



Children's Yoga Teacher Training
Module 8 – Yoga for additional Needs

Yoga for children with special educational needs, ASD, ADHD and ADD

During some of your classes, especially at schools, you may have some children with additional needs. It is important to have some insight into these areas and for you to become aware of what you would do if they were in your class.

We must remember that we are all the same, yet with our own unique qualities and tendencies and that some children may not be able to do the full asana poses, but there are still plenty more yogic practices we can share with them.

This module is just a small insight into the broad topic of yoga therapy for children. A separate training course would be required if you wanted to develop your skills further in this area.

Here is a brief overview of the types of needs that you may come across and tips on including these children in class.

ADD/ADHD

Attention Deficit Disorder is indicated when children display inappropriate inattention, impulsivity, and sometimes hyperactivity for their mental and chronological age. ADD may be diagnosed as with or without hyperactivity. Approximately 20% of the population will be diagnosed as having ADD/ADHD.

The core symptoms of ADD/ADHD are restlessness, forgetfulness, impatience, low self-esteem, inattention, impulsive. It is thought that the disorder is caused by a chemical unbalance in the brain, but there is no conclusive evidence and there is no cure that can get to the root of the disorder so learning how to control the behaviour can be very beneficial.

Yoga can be very helpful for children with ADD/ADHD. A class may start with some breathing exercises where they learn deep breathing technique. The deep breath can help oxygen get to the brain which stimulates vital areas of the brain and central nervous system. The breath has a big connection to our emotions and learning how to control it can be very beneficial. Yoga helps develop a mind- body connection as well as self-awareness which many children with the disorder lack. Many children with ADHD have lots of energy which they don't know how to channel properly. Yoga can help them release any pent up energy, relieve their need to fidget and direct their energy in ways that will enable them to focus, relax and create.

Ways to support these children in Yoga

- Establish a strong bond so that the child trusts and pays attention to you. Get to know them and speak to their parents, TAs and teachers to learn their strategies.
- A well planned lesson and a structure to each class is essential. Children with ADHD/ADD like routine as their internal sense of structure lacks coherence, keeping



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the lessons very similar and only changing a few of the poses will help the child's concentration and help them feel secure

- Start of the class include a ritual provide consistency.
 - lighting the candle or incense stick, or
 - bring along a toy which can sit on their mat.
- Keep directions and instructions clear, short, specific and concise so that the child can understand what is wanted
- Reward the child's correct responses and give them specific praise so they know what they have done correctly.
- Give reminders and repeat directions whilst giving warnings to what will be happening next, i.e. "We are moving on to a new posture."
- Have certain procedures in place for when the child does lose control. This can be hard to manage sometimes, so having a teacher there is very helpful, as well as establishing a 'thinking space' or a 'time out space' in the room, or a certain breathing exercise, mantra or mudra sequence to help them focus.
- Be adaptable during a class with a child with ADD/ADHD and to know when to bring the child's focus back and how to adjust the pace accordingly. This is something that is learnt over time.
- Know that sometimes children with this disorder can have bad days, so don't take it personally; all you can do is try to overcome any hurdles with the child and be patient.

Autism/ASD

Source- <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx>

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others.

Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. All people on the autism spectrum learn and develop. With the right sort of support, all can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choosing.

Tips on supporting these children in your class-

- Give advanced notice – have well organised and consistent routines
- Get to know your students, speak to the other adults that work with them and learn what works, what their triggers may be and way we can support them



