*Yoga, mixed with creative expression, is a powerful bridge for all activities of the developing person's life ~ mindfulness, breath, movement, acceptance and expression of the body, mind & heart, allow for the child to "grow" in integrated, holistic ways with skills they can use through adulthood.

*Benefits of Yoga for persons living with the Autism Spectrum condition include better sensory information processing, motor control, balance, focus & attention, communication, self regulation and self esteem.

*1 in 88 children now diagnosed with ASD, nationally. Locally, the figures are higher. Boys are affected more, and yet the numbers of girls are increasing. 1 in 50 families is dealing with a "Spectrum" condition - ASD, ADD/ADHD, APD, SPD and other neuro-social communication issues.

*Yoga is a natural complement to education and therapies, such as OT, PT and Speech. There are many ways to weave methods and practice together to advance the overall effectiveness of interventions. Use the "lens" of your perspective to see possibilities for use.

**"I can take my Yoga anywhere!" ~ Joshua
Just Breathe~~~

What is your breathing like right now?
How do you breathe when stressed?
What is "breath"?

Breath does more than just supply oxygen or release carbon dioxide. Breathing patterns can change brain wave patterns... neurotransmitters ...hormones...heart rates...perspective. Sacred traditions worldwide often equated breath with spirit and with the subtle energies that animate life. Ancients believed there is a life force in Breath which is shared by all, and when connected to tone and sound becomes a creative source.

*Cleansing breaths - just 3 can change a room, let alone an attitude!

*Balloon Breath - inhale and raise arms in circle with fingers touching above your head - exhale and let your balloon deflate. Inflate your balloon 3 times. Now get silly! Imagine someone pops your balloon - exaggerate your exhale. Use crossing the midline actions with your hands and arms to "reach for a new balloon" and inhale/inflate again. Make a silly balloon - make noises as you exhale, pretending you are a rapidly deflating balloon. (Go ahead - laugh! It's good for you.)

*Cycle Breath - Inhale for 4, hold for 3, and exhale for 5
Inhale = sympathetic system   Exhale = parasympathetic system
Fight or Flight     Rest and Digest
(Increase cycle for breathing, consciously slowing the process and focusing on extended exhales to restore balance in our Cortisol driven lifestyles.)
"If you have time to breathe, then you have time to meditate!"

"Shhh! I'm trying to get my Peace on." ~ Paul - as stated to nearby people.

Awareness
Mindfulness
Meditation
Consciousness

*The Raisin Experience*

**Mindfulness** is awareness, often in action, and not so much what we focus on, but how we focus. We become a silent witness with no judgment to moments and activities. This technique prepares you to respond to your reality less impulsively and more effectively.

*Meditation is inviting yourself to a space that is just yours. Something within, and yet something that expands you beyond your perceived boundaries and limits. It is quieting the "monkey chatter of the mind" to listen to the small still voice…to be present to that which is other…connected to a sense of Self which is beyond the ego self.

*Breath
*Mantra
*Music…Guided Imagery …etc

Sooooo - what about kids?
They need quiet moments and deep breaths too, especially in the fast paced technological world they operate. Constant stimuli can help to develop areas of the brain for certain advanced processing, but it also can deplete children of energy and make them unable to just be still with Self.

The Spectrum child is interesting in that when they are in "their zone", they can actually be in a meditative like state. Their perseverations can be their bliss! Yet, we can create an intentional meditative space which will help them to become more aware and connect them to tools for self monitoring, regulation and control.

*Set a space and time…use soft tones when speaking
*Connect to Breath
*Introduce a focus word or tone; you can use mudras (and postures)
*Start out 1 minute, 2, 3, 5, up to 10
*Be encouraging…remind them that it's natural for the mind to wander…tell the child how wonderful they are

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YOGA!

What is it?

I explain Yoga as an integrated wellness system - it can improve our lives on every level. Yoga is translated an defined to be a word from Sanskrit meaning "to yoke". Expanding, it means to yoke the body, mind and spirit together - to achieve a unified presence and force. Others say Yoga means "union." It is comprised of various levels and components. Many people may just think of the physical fitness piece - the poses. Yet, Yoga is really about Breath and Awareness. Through your breath, mindfulness and movement, you become aware and present to your body, and then deeper to your feelings and state of emotions, and then deeper still, to an overall sense of essence, or what can be called spirit.

Yoga is referred to as a Body/Mind/Spirit practice. Some people see these parts as compartmentalized - separate pieces of our Self needing to be brought together. However, you are not a sum total of parts and practices - you are an integrated being - multidimensional and multisensory. You are a complex being, but life can be quite simple. We have made things complicated with our daily routines and expectations, thereby creating a sense of disconnect from Self, as we meet external demands. Yet, we can, through Yoga, move with grace and compassion, accepting and respecting ourselves and others.

For children, this is a wonderful way of Being to teach, show and share. Children with special needs appreciate Yoga and its benefits. We have seen connections for learning and interactions improve. We have seen fitness abilities improve, along with focus and attention. Self confidence and self esteem are expressed.

