

## Yoga for Children on the Autism Spectrum

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### Abstract

This article provides an overview of the benefits of Yoga for children and adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Yoga can improve focus and attention, sensory information processing, communication, self-regulation, and motor control. These skills generalize to other areas in life, ultimately helping those with ASD lead more balanced, healthy, socially integrated, and independent lives. The article provides detailed advice based on the author's clinical experience about how to structure a Yoga environment, work with ASD as well as the families and communities of students with ASD, and create lessons based on student's individual or group needs. Sample lesson plans are included.

**KEYWORDS:** yoga, autism, sensory processing disorder, children, mantra, relaxation

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### Introduction;

The purpose of this article is to describe how Yoga can be used as an intervention for children on the autism spectrum. This article is primarily intended for Yoga instructors, therapists, counselors, and teachers who have relatively little experience working with children on the autism spectrum. The article will also provide insight for parents, teachers, or therapists who already work with children on the autism spectrum and who would like to learn more about how to provide Yoga instruction for these children.

Autism is a developmental disorder that typically appears during the first three years of life, and it may be the result of a neurological disorder that affects the development and function of the brain. Individuals with autism typically show delayed or abnormal development in language, social skills, and behavioral repertoire. Because autism is a spectrum disorder, individuals on the spectrum will share these characteristics but demonstrate them to different degrees. For example, some children may be high in verbal skills, but very low in processing social cues or sensory information from the environment. What works to support one child will not necessarily support all children with autism; there is no one-size-fits-all method to working with these students. Every child needs to be looked at as an individual.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the prevalence of children diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum has increased to 1 in 110 births, and almost 1 in 70 boys in the United States. With autism on the rise, it is more important than ever to find noninvasive ways to support these children and teach them the skills to function successfully and independently in the world.

Yoga is a powerful tool that can teach children how to connect to their bodies, tap into their own personal strength, better deal with life's challenges, and build connections with the outside world. Although no quantitative studies have been published on the topic, there are many clinical reports on the positive results of Yoga with autistic children with autism. Yoga therapeutic interventions have been successful in addressing each of the core symptoms associated with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In

general, the recommendation is not to use Yoga therapy in place of other more traditional therapies, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, or physical therapy, but as a complement and a way to integrate all these therapies.

Based on parent feedback in my own work, the most noticeable changes parents have immediately observed in their children include increased strength, flexibility, and awareness of breath. Many parents have also noted a difference in their child's ability to concentrate and focus his or her attention, improvement in their child's digestion, and an overall sense of calm in the child's life, with more balanced energy. Parents love to share their stories of how their children used their breathing to calm themselves at a busy restaurant, or how the speech language pathologist now sings *mantras* with the child to focus them before a session.

### **Yoga in the Classroom: An Experiment**

As a certified special education teacher and registered Yoga teacher, I have worked with the special needs population for many years, ranging in age from preschool to high school. Most recently, I managed a program for high school students on the autism spectrum. These students possessed minimal communication skills and had high sensory and behavioral needs. As I watched my students, I was struck by how detached they were from their own bodies and what was happening in the school and larger community. My students were very social and wanted to connect with peers and adults; they just didn't understand how to do that in socially appropriate ways.

I decided to teach the high school students Yoga to help them integrate outside information and to build an inner connection with themselves in a more personal and holistic way. In the beginning, our Yoga sessions were crazy, and the children were all over the place. But as my students practiced more Yoga, they started to find the same peace and sense of calm that I had found in my own personal practice. This was apparent by their calmer demeanors and happy smiles.

The first surprise was that the skills learned in Yoga practice generalized much more quickly than other curricula our team had tried. As a classroom teacher, teaching a student to generalize a skill from one setting to another is a very difficult task, especially when working with children on the autism spectrum. And yet Yoga was something the children connected to in other settings. For example, if they were having a meltdown out in the community, the simple prompt of "do your Yoga breathing" worked to remind them to breathe deeply and calm their bodies. In time, we found we no longer needed to prompt the deep breathing; students recognized they were stressed and would begin deep breathing on their own (demonstrating the ability to self-regulate).