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- Give clear expectations- Convey what you would like them to do, rather than what you want them to stop doing
- You can introduce change, but do it gradually and with advanced notice. For example, if the location of the class is going to change one week, then let them know a few weeks before hand
- Good news for bad. If a child doesn't want to do something, make a deal with them for doing the task to receive a reward or incentive.
- Obsessions- One of my students likes to flap a sock around during class. I allow him to do it for a certain amount of time each class, then I take the sock away from him. He has now become use to this and joins in with most of the activities without his sock.
- Catch them showing positive behaviour. Give them plenty of praise and encouragement.
- Tantrums- prevention is better than cure. Try to avoid high risk triggers. Stay in control, keep calm and keep yourself and the other children safe
- Give them space. For children with ASD, the world can be very demanding. Making sense of people & what they are doing/saying, having difficulties with social understanding and interaction, sensory overload. Sometimes their world has no rhyme or reason to what happens. Give the child space if they need it, allow them to rest and lie down if they prefer.
- Breathing techniques and mudras work particularly well with these children
- If appropriate, have a 1:1 session with these children so they can learn some basic yoga skills and maybe they can teach you something too

By establishing optimal physiological and psychological integrity, yoga therapy helps autistic children gain new motor, communication and social skills with an overall improvement to their quality of life.

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral Palsy is a condition marked by impaired muscle coordination which is caused by damage to the brain. Characteristics include compromised posture, tight muscles and restrictive movement. Yoga can help stretch and align the spine, the flexing and twisting of the spine increasing the space between the vertebrae and reduces the pressure on the disks and the nerves that radiate out of the spine. The reduced pressure on the nerves facilitates the release of muscular tension through the body and enhances overall nerve function. Yoga also increases flexibility, augment range of motion and it can reduce high muscle tone. Holding asana or poses gives muscles and tendons a relaxing stretch, releasing overall stress and tightness throughout the musculature and around the joints. The result of yoga can give a child with cerebral palsy a greater range of movement and coordination as well as independence.

A yoga session involving a child with cerebral Palsy must be carefully planned and adapted to meet the ability of the child. It is important to know what the child is capable of and their range of movement, so communication between to their parents or carers or teacher should be made in order to provide a stimulating, safe and beneficial yoga session.



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Down syndrome

Source- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/downs-syndrome/>

Down's syndrome, also known as Down syndrome or trisomy 21, is a genetic condition that typically causes some level of learning disability and certain physical characteristics.

Characteristics of Down's syndrome

Most babies born with Down's syndrome are diagnosed soon after birth and may have:

- floppiness (hypotonia)
- eyes that slant upwards and outwards
- a small mouth with a tongue that may stick out
- a flat back of the head
- below-average weight and length at birth
- their palm may have only one crease across it
- Although children with Down's syndrome share some common physical characteristics, they don't all look the same. A child with Down's will look more like their family members than other children who have the syndrome.

People with Down's syndrome will also have different personalities and abilities. Everyone born with Down's syndrome will have some degree of learning disability, but this will be different for each person.

Ways to support these children in yoga-

- Check for hypermobility; make sure they are staying as safe as possible in poses
- Liaise with parents, teachers and support staff at school and get to know them before you start the class
- Reinforce positive behaviour. The most common form of misbehaviour among children with Down's Syndrome is behaviour which aims at gaining attention



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Yoga for additional needs

By Rebecca Revell Child Yoga Therapist

For more info or to study further with Bess on our Mentor Program, click here-

<https://www.wellbeingbees.com/mento>

Yoga helps us to manage our emotions, increase our concentration and attention. It is a lifelong practice for developing inner peace and calm. The practice of yoga strengthens anatomical and neurological structures, balances the nervous system and as such is inherently healing.

Yoga is a science, philosophy and a way of living. The following precepts are very relevant to working well with the children.

I believe that there is not a single child that cannot access yoga in some way, sometimes the work is with ourselves, drop all expectations, become creative and think about what the child is telling you/communicating to you about their needs Remember behaviours are a form of communication too.

Huge behaviours = Huge communications!

How many different ways can you think of to communicate these 3 things:

- **HELLO**
- **THANK YOU**
- **MILKSHAKE AND A BISCUIT**

There are endless and miraculous ways to experience the world around us, some of us are sensory beings who like to experience life through ALL of the senses. We can learn so much from the children we work with.

