

# Yoga for Autism: Improving functional skills

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(Based on the research, performing these exercises at the beginning of the class period can support children with autism to increase imitation skills, the ability to respond to verbal instruction, increase body awareness and balance, increase sensory integration, reduce stress and potentially alleviate effects of digestive system disruptions common to children with ASD.)

## ***Why should we?***

Students living with ASD experience high levels of stress. The amount of sensory intake being processed through their nervous systems can be highly overwhelming for them. The anxiety that can be experienced is beautifully captured in the video “Carly’s Cafe,” where Carly Fleischmann, a young woman living with ASD, offers the world an experience through her eyes. This has provided tremendous insight into what kind of sensory intake persons on the spectrum are relating to on a daily basis. This further contributes to the anxiety levels that are seen and experienced through social deficits, perseverating interests, a need for rigid routine, lack of functional skills, communication deficits, etc.

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These children are in a constant state of stress, otherwise known as 'fight or flight.' Understanding the human nervous system, we know that the body is either in 'fight or flight' mode, or in 'rest and digest.' From this standpoint the correlation between children with ASD and gastrointestinal disorders becomes clear. The constant state anxiety leads to an autopilot stress response which doesn't give the body much time for rest. If the body is stuck in a stress response blood is prevented from circulating through the digestive tract and vital organs, and remains in the extremities. This is visible when you notice the tension held in the muscles of children with ASD.

How can we support these children in turning of the stress response?

Practicing yoga exercises such as postures, affirmations, concentrated breathing exercises and meditation, supports the body in shifting from fight or flight activity into rest and digest functions. Cellular biologist and epigeneticist Bruce Lipton refers to this as the "growth system." Some small pilot studies have shown the potential these practices have to alleviate some of the physical conditions children associated with ASD such as limited bodily and spatial awareness, difficulty with imitation, and poor balance. The benefits then have the potential to extend into functional classroom skills which can be observed as self-regulation skills, increased imitation skills, and ability to follow verbal instructions. These are the skills we hope to teach in order to increase learning capacity in students and also allow them to appropriately respond to a classroom environment, social situations, and in the home. My personal experience comes through anecdotal examples from being in classrooms and participating and leading students through these exercises. If the students didn't ask for more, I wouldn't have received the inspiration to look further into it!

### **Feel good moments**

These practices can contribute to the implementation of behavior plans if skills like self-regulation are a goal. Students with ASD that have practiced these exercises in class have reported "feeling calm and happy." On a few occasions students have personally requested the exercises at the beginning of class before the teacher began her instruction period. One student was asked if he would like to do the exercises at home, and he responded yes, asking that I write down the two video channels on "Gonoodle" with the exercises he liked so he could practice at home with mom!

Through my personal experience the students seems to respond better to the exercises when an adult is by their side practicing alongside them. When a student was confused on bodily placement, they would look over to me or receive support on body positioning. This is where the increase to imitation skills comes into place!

On one occasion we were practicing positive affirmations in class such as, "May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May my life be filled with joy." When taking a walk break during class, the student repeated the affirmations multiple times with staff. The following day when

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speaking to another staff member (behavior tech) in a reflective manner, he communicated that when “he was filled with joy when he saw staff members visiting from the other school.” (A school that he would later transfer to.) This went to show the benefits of these exercise extending beyond the time of practice.

### **Try this!**

Just taking 5-10 minutes at the beginning of class is easily implementable. School districts now have free access to websites like ‘gonoodle,’ which have various channels, some of which contain short videos that incorporate yoga postures (body movements), breathing techniques, mindfulness practices with emotions such as empathy, and affirmations. Below are links to these channels. Test out the effectiveness with your students and don’t be hesitant to get involved with them! It is encouraging and fun. As school staff, we could use the stress reduction too!

<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/flow>

<https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/empower-tools>