We also found that the frequency of outbursts in the classroom decreased and the amount of on-task behaviors increased. For many of these students, fitness activities or exercise was a huge trigger for off-task behaviors. However, Yoga seemed gentle enough to many of them that they did not resist it as they did with other exercises, such as the bike, treadmill, or lifting weights. Finally, many of the other curricula we had tried with my students required props, equipment, visuals, and/or timers. Yoga didn't, which made the teachings portable and affordable.

I became intrigued with the idea of using Yoga as a therapy with students with special needs. This inspired me to complete a Yoga Alliance-registered 200-hour teacher training program and to continue my education in Sonia Sumar's Yoga for the Special Child basic and advanced courses. This training has helped to guide much of the work that I do with

students with ASD, and Sumar's principles and practices will be referred to throughout this article. I also had the opportunity to attend other trainings that furnished me with ways to diversify the Yoga experience for larger groups or higher-functioning children who needed more social skill interaction and team-building skills. These trainings, plus my experience in special education, inform the recommended practices and principles that follow.

### **Best Practices and Principles**

Working with children with ASD is challenging. It requires a strong understanding of the children's needs, as well as a connection with the children's community and families. Each session demands significant time and thoughtfulness to prepare, and once the practice begins, it requires mental, emotional, and physical energy to sustain and adapt. Before one is ready to jump in and begin working with students, there are important steps that need to be taken to ensure success for the students and Yoga practitioner. These steps are fully described below.

#### ***Connect with a Child's Support Group***

In order for students to fully integrate Yoga into their lives and to make the greatest impact in the shortest amount of time, it is key that all the child's social supports are on the same page. Connect with the child's therapists and classroom teachers to learn what they are working on with the child, and share with them what you do. If families are comfortable doing so, they can share evaluation data or the child's individualized education program from school with you so that you can create a well-rounded, intentional practice.

When working with a child with autism, it is important for you to remember that you are not just working with that child. You are working with the family. Many of these families work day and night to provide the best for their children, often to the detriment of their own physical health and the health of their marriages. Encourage families to develop their own personal Yoga practice. As their practice grows, they will better understand the work you are doing with their child, and also benefit from the healing found in Yoga. At the end of the day, it is the families who will be your greatest champions and supporters. Autism communities nationwide are very tightly knit groups of people. Practitioners will find that word-of-mouth is often the best way to connect with other member of the autism community in your area.

#### ***Mindfully Set Up a Yoga Practice***

The success of a Yoga session with an autistic child can be decided before the student even walks in the door. It takes a lot of time and thought to set up a safe and comfortable environment, but in the end it will be worth the effort. Children on the autism spectrum are often very routine-and rule-oriented. They will learn something one way the first time, and it will be very challenging and stressful to change that routine if you decide that you want to do it differently the next time. It is imperative to think about your structure, processes, and procedures before you begin teaching a Yoga session.

#### **Structure the Environment**

The first step is choosing an environment for the Yoga practice. This can be at a student's house, in a therapy space, a Yoga studio, or classroom setting. The following are things to consider when looking for this setting:

**Safety:** Are there lots of safety concerns in the room, such as sharp corners on furniture, cement floors, or multiple doors for the student to run from?

**Distractions:** Are the walls in the room covered in loud posters, or is the room filled with objects the children would see as toys? If it is impossible to find another space, you can use sheets or blankets to cover items that will be particularly distracting for the students.

**Acceptable Noise Levels:** Children in general, and especially students with ASD, tend to be noisy. Ask yourself if this is an environment where it is OK for a student to make a lot of noise, or will he or she constantly need to be reminded to be quiet?

**Predictability:** Changes in the environment can be stressful for a child with ASD. When looking at spaces, think about how much of the environment is within your control.

**Sensory Input:** Is this a sensory-neutral environment, or are your senses overwhelmed as you walk in the door? Is there a restaurant or cafeteria nearby that produces strong odors? Fans or heaters that make lots of noise? Bright lights you can't control? Train yourself to be acutely aware of information from your senses that you might otherwise not notice.