'Movement is our Mother tongue.' Maxine Sheets-Johnstone.

Now, thoughts on what we need, tools we already have, to draw upon to enable us to be open to working with any child.

- **What are your intentions?**
- **Can you set an intention before a session with a child ...?**
- **Often this is about their agency ~ what is it that this child needs in the world and how can I help them to get there?**
- **ENCOURAGING, EMPOWERING & A POINT OF SAFETY.**
- **BE EXPLICIT IN THE IMPLICIT! Don't assume a child will know what you mean, sometimes language is too confusing!**

When working with children with additional needs we need:

Humility, it is from a place of humility that we begin our work with the children. Each child that we have the privilege to work with is a great gift. There is always something positive to find in every child, this is where we work from.

Generosity, the pure intention of giving from our hearts without expecting anything in return. It is the desire to give and to be of service for the greater good.



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Patience, we need a lot of patience in our work with the children. Patience is about our minds, it has been described as 'the cheerful endurance of trying conditions and the consequence of one's actions and deeds.' We need patience not to be discouraged when we believe that the child is not meeting their potential. It is the capacity to wait calmly and without anxiety. It's about patience with ourselves as well as with a child especially when they display challenging behaviours. **Celebrate every tiny fraction of change!**

Loving kindness, Loving kindness has the characteristic of wishing for the happiness and welfare of others, loyal love and dependable kindness! Loving kindness refers to acts of kindness, motivated by love, tenderness and consideration towards others. Loving kindness is an act of both generosity of heart and non-attachment. Sometimes children can press our buttons and their behaviours can disturb us. If we come back to loving kindness, then we can see beyond their behaviours: serve the children as extensions of your own selves and the love you feel when you connect to your true self. **You are love. The child is love.**

Empathy, not to be confused with sympathy. The capacity to recognise emotions that are being experienced by another being. We can communicate with empathy, this is very important in our work with the adults that we encounter who care for the children we work with, either parents, carers, teachers – it helps us to understand other perspectives, needs, intentions without judgment. We are all doing the best we can with the tools we have been given.

Gratitude, Gratitude is about wholeheartedness! It is more than the quality of being thankful and our readiness to show appreciation for, and to return kindness. Gratitude requires a wide-open heart! **Do you give yourself time to practice and treat yourself well in order that you may then give to others? Show gratitude towards yourself first.** Gratefulness is being fully alive, when we discover the spot where our life holds together, reaching our innermost heart. It is an absolute privilege to have the opportunity to work with these children. The power of gratitude has been practiced for thousands of years and through all major religions. It brings with it a deep sense of peace and ease; the children will really benefit from your feelings of gratitude.

Compassion, our work with children and their families is about compassion and connection from our souls. When we connect with the child from this deep place of compassion, we are equal with the child. We have to develop this connection so that we can go beyond the body. We cannot be deceived by appearance or a condition, we are just the same light as them. In this place, we are not teaching, we are sharing and learning together. Go beyond 'teaching' – open up to intuition and this will serve as the best guidance and the best practice to serve the child/children you work with.

THE QUALITIES THAT DEVELOP FROM FOLLOWING THESE PRECEPTS ARE:

TRUST: believe in yoga, truth in universal powers and the ability of the child. Trust allows us to have meaningful relationships with others.

COURAGE: and CAREFUL, but not afraid! Courage comes when we let go of our fears and trust. Fear blocks rhythm, intuition, flow. If we are careful, mindful and FULLY present with the child then we will not hurt them.

SOUL CONNECTION: Spiritual health is having a sense of interconnectedness with all living beings. This is where we meet the child. We are no different = **UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.**



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Do you have a Mission Statement for your work? Something to think about

This is mine:

The poses we create in yoga are just a vehicle.

The goal for our practice together is grounding, expansion, balance and rhythm. This allows openness for energy to easily flow and using the breath as a tool to enhance space, openness, alertness and union of the body, breath and mind.