It may seem like a huge order for Yoga to fulfill all these things - but I believe it is an inherent ability for each of us to discover and express. You move with greater ease, flexibility, strength and compassion as you allow your inner light to shine. You discover that despite the ups and downs of everyday, the roller coaster of emotions, and the ever changing world around us, you do have choices. You are empowered to be just you. And that is more than enough. Only you are made this way, and the world needs you. So, with Yoga, see yourself as whole and wonderful, as you practice this thing called Life.

Explaining Yoga to Children

I explain the history simply and dramatically -

A long time ago, in a place called India, Yoga was born. Have you heard of India? Does anyone know where India is in the world? Well, people lived back then without all the stuff we have today. They spent a lot of time outside. They would sit and look at the world around them. REALLY look at things. They noticed attributes and began to draw pictures, mold clay, carve stones, sing songs and do dances to celebrate the world around them. They created stories to explain how the world and all the animals, objects and people were made. The air was clean and they breathed deeply. They began to exercise and move their bodies like the world around them. Mountains, rivers, tigers, snakes (I move like these while speaking)……they also learned to sit very still and just be…to meditate. Yoga made them feel whole and good about themselves.

Today, we know that Yoga can help us feel more put together and be healthy. We can feel more organized and do our work better. Yoga means "union" or Oneness. So, we stretch and breathe, bend and balance, and relax, when we do Yoga. It’s awesome!

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Yoga gives us a wonderful way to connect and interact with children. In its simplest form, Yoga invites us to BREATHE - to breathe with awareness, mindfulness and appreciation for how our bodies and minds work. There are many benefits to this practice. Notice, we say practice - it is an ongoing process. Yes, as time goes on, we do improve, giving credence to the old saying, "practice makes perfect." Yet, it is not about the perfect pose. The practice gracefully leads us to a sense of wholeness. There are so many systems active in the mind/body/spirit process as we move through Yoga; it creates the possibility for integration, along with a greater sense of ease, poise and self confidence.

**Children we can help with special considerations:**

* Easily over stimulated
* Difficulty with self-regulation
* Impulsive and/or easily distracted
* Focus and concentration issues - attending to task
* Need simple steps
* Learning / Processing issues
* Sensitive to Sensory input and processing
* Speech and language deficits
* Low or high muscle tone
* Anxiety
* Rigidity and fixations
* Boundaries and social skills
* Discipline
* Confidence and self-esteem

**Benefits of Yoga for Children**

* Increases self awareness
* Increases strength and flexibility
* Helps to balance the mind and body
* Improves coordination and balance
* Enhances focus and attention
* Teaches about the body / anatomy
* Expands awareness of the senses and sensory system
* Builds and maintains a healthy spine
*Strengthens systems of the body: skeletal, muscular, hormonal, digestive, circulatory, nervous, respiratory

*Reduces stress by releasing tension and teaching calming techniques

*Teaches self-control and self-regulation

*Acknowledges and nurtures their special gifts and strengths

*Increases self esteem

*Promotes positive choices and confidence

*Encourages teamwork and cooperation

*Teaches respect and acceptance for self, others and the world

*Promotes social skills and communication, encouraging friendships

*Allows children to BE themselves

*Explores the inner stillness and connects them to mindfulness

*Energizes as creativity and fun are experienced and expressed

*Grounds and expands the child, integrating all aspects of who they are

*Something wonderful to do with family, friends or alone

*Provides a framework for health, wellness and a joyful life

**Yoga is a powerful tool that can help children to connect to their bodies, find their strength, self regulate, be calm, face challenges and develop respect for self, others and the world around them.**

Research varies on Yoga and children, and not many "official" quantitative studies have been done. However, there are many anecdotes and clinical experiences. For Spectrum children there is published research showing that Yoga was successful in addressing core symptoms and issues of Autism. (International Journal of Yoga Therapy, 2002; 12:71-79, Kenny. And IJYT, 2004; 14:68-78, Goldberg)

**Yoga practice tips**

As you set up at home or school, be aware of the child and environment. Is the area safe, are there too many distractions, will you use music, are the children sensory avoiding or sensory seeking, will you use visual supports, will you use mats or towels to designate personal space? It is good to establish a routine, so the children can anticipate the flow and it helps to reduce anxiety. Develop rules together. As you lead the yoga, speak in direct statements and use verbal cueing to bring awareness to their body. Aspergers may take literally things you say. Be aware of Medical issues - seizures, heart, allergies.