Once you have decided on a space, it is important to give some thought to the actual set-up of your Yoga environment before you begin a Yoga session. Think about creating a calm, serene, and sacred environment so the children can really focus on their bodies and the Yoga they are doing. Some things to think about when setting up your environment:

**Boundaries:** Provide Yoga mats for the children to give clear visual boundaries of where their bodies are to be. When working in a group setting, it is helpful to place the students' Yoga mats in a circle. This creates a feeling of community and equality amongst the students.

**Routines:** Routines are important, and it is helpful for the children if you establish your routines the very first time they come to Yoga. For example, teach students the routine of entering the Yoga room, taking off shoes and socks and placing them by the door, finding a Yoga mat, and sitting quietly. Children with ASD do well with predictability, structure, and consistency. When you know your plans must change, it is important to stay positive, remain calm, and adhere to the routine and schedule as much as possible. If you know that there is a change coming up, warn the children before the new task is introduced.

### **Set Clear Expectations**

When working with children on the autism spectrum, there are three questions that are important to answer for the children so they understand the expectations of an activity. By answering these three questions for a student, you can help to lower their anxiety level significantly:

What am I supposed to do?

How will I know when the task is complete?

What is next after the task is finished?

As you move through the Yoga practice with a child, pay attention to the child or children you are working with. Notice what helps them relax and be successful. Once you figure out what that is, do more of it! Yoga should be an enjoyable experience, not a place where they feel additional stress.

Some students may also benefit from a visual schedule showing what the plan is for the Yoga session. Generally two types of visual schedules will be used. A *specific visual schedule*, for students who are lower functioning or very anxious, outlines (with words and/or pictures) the specific Yoga postures and practices they will be doing in a specific order. It is important that after a posture or practice has been completed, it is taken off the schedule and put somewhere (in an envelope, etc.) to show that it is finished. A *general*

*visual schedule* is often used for higher functioning children or children who have graduated from a specific schedule. This schedule simply outlines the areas of Yoga you will be doing that day, for example: singing, breathing, Yoga stretches and strengthening, and relaxation. The same principle applies as above; when the task is completed, it is taken off the schedule. By providing visual and/or verbal cueing for what the agenda looks like, you are creating a predictable sequence for the children to follow, which allows them to relax.

Yoga teaches both mental and physical flexibility. For this reason, it is good to change up some of the Yoga postures, the order the postures are presented, or teach new movements. Watch the students; you will know when the time is right to try a new strategy. As the student's Yoga practice grows, you may be able to fade away the pictures schedule, and try a checklist or no visuals at all. Ultimately, the goal would be that the child could complete a Yoga session without any additional props or visuals. My vision is to set them up for a lifelong Yoga practice. Ideally, they could walk into a class at a community center at age 30, 40, or 60, and adapt to a setting in which visual schedules are not provided.

#### ***Address Sensory Needs***

Many students with ASD struggle with sensory integration dysfunction. This is the inability to understand and process the information the child is receiving from the environment through his or her senses. The senses include sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, proprioception, and balance/coordination (vestibular sense). As you work with children on the autism spectrum, you will see that not all students have the same sensory needs. You will find some students who seek out sensory experiences, some who avoid them, and some with a mixture of the two behaviors.

Children who seek out sensory input have nervous systems that do not always process the sensory information that is coming in to the brain. They are often under responsive to sensory input and will seek out more intense or longer-duration sensory experiences. When watching students who are sensory-seeking, one may notice that these children are often very busy and move a lot. They can, at times, appear to be aggressive or rough because they are less aware of touch or pain. They often like loud noises and enjoy smelling people and/or objects.

Sensory-avoiding children, in contrast, have nervous systems that feel sensation very intensely and easily. When observing these children, you may notice a fight, flight, or freeze stress response to sensations, or *sensory defensiveness*. These children may appear to be very cautious, withdrawn, and uncomfortable with loud, busy environments. Many of them are very sensitive to touch and are picky about objects touching their bodies, such as clothing and shoes, as well as the foods they eat. These students can be seen covering their ears to drown out sound and often ask for no music during Yoga sessions.