Yoga can support us in living vibrantly throughout our whole body and with expression, joy, playfulness and a feeling of more space. These core sensations can lead to a lightness in the mind/body relationship, making us feel more whole.

Yoga tries to show you that regardless of the body you live in or any condition you are living with, you are deeply and directly connected to the space around you, you are integrated with life.

Yoga teaches us to honour our limitations in a healthy and safe space, on our mats. But, yoga can also shine light onto our vast and great capabilities.

Barriers that may create fear in using yoga to support additional needs:

- Environment – safety/spaces for example at schools.
- Convincing others – write a lift speech! We can empower other workers how to work therapeutically.
- Touch and child protection, protecting yourself.
- Managing expectations – other professional, parents – you are not there to 'fix' anyone, they are perfect as they are. A therapeutic approach could be a very new approach to some people. Sometimes this work takes TIME.
- Support – maybe you need extra hands in a group session with other children. Don't struggle with an un-manageable group size it simply isn't fair on yourself or the children, especially if it's a very mixed group.
- Under-qualified, you are not BUT – know your child. Get all important info, health checks, use form. Go for extra training if it interests you to delve deeper into this work. Be very careful of working with children with a trauma-sensitive background. This is very delicate work that definitely needs extra knowledge of the child and a deep understanding of the work involved.
- Money - are you charging for your sessions?
- Yourself!!! I haven't met 1 child yet who cannot access yoga in some form. Be creative, don't be afraid and start even if it's just gentle foot work to ground the child.

DO: keep up professional dialogue with parents/family/carers and other professionals and invite others to observe your work, get feedback.

DO: ask important questions:

- Do they have a diagnosis?
- What do they like (sensory) / What are they into?
- What do I need to be careful of?



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OBSERVATIONS!

Your most important work on initially meeting the child-

- What do you notice?
- If they can stand/walk – how do they do this. Are they very sunken into the earth or very flighty, on tip toes?
- How does their posture present?
- Are they seeking sensory feedback – touching everything? Do they look to get UNDER the mat?
- How does the child connect with you? What does your intuition tell you about how close the child is comfortable with you being, in relation to them?
- Are there any obvious physical difficulties?
- What are they telling you JUST in their body language? Can you replicate their movement in order to understand it? Maybe then you can gain closer proximity?
- Do they give eye-contact? Where are they looking? What interests them?
- Watch their breathing – quick or slow? Where do they breathe? This is interlinked with their nervous system and will tell you a lot.
- Where is the child's still point? Remember sometimes their still point is actually moving! Stimming for example, brings self-regulation to some children and this repetition of movement can bring them quiet, calm and stillness.
- See if they have a rhythm, replicate it. This could be a way in.
- Child's muscle tone? Children with Downs Syndrome can be hyper-mobile, be aware of hips sliding out joints. Contain their lapse tone, small & gradual openings.
- Child's ability to focus/ concentrate?
- What's their energy telling you?
- Child's hearing? What do I need to do to gain the child's attention?
- What sound touches the child?
- Watch for any signs of difficulty if heartbeat is raised.
- Watch for tiredness and work accordingly.
- Circulation – cold feet? Tips of fingers or toes tinged purple?

On first meeting the child there can often be a 'dance' going on between you, you want to take them somewhere. Meet them where they are 'at.'

Mimesis (mimicking) is a way of finding a common language (INTENSIVE INTERACTION).

But remember YOU have to be the centre of gravity in the room. You are safely holding the space. Maintain your OWN Yoga practice to keep you strong and in your centre of gravity.



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Creating Sequences.

Within a balanced practice we can do a sequence of poses but in order to determine the order we will have to learn to read the child's energetic and proprioceptive systems.

What does the child need energetically? Does the child need soothing? Does the child need to be roused? Does the child need to be more organised in their state? Does the child need to develop body and spatial awareness? How does the child interact with the world? What is the child's emotional state?

