

How to Relax and Bond With a Special Needs Child Through Yoga

By Charlotte (Charlie) STEWART-BROWN

What makes yoga different from other activities is its focus on correct full breathing during the exercises and emphasis on doing them mindfully. Therefore, it is important to encourage children to be fully present during these sequences and regularly remind them to keep awareness on their breath, and in what they are feeling in the different parts of their body as they do them. Be sure to ask how they feel after each exercise to gauge how they feel mentally and physically and to assess whether you can start increasing the duration of each exercise, without causing any exhaustion or distress.

Try to avoid distractions by doing the sequence below in a room or place where children do not have toys around them and can focus better. Make sure it is a time of day when they haven't eaten in at least two hours and feel calm. Repetition is very important for this routine to have a positive impact; therefore, try to keep the time of day and place the same each time if possible. It is also more beneficial if there is little noise during the session and that you each have a yoga mat, or use the same towel to do the sequence on each time. This helps the child associate his/her environment with the activity to come, so he/she knows what to expect and feels comfortable and calm from the beginning.

This sequence is specially designed for children with autism; however, kids on the spectrum can differ immensely. Make sure you talk your child through it in a relatable, happy, and calming way, working within the parameters of abilities and limitations. It is important to encourage the child to copy you, keep looking at you, and maintain focus and awareness on the present moment. This seven-step routine promotes correct full breathing, better posture, flexibility, and concentration. Many children with autism breathe incorrectly and in the reverse manner, which restricts the oxygen



intake fundamental to optimal health. As they get older, they tend to adopt postures that make them feel more secure and help avoid social contact, by hunching and rounding their spines and looking down at the ground when walking. Correct posture is not only physically important, especially for the strength and health of the spine, but it also induces a sense of confidence and helps open children up to the world in front of them. Try to always start your yoga sessions in the same position, running through the same order of exercises, increasing in duration over time. Keeping with the same routine will help children remember the tools you are teaching them outside of the sessions and enable them to associate what is coming up with a time of calm and focus.

1. Correct Posture

If you are starting with the belly breathing in a lying position, make sure the child is lying down straight and relaxed with the legs and arms slightly apart. Breathing is restricted when there is any tension or rigidity in the muscles. If starting in, or moving into, a sitting position for the following exercises, it is very important to establish correct sitting posture and to keep reminding the child of it throughout the day, even outside of your yoga session.

Correct sitting means distributing your weight equally on your sitting bones, crossing your legs (when sitting on the floor, or both feet flat on the floor if in a chair), straightening your spine, rolling shoulders back and pulling them down from the ears, hands resting on the thighs, and relaxing your face. Children with autism tend to round their lower backs and let their shoulders hunch forwards. Encourage the idea that they need to grow taller out the top of their head and to keep their shoulders back. A straight spine means lengthening from the coccyx all the way up into the neck, bringing an understanding and awareness to all the vertebrae. As their core strength increases, this posture becomes easier to maintain as does keeping the arms, legs, and facial muscles relaxed while in a seated position. Remind the child to stay aware of posture and to correct himself or herself at school or other times you are not around.

A correct standing position means keeping the upper body the same as when you sit correctly. Legs should be together, or no more than hips distance apart, and, most importantly, weight should be equally distributed on both feet, between the ball and heel

of each foot. Again, encourage the sensation of growing taller out the crown of the head and keeping the neck straight so that the child practices looking straight ahead and not down at the ground.

2. Belly Breathing and Alternate Nostril Breathing



Correct full breathing comprises all the muscles utilized in breathing and the lungs from the apex to the origin. To enhance the strengthening of the respiratory system, a sense of calm, and clean air reaching the lungs, the inhale and exhale should both be done through the nose.

As you breathe in, you should feel your ribcage expand to the sides and your abdominal cavity expand outwards (like a balloon). As you breathe out, the belly should be sucked in towards the spine to contract the diaphragm and fully expel the stale air in the lungs.