It is important to see all behavior as communication. These behaviors are not malicious or done out of spite. When children with ASD exhibit such behaviors, they are communicating to us that their needs are not being met. It is our job to take the time to try and understand what a student's behaviors are telling us. Amazingly, when the correct supports are put in place, most such behaviors will dramatically decrease. Eventually, Yoga can help children with ASD learn to regulate their nervous systems by providing them the sensory input they need, whether that is deep pressure and movement, or a calm sterile environment offering a break from the chaos found in the outside world.

Unfortunately, there is no specific recipe for setting up an ideal sensory environment. Listen to the children as you work with them. Ask them, if they have the language to tell you, if something is good or not good. If they cannot tell you in words, watch their bodies and how they respond to different sensory experiences. In general, avoid wearing perfume or strong-smelling lotions, and be aware of what impact touch has on a child before you rush in to adjust or support them in a posture. Knowing what sensory activities or Yoga poses calm a particular child can also be helpful. Take time to be observant of your students' energy and moods. When you see their bodies begin to escalate, add poses that are calming and will regroup them.

### ***Obtain Background Information***

Before one begins working directly with a child, it is important to acquire some background information about the child and to meet the child for an informal observation. Send home a questionnaire to the families, gathering medical history and behavioral and social information. Ask any questions that will help you understand the child better before the child walks through your doors to do Yoga. In particular, there are three important risk factors to note before you begin a Yoga practice with a child:

***Seizures:*** Some children with autism experience seizures. If this is the case, do not do any inversions before you check with the child's doctor. It is also important to be very conscious of the child's breathing. When completing breath exercises, do not have the child hold between breaths or do any technique that could lead the child to hyperventilate.

***Heart conditions:*** Similar to seizures, check with the child's doctor before introducing any inversions.

***Behavioral triggers:*** Ask the parents if there are any objects, words, smells, and so on that could trigger particular behaviors in their child. These behaviors could exhibit themselves as outbursts, withdrawal, or perseveration on a topic. For example, I worked with a student who loved princesses. If princesses came up in the conversation, she would perseverate and become so stuck on talking about princesses that it was nearly impossible to get her back on the topic at hand, Yoga. I quickly learned to not bring princesses up during our Yoga practice.

When meeting students for the first time, observe their bodies, watch how they move, and introduce some simple Yoga postures and breathing. Based on this initial meeting, you will be able to better design a program to meet each child's individual needs. Once this observation has been completed, you are ready to begin a session. If working in a classroom setting, talk with the teacher beforehand. Ask if he or she has any tips for success or can inform you of things you need to know before you walk in to teach the class.

### ***Organizing a Yoga Session***

Regardless of whether you are teaching a one-to-one session or a group session, the general format will likely be the same. (See Appendix A for sample session outlines.) A typical Yoga session consists of four components: Yoga *mantras* (music and chanting), *Pranayama* (breathing exercises), *asana* (physical postures and exercises), and deep relaxation. Below, I describe general guidelines for each component. For specific examples, see Appendix B.

### ***Yoga Mantra Chanting***

Many children on the autism spectrum respond well to music, and for this reason, they really enjoy the chanting of *mantras*. Yoga author and expert Shakta Kaur Khalsa notes that singing Yoga *mantras* encourages the development of language, establishes eye contact, and helps create a personal connection. The use of vibration and vocalization is calming and also helps to focus the attention. One study, conducted by Luciano Bernardi, found that Yoga *mantras* slowed respiration to six breaths per minute, had marked effects of stabilizing the respiratory system, slowed the heart rate, and had generally favorable psychological and physiological effects.

For younger or nonverbal children, the *mantras* can be sung to them. Higher-functioning children can participate in the *mantras* in a call-and-response format with hand movements such as clapping and patting. Keep the chanting fun and lighthearted. This is a wonderful opportunity to begin building a strong relationship with the child.