A balanced asana practice will include the following considering all the counter-indications and the child's physical and cognitive development:

- A spinal twist
- A forward bend
- A back bend
- A lateral bend
- A balance
- An inversion
- Poses from sitting, standing, lying supine and prone
- Crossing of the mid-line

POSSIBLE EXTRA PROPS – SOMETIMES HELPFUL BUT NOT ESSENTIAL:

- Blankets and extra mats for weighting down.
- Feathers to blow to observe breath or blow to each other to encourage eye-contact.
- Bolsters to prop hips – Children with Downs Syndrome are hyper-mobile, they will be able to show you all sorts of flexible shapes!! But this isn't necessarily safe for their joints!
- Visual cue cards – actual photos of them, taking off shoes, finding a mat, etc
- Oils, a familiar smell to associate with 'now it's time for yoga.'
- Sound bowl or bells.

A very important tool is your VOICE! How are you voicing? When to bring your volume up/down.

Possible use of metaphors (be aware maybe too abstract)

USING VERY SIMPLE & FAMILIAR LANGUAGE & PHRASES.

'..... now it's time to rest, now it's time to rest, rest now. Calm and relaxed, calm and relaxed ...'

Use the voice for rhythm and chanting.

The use of sound and **mantra** is incredibly powerful and healing, don't be shy and offer it from your heart.

OM, OM, OM.

Hari = God, Om/ Prema = Love, Om/ Shanti = Peace, Om.

By changing the chant, you are introducing tolerable stress.

Chanting: establishes rhythms of communication and harmony, increases exhalation, facilitates muscle tone, increases oxygenation and circulation, helps to get child's attention, increases, calms and clears the energy, helps to clear emotional blocks, can help with speech, creates vibration in the lungs, brings you into the here and now, can be used to change energy states – wake up or calm down.

Using the child's name in a chant is a good way to unite a group and connect the child to themselves.



Module 8 Assignments

1. How would you assist children with the following additional needs in your class?

- **ADHD**
- **ASD/Autism**
- **Cerebral palsy**
- **Down Syndrome**

2. Read Rebecca's mission statement in module 8 of the manual. Create your own.

3. Imagine you have been asked to do a 1:1 session for a child with additional needs (of your choice)- Plan a 30 minute session

Further Reading: (Just to get you started!)

~ Yoga for the Special Child: A therapeutic Approach for Infants and Children with: Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, ASD, Learning Disabilities. By Sonia Sumar.

Sonia Suma is an inspirational teacher and mother who has worked extensively with young people of all abilities. This book provides practical guidance on specific therapeutic sequences for children and young people with additional needs. Her work is highly recommended.

~ Child's Mind: Mindfulness Practices to help our children be more focused, calm and relaxed. By Christopher Willard.

~ Calm Kids: Help Children relax with Mindful Activities. By Lorraine Murray.

~ Sensory Stories: For children and teens with special educational needs, A Practical Guide. By Joannna Grace.

~ Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children. By Thich Nhat Hahn and Plum Village Community.

~ Teen Yoga, for Yoga Therapists. A guide to development, mental health and working with common teen issues. By Charlotta Martinus.

~ Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha. By Swami Satyananda Saraswati.

~ How Yoga Works. By Geshe Michael Roach.

~ Waking. By Matthew Sanford. A memoir of trauma and transcendence.

~ Transforming Disability: A mind-body approach. By Matthew Sanford.



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Further Trainings:

Mentor program with Rebecca Revell. Contact the Wellbeing Bees for more information

Special Yoga Foundation – flagship 7day course, Special yoga for special children. With Jyoti Jo Manuel.

Creative Calm Yoga Studio, Manchester for trauma sensitive yoga.

Yotism. Inspiring Harmony in Autism. Unique & specialised sensory yoga method. With Nicole.