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Overall, any children's class we teach will be successful as we incorporate key components:

*Breathing
*Movement
*Imagination
*Cooperation
*Creativity
*Fairness (non-competitive *)
*Fun
*Respect
*Positive and affirmative
*Peaceful - we always have choices
*Relaxation

**Poses** (Asanas)
- Sitting
- Laying
- Standing
- Balancing
- Inversions

**Games** (note - games are to be played in supportive ways, with little focus on winning)
- Ball pass with feet
- Cotton Ball - Clean up (1. using straws to blow; 2. using toes)
- Freeze Yoga
- Sketch and Stretch - Yoga Pictionary
- Yoga Says
- Bell Game

**Stories**
- Read a book and have kids act out in poses
- Take a Walk and then act out in poses; or Yoga a school topic!
- Create your own story and act out - consider themes - beach, zoo, space, farm, etc
  * Imagination, communication and motor planning are key here and really help to develop the child

**Relaxation** (using calm voice, move slowly and warmly - sitting or lying down - breath focus)
- Visualization - Fluffy cloud, Beach, Sunset, Favorite place, Rain, Colors, etc
- Savasana - rest pose - lie on back with eyes closed for 2-5 minutes. Some children may need to lie on side or roll up in a mat or blanket based on Sensory issues. If in family class, kids may lay on Mom.
  * I have had great success with kids finding and feeling their calm state in this final part of the yoga. I will monitor how well they are "resting" and I remind them that they have control and can be in control - they can use their breath to center. I affirm how wonderful they are and praise their efforts.

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Art and Yoga

Art expresses in unique ways and often reveals the deeper and beautiful aspects of a person. Creative expression provides many points of engagement and interaction - creating, communicating, following directions, sharing, motor planning, fine motor, group dynamics, openness, joy and esteem.

Much research has been done on the benefits of all arts for children and especially Special Needs. Results show very positive outcomes for the children.

* Draw you Breath
* Decorate your Yoga Mat
* Mandala - circle art - can use images, lines, words, etc to create

* Projects related to the story - puppets, painting, etc
* Make a yoga pose book - stick figures for poses; create a sequence
* Photo collage of friends and self doing yoga
* Paper plate shakers - maracas - for music and movement
* Coffee filter butterflies, flowers or dragonflies.

We find through Story, Movement and Art, children integrate on several levels. It becomes a structured, yet freeing way to put together all the pieces. For the Spectrum person, education, interventions, therapies and social skills come together in a fun way. It is amazing what we have seen happen with the kids!
Benefits for Families
Yoga, with its movements, breath and relaxation components, along with other creative movement and expression techniques, is a wonderful way to stimulate growth with children. It can incorporate and augment all the other areas of training, education and therapy, while empowering the child and family to live with a more joyful quality of life.

Yoga is fun to do as a family! We have many times used just the basics to offset sibling explosions. Sometimes you have to let kids be kids. Other times for various reasons of personalities, stresses, weather patterns, etc, kids become overwrought. Maybe you have a backyard or a park to send them into and blow off steam and play around. Some kids will require structure, so bring a ball or jump rope or anything, and guide their activities looking for ways to stretch the body and open the mind. Deep breathing and laughing are key and perfect ways to reset the buttons. Of course, try some yoga.

Now if, you can't get outside, then Yoga to the rescue! Use the strategies of breath and focus. Tell a story and act it out. Make up poses and names. Use Lion Breath, tones or sounds to have them push the wound up energies out. Do the Lemon Squeeze. Remind everyone there is no competing or judging. We connect to respect and look for the positive. Smile. Just the act of breath and smiling changes chemistry in the body. And 2-5 minutes of candle meditation does wonders. You can do some foot or hand reflexology, and maybe have some lavender spray. Give hugs and remind them how wonderful they are and how much you loved them…and then give yourself a hug and say I Love You.

Family Plan - __________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

School Plan - __________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

Personal Plan - ________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

Conclusion
As we engage the children with the Yoga and Creativity, we are sharing invaluable tools. These connections and skills become healthy bridges to empower the Adult as well. Yoga allows us to explore our minds and bodies. It encourages regulation of the senses. It shows us the strength of flexibility and the fluidness of stability. It leads us on a path of mindfulness, allowing for appreciation of the present moment. Yoga balances and calms the mind, and empowers us to live a peaceful, inspired life. Now that is a great thing to share with KIDS and just what the world needs! ♥

Enjoy! Thank You! Namaste!

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Resources:
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*Yoga for the Special child* by Sonia Sumar (Special Yoga Publications, 1998)

*Yoga Calm for Children, Educating Heart, Mind and Body* by Lynea Gillen and Jim Gillen (Three Pebble Press, 2007)

*Storytime Yoga, Teaching Yoga to Children through Story* by Sydney Solis (The Mythic Yoga Studio, 2006)

*YogaKids, Educating the Whole Child through Yoga* by Marsha Wenig (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2003)

*Ten Things Every child with Autism Wishes You Knew* by Ellen Nothohm (Future Horizons, 2005)

*The Out of Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kranowitz (The Berkley Publishing Group, 1998)

*The New Social Story Book* by Carol Gray (Future Horizons, 2010)

Online -
www.KarmaKidsYoga.com
www.HappyHeartsYoga.com - Spectrum Kidz Yoga ®; SMARTKIDS Method®
www.everykidsyoga.com
www.specialyoga.com - Sonia Sumar
www.childlightyoga.com
www.braingym.org
www.coloring-pages-kids.com
www.artprojectsforkids.org

Natural -
Go outdoors, Breathe and Observe
Visit Nature Centers, Parks, Farms, Zoos
*Observe children - observe the ASD child - clues for Yoga activities are in their natural movements, interests, gifts and challenges! *

Wishing you the best on your journey to create healthy connections for Spectrum persons!

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