### ***Pranayama***

A number of breathing exercises can be completed in one Yoga session. When completing *Pranayama* work, the ultimate goal is to create awareness of the breath and teach children how they can use the breath to calm their bodies. Practicing breathing also encourages the development of breath support for speech and postural stability.

Many students who come to Yoga therapy sessions breathe in opposition to how we naturally breathe at birth; over time, they have learned to suck in their belly as they inhale and to let their belly relax on the exhale. By re-teaching proper relaxed breathing technique, students can significantly decrease the levels of anxiety that they feel throughout the day.

### ***Asana Practice***

*Asana* practice is what most people think of when they think of Yoga: moving through poses connected by breath. Many students with autism, in particular, have low muscle tone in their bodies and minimal core strength. Additionally, they struggle with proprioception (internal body awareness) and the sense of their bodies in space. Some of these children may be somewhat “noodle-like,” and will struggle if the instructor begins with a standing practice. When beginning a Yoga practice with children who have low muscle tone and minimal core strength, it has proved to be beneficial to have them try postures while seated or laying on the mat. As they build strength, standing postures can more successfully be introduced. It is important when designing your lesson to include all ranges of motion for the spine: forward folding, lateral movements, back bending, and twisting. Inversions can be introduced to students from the beginning, barring any medical contraindications. Start off with simple inversions such as legs-up-wall pose or should or stand before you move to more complicated postures. Handstands, as well as more moderate inversions such as *ardha chandrasana* (half-moon pose) and *trikonasana* (triangle pose) appear to have an especially positive therapeutic effect. They also have the added benefit of toning the core and curbing hyperactivity.

Throughout the Yoga practice, verbal cues are used to help children begin associating with their bodies. Practitioners can talk to particular parts of the body, instructing them as to what to do. For example, say, “OK knee, it is time to bend,” and then the child will bend his or her knee. Ask students where they feel the postures in their bodies, and help them begin to make those connections. As students progress to a standing practice, include some static postures and some flow, cued by the breath. This combination trains

focus and stability, while also allowing the students to practice motor planning and moving their bodies through space.

Another term practitioners will hear when working with children on the autism spectrum is *heavy work*. Heavy work activities (e.g., proprioceptive input) are used for children with sensory processing difficulties to help increase attention, decrease defensiveness, and modulate arousal. Proprioceptive input is provided by the performance of tasks that involve heavy resistance and input to the muscles and joints. This process is essential in helping the children's bodies assimilate and process both movement (vestibular) and touch (tactile) information.<sup>8</sup> Part of the reason that Yoga is so successful with ASD children is that most of the postures use the child's body weight to provide input to the joints and muscles. In this way, the practice of Yoga can itself serve as a form of self-directed heavy work.

### **Deep Relaxation**

This is often the most challenging portion of the Yoga practice, but also the most beneficial, especially for children who rarely stop moving. During *savasana* (relaxation pose), students are allowed to use lavender eye pillows, listen to soft calming music, and experience massage for their feet, shoulders, and head to facilitate deeper relaxation. Ultimately, the goal is that they will learn to find a calm and relaxed state without relying on the instructor or outside props as a guide. However, in the beginning, having the instructor guide the students through the relaxation or the use of props can help train this skill.

Instructors may find that some students with sensory sensitivities find music, smells, or touch too overwhelming or stimulating. Watch students' bodies and listen to their words to assess whether these tools are helpful or hinder their relaxation. As the students progress in their practice, it is important to build in longer durations of time for deep relaxation. The practice can be closed with a simple "*Namaste*" with intentional eye contact.

### **Language**

One last thing to take into consideration is the language and vocabulary you use while working with your students. One of the characteristics of children with ASD is difficulty understanding and expressing language. There are some simple things a practitioner can do to support students with language deficits:

Minimize the number of words being used. Be explicit and direct about what you are asking the child to do.

Use literal language. For example, instead of "Eyes on me," where the students may possibly run up and put their eyes on you, say "Look at me."

Use "first, then..." statements. For example, "*First* we do chanting, *then* we do breathing."

Provide processing time (possibly 5-15 seconds) for the child to think after a directive is given or question asked.

