

Yoga Therapy

with a Special Touch

Praveena Karunamoorthy

As strains of the ancient Indian Gayatri Mantra filled the room, it was obvious that the impact of that very chant was immediate. A reluctant seven year old boy stopped being agitated, calmed down and immediately allowed the chanter to massage his body and fold it into a simple yoga *asana*.

This was no ordinary children's yoga workshop. It was one for special needs children and such an experience can only be described as amazing.

Led by renowned early intervention therapist Teddi Barenholtz, the workshop was part of a 500 hour teachers training programme and one particular aspect of the programme is teaching yoga to special needs kids i.e. those with mental and/or physical disabilities such as Cerebral Palsy, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Autism.

According to Teddi who is also a qualified physiotherapist, "One of the main components of teaching yoga and implementing yoga therapy for these kids is that you have to come down to their level in order to be able to relate to them which is contrary to a regular yoga class where the student is supposed to adapt to the teacher. Here, the entire session depends on that particular child that you are working with."

Chanting or singing also appears to be one of the main aspects of teaching these children yoga. This is especially so with kids who are hyperactive or have ADD, etc. "It helps to soothe and clam them down and thus enables them to focus their attention on their body and the *asanas*", Teddi says.

Teddi also asserts that there are different methods which are incorporated in the class for different types of children. "For example, if a child has Attention Deficit Disorder, what we do is, we start the class really big and make it very active and then we bring the tone of the class down to a more calm and focused atmosphere and in turn, the child follows." This goes to show that the therapy that is conducted must be malleable enough to cater to each individual child's personality. This can be seen in the case of seven year old Ivan who is blind. "In



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order to bring his awareness to a particular part of his body, for an example, his hand, we massage his hand and then say ‘Ivan, this is your hand.’”

Then there was seven year old Raajdev who was open, completely calm and enthusiastic about his yoga session with Yap Wee Cheng, one of the participants of the workshop. The sheer glee on his face that appeared as he completed the *Bhujanga Asana* or Cobra Pose was indescribable. It was evident that this form of yoga therapy helped these children well beyond the physical level. They were able to emotionally connect to and completely take in the yoga *asanas*.

According to Marina Pinchuk, one of the other participants of the “Yoga for Special Needs Children” workshop, every bit is important when teaching these children and helping them with their yoga therapy. “It is fun to be around them and it is definitely emotionally overwhelming sometimes. But as you start spending more time with them, you get over that and rejoice in their ability to complete a pose and the smile on their faces when they do, that is priceless.”

According to Teddi, the parents of these children too appear to respond well to yoga therapy for their kids. “They are able to see their child gain strength and dexterity in their muscles and joints hands on, and it is definitely wonderful to watch them as they get more in tune with the therapy.”

Indrawati Widjanarko, another participant at the workshop who worked with Ivan says that it truly is the most satisfying experience to work with these children and help them come out of their shell. “You have to look within yourself to relate to them and in turn, you are able to see how blessed and fortunate you are to be living the life that you are.”

Although yoga therapy for special needs children may not be as popular as the traditional approach of sending such a child to psychologists for counseling, it clearly is a more personal and fun way of enabling these children to get the exercise and the awareness of their body that they need. More than anything, it is that personal touch and communication that makes all the difference to them.

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