You can teach belly breathing from a lying down position by placing a small teddy bear or toy on the child's belly. Encourage him/her to see and feel the toy rise as he/she is breathing in, and then come back down with the belly when he/she breathes out. This should then be established and practiced in a sitting and standing position with one or both hands on the abdomen, so the child can feel and understand the notion of expanding the belly and chest on an inhale, and feeling them compress on an exhale. Remind the child to try to breathe in this way throughout the day, not just in yoga class.

Alternate nostril breathing encourages coordination, focus, and calm. It is said to balance the pathways to the two hemispheres of the brain and have a relaxing effect on the central nervous system.

This exercise can be done either using the thumb and last two fingers to close off each nostril or, if too young or not able, using “crab claws/lobster pinchers” with the thumb and first two fingers.

- Take a deep breath in with both nostrils.
- Close the right nostril with the thumb and exhale through the left nostril.
- Keeping the right nostril blocked by the thumb, inhale deeply with the left nostril.
- Close the left nostril with either your last or first two fingers, release your thumb, and exhale through the right nostril.
- Keeping the left nostril blocked, inhale deeply through the right nostril, block it with the thumb, and release the other fingers to exhale through the left.
- Continue for another 10 breaths ideally, building up to two minutes if possible.

3. Identifying Parts of the Body

It is important for children to learn not only what their different body parts are called, but also where they are located and what they feel like. This increases body intelligence and an ability to communicate with themselves physically, inducing self-confidence, independence, and control over body movements. It also helps with social development as children begin to relate to other people’s pain, sensations, and emotions.

To do this, you can use the well-known children’s song *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes* while touching each part of the body with both hands. You can then start adding different parts of the body into the song, and eventually, if possible, distinguishing the parts of the body on the right side from the left. This can also be done in the way of a lighthearted test whereby you call out a part of the body and the child has to touch it, or, quite popularly, use stickers. He/She can either place them on their different body parts as they’re learning them and practicing saying them out loud, or they can have fun placing them all over you! Aid in language development by having him/her vocalize the parts of the body each

time, and eventually progress to doing the exercise with his/her eyes closed to strengthen coordination and the mind-body connection. Make sure it is a fun, energetic exercise, and be creative!

4. Sun Salutation/Season’s Song

In yoga, we have the classical sun salutation routine made up of various poses that open up the joints and work on stretching and strengthening all the major muscle groups. Eventually, you can encourage your child to practice the routine first thing in the morning or in times of boredom or physical tension to wake up the body. The first and last three poses of the sequence are the same, so the flow starts and ends in the same standing position, making it an easy routine to learn and repeat.

Take a look at the usual 12-pose routine you can do with older children, followed by a song and a modified sequence you can use to make it more fun, relatable, and child-friendly. You can be creative and make up your own story, song, poem, etc. to guide them through the poses or add poses in the sequence that they like. The most important thing to accentuate is performing each movement in coordination with an inhale or exhale and learning to repeat the same routine a few times. Doing this flow with the correct breathing pattern makes getting into the different poses easier, strengthens the respiratory and circulatory system, and makes this a more cardiovascular exercise.

The Classical Sun Salutation

The modified version for children is called the Season’s Song. The poses are slightly modified to make the actions fit the song. It should be repeated for as many rounds as possible until your child starts becoming out of breath. Show your child the flow



of poses first while you sing the lines of the song or do the poses with them as you go along. Let your child get to know the sequence of poses first before you introduce the correct breath per movement, to not confuse him/her or make it too hard from the beginning. Use any tune or rhythm that you like when saying the lines.

The Season's Song

1. In the summer there's sun
2. And in the winter there's snow
3. In the spring we lunge
4. And we get down low
5. To sniff the flowers 1, 2, 3
6. In the autumn leaves, we play with our puppy
7. He wags his tail and bends his knees
8. To lunge and catch the birds
9. Before they fly up the trees

The similar movements to the Sun Salutation that correspond to the Season's Song are:

1. From standing pose, stretch the arms up, making a round sun.
2. Then fold forward, wiggling the fingers to imitate snow falling to the ground.
3. Lunge back into a plank position.
4. Lower body parallel or knees first to the ground.
5. Lift the chest into Cobra Pose and sniff the flowers three times.
6. Push up into Downward Dog Pose.
7. Waggle hips from side to side and then bend knees.
8. Lunge forward into a forward fold (trying to catch the birds on the ground).
9. Come up into standing pose stretching the arms overhead, looking up at the birds, and spreading the arms and fingers to become a tree.

