



Tuesday, September 5, 2006

Yoga joins treatment for kids with disabilities

By Rona Marech
Baltimore Sun

BALTIMORE -- Riley Jackson and Shane Perlow, both 7 and ordinarily full of energy, were lying on their backs and taking deep yoga breaths while little plastic frogs on their bellies steadily rose and fell. Soon, they were wobbling and grinning through "tree pose" and hissing enthusiastically for "cat pose." Riley, who has missing front teeth, gaily sang "London Bridge is Falling Down" as he wiggled into bridge posture.

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Yoga is a part of the occupational therapy the boys do at Hands On Therapy in Pikesville, Md., where Riley is being treated for a sensory disorder and Shane gets help for handwriting problems and some related spatial issues. As the half-hour yoga session wrapped up, Shane, a sweetly polite kid with wavy brown hair, declared that he felt good. "I feel more quieter," he said. "More calmed down."

Giggling and croaking like frogs may not be precisely what ancient Hindu practitioners had in mind, but as yoga continues to boom in popularity in the West, a new sort of follower is scurrying onto mats and into downward-facing dog position: a child with disabilities.

A growing number of kids with attention, anxiety and learning disorders, as well as diseases such as autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis, are embracing yoga. Their parents are reporting physical, mental and emotional benefits.

"People are calling about kids with almost every kind of diagnosis," said Annie Mahon, who offers what she calls "therapeutic yoga" for children at her Chevy Chase studio, Circle Yoga. "It's definitely blossoming."

Yoga teachers are beginning to add a "special needs welcome" tag on their advertisements, and a variety of pediatric therapists are integrating yoga into their treatments. "There are so many parents with kids with special needs. I don't want to say they're desperate, but they really want to find ways to help their kids," Mahon said. "They may want to find complements to medication, to find natural ways to help them, and ways the kids can be empowered, too."

Some of the "yoga" done with children can look a little more like plain old playing: running, wriggling, pretending to be animals. But many of the postures adults do are embedded in there - just with extra barking, snorting and chants with Sesame Street overtones.

And just like adults ensconced in an incense haze, children learn to meditate and to pay attention to their breathing. Teachers sneak in strands of yoga philosophy, reminding children to breath through the scary parts or to be present.

"We feel like all our kids are true yogis. We see in them a sense of their belonging in this world, and that they are valued in this world," said Molly Kenny, a Seattle-based pioneer in the field, who has trained many of the people who work with disabled children.

Susan Whelan of Leonardtown found out about yoga for disabled children from another parent in her knitting group. She enrolled her 10-year-old daughter, who has a yet-unlabeled condition that may be cerebral palsy, and her 12-year-old son, who has autism, in classes.

"Because there's no known cure for autism, I have always looked at all alternative and on-the-edge therapies," Whelan said. She said yoga helps her son focus and he has learned to use the breathing techniques to calm himself.

Her daughter, who has trouble running, gained considerable flexibility through yoga. The class also boosted her self-confidence and even helped with a speech problem that often leaves her struggling to find words. "Something happens with the brain that frees up language," Whelan said. "She's a motor mouth during yoga."

Julie Peoples-Clark was suffering from postpartum depression when she saw an ad in the back of a yoga magazine for "yoga for the special child." Her daughter, Ella, who is now 3, has cerebral palsy due to a birth injury.

She took a weeklong course and started practicing with her daughter every day. "It was a wonderful way for me to connect with Ella," said Peoples-Clark, who recently moved to Vermont. "Finally, I felt like I had a sense of power over her recovery." Her depression lifted.

Other teachers and parents say yoga can help kids with concentration, balance, sleep, muscle development and brain function. Karen Soltes, a clinical social worker from Chevy Chase, does some conventional talk therapy during her yoga classes.

"This was a surprising byproduct," she said. "Most adolescents don't want to come and talk to you a lot about what's bothering them. Through a lot of movement and sun salutations, all of the sudden they'd be talking about their lives."

In addition to introducing yoga to children with severe disabilities, Soltes has worked with "regular stressed-out kids" doing yoga and yoganidra, which resembles a guided relaxation.

"There's an enormous increase in anxiety in children," Soltes said. "We can help kids find better ways to relax so it's not taking a toll on their physiology."

Research on the effect of yoga on children is scarce because the practice is fairly new, but the health benefits for adults are well documented, said William Stixrud, a clinical neuropsychologist in Silver Spring. He often recommends yoga to anxious children he sees in his private practice.

"For kids in general, stress is terrible for learning," he said. "My emphasis on yoga and meditation is to minimize the extent to which stress molds their brains in such a way that they're vulnerable to ongoing anxiety and recurrent depression."

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