### **Conclusion**

It is inevitable that as you pursue this work with children with ASD, there will be challenging days. There will be sessions in which the children do well with Yoga and soak everything in and others that are simply not Yoga days. There will be days when the practice you design works perfectly, and other days when you do the same thing, and it fails miserably.



It is important to stay positive, persistent, and adaptable. Know that, in some cases, it will take time to build a student's practice. In the beginning, the student may prefer to watch. I have had students who wandered around the room for the first few weeks until they were able to settle their bodies enough to complete an abbreviated Yoga practice. Be patient and supportive. Do not let Yoga become a power struggle over what the child needs to accomplish. Walk in with no expectations except to be present with that child (or group of children), and you will be successful.

As you build relationships with the students and their families, you will have more success in reading their bodies and modifying their Yoga practice to meet their needs each and every session. As you work with groups of students or individuals, solicit feedback from parents, students, teachers, specialists, and administrators. Commit to increasing your capacity to teach by growing from what they say. Ask to use their words as testimonials for the work you are doing. Listen to the feedback and let it remind you that the work you are doing with these students is important, necessary, and making a big difference in their lives.

Autism is on the rise. These children are in our communities and schools, and there has never been a more important time to figure out ways to reach and connect with these unique children. As instructors of Yoga, we have an amazing opportunity to change individual lives, not just for this particular moment, but also for years to come.

#### **Appendix A: Sample Yoga Session Outlines**

##### ***Sample One-on-One Yoga Session (30- to 45-minute session)***

One-on-one therapy is especially helpful because the practitioner is able to provide physical assists in each posture and adjust and adapt the lesson based on the child's individual needs that day. With lower functioning or younger children, this seems to be the most successful way of providing Yoga therapy.

Yoga mantras (5-7 minutes)

Breathing exercises (5-7 minutes)

Asana practice (17-24 minutes)

Seated forward folds

Core strengthening

Spine strengthening and back bends

Standing postures including balancing

Twists

Inversions

Deep relaxation (3-7 minutes)

##### ***Sample Small Group Yoga Session (35- to 45-minute session)***

A small group works well when students are functioning at a similar level and can be somewhat independent with their practice. Follow the same structure outlined above, but also use the opportunity to practice social skills and teambuilding skills, including partner postures and Yoga games.

Yoga mantras (4-5 minutes)

Breathing exercises (3-5 minutes)

Asana practice (15-20 minutes)

Seated forward folds

Standing postures, including balancing

Core strengthening

Spine strengthening and back bends

Balancing.

Yoga activity social skills/teambuilding/Yoga game (10 minutes)

Twists

Inversions

Deep relaxation (3-5 minutes)

### **Sample Classroom Yoga Session (10- to 15-minute session)**

Classroom Yoga sessions may need to be shortened to 5–15 minutes. Students can do postures at their desk or on the floor; it is not necessary to use Yoga mats. Time can be spent at the end to take a short *savasana* (can be taken seated at their desks). Yoga can be used to start the day or as mini-breaks throughout the day. Use the same sequence of postures (possibly supplying visuals for the group) until the students show mastery. At that point, try adding new postures into the existing sequence.

Yoga *mantras* (1-2 minutes)

Breathing exercises (2-3 minutes)

*Asana* practice (5-7 minutes)

Deep relaxation (2-3 minutes)

All outlines adapted from the teachings of *Yoga For the Special Child* □

## **Appendix B: Sample Yoga Exercises**

### **Mantras**

The “Yoga Breath” song, sung to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” (better for younger students): “Criss cross apple sauce, Tall Yoga back; Shoulders up, shoulders down, Now take a Yoga breath.” Lyrics can be altered to suit students.

*Hari om* (a calming Yoga *mantra*), followed by 3–5 rounds of *om*.

### **Breathing**

Belly Breaths. Start with hands in front of the heart. As you breathe in through the nose, extend your arms to the sky in a circular motion. As you exhale through the nose (modification is exhale through the mouth), bring your hands back in front of the heart.