5. Standing Balances

Standing Balance Poses promote confidence, strength, focus, and body awareness. It is ideal to do these poses with the hands clasped behind the back, so the child practices keeping his/her shoulders straight and opening the chest for better breathing. Opening the chest in these poses and looking at a

focal point for balance help children become more comfortable with social interaction by opening them up physically to the world in front of them. Try standing or kneeling in front of the child so your eyes are the thing he/she focuses on to encourage eye contact. Make sure to repeat the pose on the other leg and encourage deep breathing, as children tend to hold their breath when holding a balancing pose.



Tree Pose



Stork Pose



Soldier Pose

6. Cross Lateral Brain Stimulating Exercises

These exercises increase development in both hemispheres of the brain and can be done from a variety of starting positions, i.e., standing, lying, sitting, and on all fours. For the last, known as Table Top Pose, make sure that the hands are directly under the shoulders and the knees are directly under the hips. The spine should be straight, the neck relaxed, and the weight equally distributed between the hands and the legs. From any position, the idea is to stretch your arms and/or legs away from the body and then bring them back in, crossing over the midline, i.e., taking your arms out to the side and then crossing them in front past the center line of the body. This can be done with one limb at a time, both arms or legs, or the opposite arm to leg.



7. Calming Visualizations

End your yoga sessions with a visualization exercise. These can be done at any time, especially at night time if your child is having trouble sleeping. Start making the child relax in a lying position, if possible, and build up to doing them from a seated position. Whatever the position, it is important he/she feels comfortable and safe, ideally with the eyes closed. Visualization exercises can be from two minutes to 20 minutes, and the story should center around a positive place or topic that the child is interested in or finds comforting,

i.e., a walk in the park, forest, garden, zoo, the beach, magical castle, land of dinosaurs, etc. Anywhere is fine as long as it is something the child understands, enjoys, and can relate to. Modulate your voice throughout the story to express the differences in calm, excited, happy, fast, or slow. This will help enhance creativity and help him/her relate more easily to other people's emotions. Start off with calming visualizations and then begin to vary them according to your child's feedback. You can also ask the child to draw a picture of what he/she "saw" during the visualization and ask questions about it afterward.

Make yoga a time of fun, calm, and bonding between you and your child, and watch the benefits of it flourish over time.

Namaste

Charlotte (Charlie) Stewart-Brown was born in London in 1981 and was eventually recommended yoga and meditation at 14 years old after struggling with anxiety and anxiety-related disorders. After a degree in psychology and sociology, and some grueling years in business, 10 years ago she finally decided to finish her RYT200 Teacher Training and dedicate herself to teaching yoga full-time. With a difficult childhood in the pressure of London, Charlie started to find peace and focus through yogic breathing exercises, Zen meditation, and different styles of yoga. She has since trained with some of the most renowned yoga teachers around the world (David Swenson, Shiva Rea, Anne-Marie Newland, Sadhguru, Sadie Nardini, Leslie Kaminoff, and Sonia Sumar) studying Hatha, Sivananda, Ashtanga, Children and Family Yoga, Prenatal Yoga, Yoga for Special Needs, and Inner Engineering. She has become well known for her successful work in yoga for anxiety, and yoga for autism spectrum disorder and ADHD. Charlie holds the highest yoga qualifications as an experienced registered yoga teacher (ERYT500), registered children's yoga teacher (RCYT), registered prenatal yoga teacher (RPYT), and yoga continued education provider (YCEP) with the Yoga Alliance. Now living in Switzerland with her husband, and having taught yoga for over 10 years, she developed Indiv Yoga™ as a therapeutic approach to yoga that every individual can benefit from. She is dedicated to the continued study of yoga, science, medicine, and mindful meditation, to share her knowledge and experience with as many people as she can, and keep training more Indiv Yoga™ teachers around the world.

Website: <https://indivyoga.com/about/>