

Autism, ADHD, Learning Disabilities, Down's Syndrome and Physically Impaired

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All children but especially children with any type of disability fall along a continuum in terms of attention span, socialization skills, physical abilities and emotional maturity. Autistic children in particular may have difficulty with communication, sensitivity to sensory input, unusual attachments to routines and objects. They have difficulty processing information as it enters the brain through their senses so they have difficulty reacting appropriately with their muscles and joints. They often struggle with poor balance, clumsiness, lack of movement control, and have difficulty with spatial boundaries. In addition to using our five senses there are two other senses that are lesser known. The proprioception sense tells the body's joints and muscles how to react and tells the body where it is spatially. The vestibular system controls a person's sense of balance and works with the inner ear to maintain equilibrium when the head moves.

Children with disabilities may easily become over-stimulated and are often impulsive and distracted. They may have poor social skills and difficulty with spatial boundaries. They might also become oppositional or disruptive very easily. Special needs children may have high or low muscle tone. When teaching Yoga to special needs children it is extremely important to note that the disabilities run along a continuum from mild to severe. In the case of kids with autism that might mean you have students who are verbal to ones with very little verbal language.

The benefits of Yoga for all kids and especially to those with special needs give enhanced connectedness to themselves and others. Yoga improves their concentration, focus, and memory and gives greater balance and coordination. Their gross motor planning improves as well as their strength and flexibility. Yoga assists and improves their body awareness and sensory integration, improves their breathing and body alignment.

When setting up a Yoga class for special needs children it's very helpful to consider conducting that class as a family Yoga class, which includes siblings and

parents. They know their child's strengths and weaknesses best and can assist their child with body placement into and out of the Yoga poses. Children with autism may enter a class wearing headphones or may cry or scream. They may not want eye contact with you. Do not be alarmed by any of these things. Just calmly present your lesson and tell the parents the kids are fine and you'll find a way to make the class work for them. If a child is uncomfortable with eye contact you can change your mat position so the child can still see how to move. They may only be at a point where they can only participate by sitting with their parent or sibling on their mat. Reassure their family that this is also beneficial and will help them relax anyway as they see and hear what is taking place. As time progresses they will probably begin to join in to try the poses.

Adaptations Using KAY Songs and Materials

As we do in all of our KAY classes keep things fun! During the Yoga story/pose integration it is helpful to use a picture book (or adapt our Yoga stories and create a book!) so these children have a visual to focus on. They may learn best through their visual sense.

Do lots of breathing exercises during the beginning of class. Give the teaching of poses lots of repetition, challenge, and some new adaptations. (e.g. During "cat/cow" reach your left hand under your right arm and vice versa to pretend to catch a ball of yarn.) Move slowly as you teach the poses and give lots of positive feedback to the kids..."great balance, very strong, etc."

Toe-ga: Recognize that some of the kids don't like the feeling of being barefoot so they may want to do this activity wearing their socks because of their sensory needs. To accommodate the spatial and balance issues scatter the pompoms around a little larger area than usual and use a larger container than usual to throw the pompoms back into at the end.

Massage Train: Demonstrate the various moves before you begin this activity. Some of the kids might not know what the word "massage" looks like and focus also on how hard to "karate chop" their neighbor!

Sun Salutation: Go very slowly through each movement and check to see how the kids are doing. Give lots of repetition for this asana. We all know it's tricky at first

so go slowly before you use the song with it. You can also check the Internet for various adaptations to this. There are a few silly ones out there that kids love... but do this only after you've gone over the KAY song for several weeks.

Tingsha Bells: This activity using both the song and the bells should work quite well. However, the kids may have just a bit more trouble coordinating the movements to make the bells ring. Just keep giving them positive feedback.

The Secret Garden: Remember that children with special needs have difficulty imagining things that are not real or familiar to them. You may need to leave out the idea of traveling on a magic carpet or floating in the clouds. Keep the imaginative images more real and familiar. They might be better able to just imagine an area of grass, soft and green on top of beautiful brown dirt, with flowers around them. They may go wading in a little river getting their toes cool and wet on a hot day. They may be able to think about lying on the grass looking at a beautiful blue sky with big white puffy clouds floating above them. Keep it more simple and real for them.

Orange You Grateful?: You can use this activity with no adaptations or you might find you need a slightly bigger object. Some of the kids may not be able to judge how hard to squeeze an actual orange and you could end up with orange juice everywhere!! In that case I use a shiny orange ball I found at K-Mart or a textured ball called a Tangiball, which can be purchased at Discovery Toys, Inc. or at a Discovery Toys party. They have two sizes to choose from. This company has great sensory toys, which could be added to your bag of tricks. Look at their website and/or contact one of their Educational Consultants in your area (listed on the website).

Head Shoulders Yoga Pose: When using this song give the kids a demonstration before you begin. Throughout the song it will be easier if you give the kids a specific pose to do.

Joggin' Through the Jungle: Pay attention to your group of kids to see if they can tolerate the noise of the Lion. You might want to tell them it doesn't roar loudly because it's a baby lion...but it can still be brave and do lots of growling!

Yummy Yoga: The kids will like to lay on the mat in the wrong direction and they love to do the superman pose! You could even use this song as a whole theme for one class and have samples of each food for them to try---just makin' it real!

A Yogi Went To Sea and The Yoga Slide: With these songs demonstrate each move first and check to see if they need more than one demonstration... then have your usual fun with these two!

May the Long Time Sun: This is a great song to end your class with. Give a demonstration first and then have the kids join in. Keep a last verbal meditation "short and sweet." Thank them all for coming, tell them they did a great job and tell them you will see them next time.

These are by no means the only songs that can be adapted! Use your own ideas to make any activity easier. These special kids and their families need us! Your heart will grow bigger as you teach and guide them.