Cleansing Breath (also called the Train Breath). Hands on belly, take a deep breath in through nose, and feel the belly expand. Then forcefully exhale as the belly draws in. Do multiple times in a row (which can sound like a train chugging along). Provide paper tissues for students to blow their nose throughout the exercise.

### **Postures (Simplified for Children)**

Forward Bend (*paschimottanasana*, seated forward fold). Extend legs in front of the body, flex toes so they are pointing to the ceiling, bend forward at the hips, bring hands to touch toes, and relax the head and neck.

Core Strengthener (*navasana*, boat pose). In a seated pose, bend your knees and make a straight back, hands hold onto the knees. Slowly lower your back as you lift your legs off the ground, making a boat shape.

Spine Strengthener (*bhujangasana*, cobra pose). Lie on your belly, hands under shoulders. Press your legs and feet into the floor as you lift your chest off the mat (modification is to rest forearms on mat, elbows under shoulders, and lift up into sphinx pose).

Backbend (*setu bandhasana*, bridge pose). Lie on your back with knees bent, feet hip-width apart and under the knees. Lift your hips and belly towards the ceiling. Find one spot on the ceiling to stare at.

Standing/Lateral Movement (*trikonasana*, triangle pose). Stand with legs apart and arms wide (like a star), toes pointing forward. Reach one hand down to touch the leg as you reach the other hand to the sky. Switch to the other side.

Balancing (*vrksasana*, tree pose). Stand on one foot as you lift the other foot and rest it on the standing leg's ankle, calf, or thigh. Bring hands together at the heart or overhead. To help with balance and focus, stare at an object that is not moving.

Twist (*jathara parivartanasana*, supine twist). Lie on your back and hug knees in to chest. Then drop the knees to one side of the body, making a capital T with your arms. Head looks away from knees. Switch to the other side.

Inversion (*viparita karani*, legs-up-wall pose). Lie on your back with hips against the wall, legs resting on the wall, with feet flexed like they are going to stand on the ceiling, and relax.

### **Yoga Social Skills/Games**

Partner Poses. Partnerwork teaches awareness of one's own body and communication skills and adds the responsibility of supporting and keeping another person's body safe. I will often share pictures of the pose, have the students figure out how to get into the pose with their partner, and then teach their pose to the rest of the group. This helps the students practice leadership skills. A sample partner pose is the Elevator. Students stand facing one another and hold hands, arms straight. As they make eye contact, they slowly lower down to a seated position, make eye contact once again, and slowly stand up.

Windy Day Game.

This game teaches focus and concentration in the face of many distractions. All but one student start in tree pose. The remaining student is the wind. The wind runs around making noises but not touching the trees. If a tree falls out of the posture, they also become the wind. The game continues until there is one tree left.

Freeze Dance. This is a way to review Yoga postures and have students practice starting and stopping their bodies quickly. When the music is on, they dance. When the music stops, they freeze and bring themselves into whatever Yoga posture the teacher (or a leader) calls out.

### **Deep Relaxation**

*Savasana* (relaxation pose). Lie on your back with hands by hips. Take some deep breaths to calm your body, and then let your body just relax just as if you were about to fall asleep.

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12. *Integrated Yoga, Yoga with a Sensory Integrative Approach* by Nicole Cuomo (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007)
13. *Hatha Yoga Illustrated* by Martin Kirk, Brooke Boon, and Diniel DiTuro (Human Kinetics, 2006)
14. *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* by Ellen Nothohm (Future Horizons, 2005)
15. *The Out-of-Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kranowitz (The Berkley Publishing Group, 1998)

***Recommended Trainings***

Any Yoga Alliance-registered 200- or 500-hour basic Yoga teacher training

Yoga For the Special Child [www.specialyoga.com](http://www.specialyoga.com)

Yoga Calm [www.yogacalm.org](http://www.yogacalm.org)

It's Yoga Kids Teacher Certification [www.itsyoga.net](http://www.itsyoga.net)

The Radiant Child [www.childrensyoga.com](http://www.childrensyoga.com)

Street Yoga [www.streetyoga.org](http://www.streetyoga.org)