

Yoga for the Twice Exceptional

By J. Mark Bade

All of our kids, especially twice-exceptional kids, grow up with stress and trauma, which can lead to underperformance, to school refusal, and even, with older children, to dropping out of school. Over the years, many adults have turned to yoga and mindfulness as ways to deal with stress and trauma. Could that work for children? And for children in the classroom?

For Louise Goldberg, founder of Creative Relaxation, the answer to those questions is a definite yes. She has been teaching yoga to kids of diverse ages and challenges since 1982 and is the author of two books on the topic. She is a certified yoga therapist and holds a master's degree in reading education. In addition, Goldberg leads trainings for educators and therapists internationally and is the owner of the Yoga Center of Deerfield Beach, Florida.



Louise Goldberg

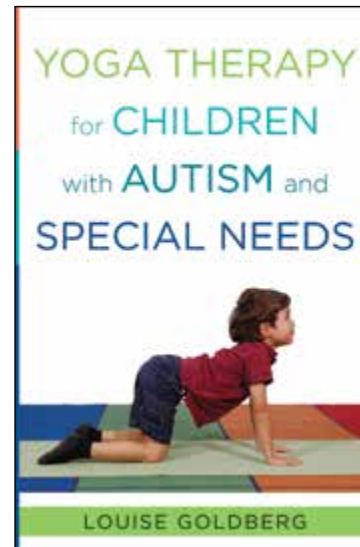
"I have never met a child who cannot receive benefits from yoga," says Goldberg. She feels that yoga is especially beneficial to children who enjoy movement and play. But she notes that even for children who find movement challenging, there are opportunities to rest in a comfortable position. The purpose of her programs for children, Goldberg explains, is to encourage them to connect with their bodies through movement and/

or breathing, and to develop tools to release tension, manage stress, and increase their capacity to focus. Most important is that all children feel valued and accepted exactly as they are.

Before we explore much further, know that yoga in the classroom is somewhat different from the picture of yoga practice you might have in your mind — that of the solitary practitioner holding sustained poses on a grassy knoll overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Yoga in the classroom is practiced in short interludes, from perhaps one to five minutes, in street clothes, perhaps using desks as supports. Nevertheless, its purpose and benefits are the same.

Yoga and Special Needs

Goldberg's first book, *Yoga Therapy for Children with Autism and Special Needs*, was published in 2013. In addition to children in an autism cluster (contained classes), she was working with students who spent part of the day in special education classes and part of the day in the general education classroom. She went into classes at

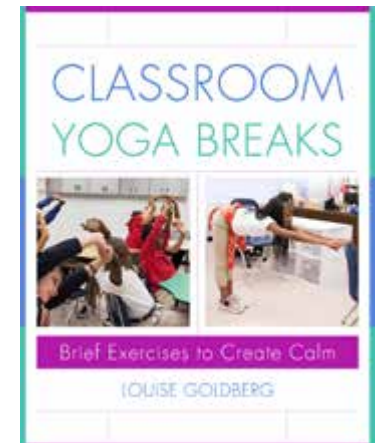


the teachers' convenience, so sometimes these sessions were brief — 5 to 10 minutes — and sometimes the sessions lasted for an entire class period of 30 to 45 minutes. What Goldberg discovered was that yoga provided a "language" for the entire class. Everyone attained skills for self-regulation, for relieving anxiety, and for getting in touch with their own bodies.

"I find kids who don't know what it feels like to be relaxed," says Goldberg. Yoga provides them with the ability to monitor themselves and regulate their stress, for example through focused breathing. The special needs exhibited by these children included autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, sensory processing issues, physical disabilities, and emotional issues.

Goldberg sees many benefits to yoga for kids with special needs. "Having fun within a structured environment makes yoga play less daunting for many children. Experiencing stillness in posture offers a respite from the constant noise and confusion of the world around them."

Goldberg's second book, *Classroom Yoga Breaks*, published in 2017, includes a chapter on ASD and special needs but is focused on bringing yoga to all students. The book connects yoga with mindfulness,



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social-emotional learning, physical education, bullying, and even response to intervention. The book offers 12 units that teachers can implement, for example on breathing, or relaxation, or attention.

After regular practice, students show in the classroom how they've incorporated yoga techniques into their lives. During tests, teachers will see students doing focused breathing or shoulder circles (a yoga exercise). It enables students with ASD, who may be prone to outbursts, to be successfully redirected through a practice cue from the teacher, such as "take five deep breaths." Yoga practice can also promote calmness and may help students address self-esteem issues.

One program taught by Goldberg is a visual yoga curriculum called "S.T.O.P. and Relax," which involves the use of visual cues. Goldberg co-authored the curriculum, along with two special educators and a school psychologist. Teachers know this curriculum is working when they see one student walking up to another and holding up a card that says "Soft face" or "Soft shoulders" — signs that students can recognize stress not only in themselves but in others.

But don't just take Goldberg's word for the benefits of yoga for children. In a blog posting at its website, Harvard Health Publishing says this:

Yoga and mindfulness have been shown to improve both physical and mental health in school-age children (ages 6 to 12). Yoga improves balance, strength, endurance, and aerobic capacity in children. Yoga and mindfulness offer psychological

benefits for children as well. A growing body of research has already shown that yoga can improve focus, memory, self-esteem, academic performance, and classroom behavior, and can even reduce anxiety and stress in children. (From <https://goo.gl/EdTKiV>)

The blog goes on to note that yoga might also help children with the symptoms of ADHD.

How Does It Work?

The mechanisms by which yoga confers its benefits involve, among other bodily structures, the nervous system and the endocrine system. For example, a yoga pose in which the child presses the chin into the throat notch activates nerves that slow the heart rate and lower blood pressure, according to research cited



The "palm gazing" yoga exercise



A "warrior" stance with desk support

in Goldberg's first book. And the "bridge pose," which combines pressure in the throat notch with certain pelvic movements, also stimulates nerves contributing to relaxation. The "child's pose," a resting position with the forehead on the floor, activates calming centers in the brain through the pressure on the orbit of the eyes. To the extent that poses reduce the secretion by the endocrine glands of stress hormones like cortisol, yoga poses can promote relaxation and relief from stress, writes Goldberg.

Helping Kids Practice Yoga

Goldberg points out a feature of yoga that helps to make it appealing to children. Any effort is acknowledged. "Not everyone looks the same in a posture,



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and that's OK," says Goldberg. "You can't get it wrong in yoga, as long as you do no harm to yourself or others."

Is there a particular age range that is more (or less) receptive to yoga? Goldberg says that one of her favorite ages is upper elementary, although she has taught kids from pre-K through young adulthood. "The upper elementary kids still have lots of imagination, but they are straddling that age where 'coolness' is king," she says. "Getting them to experience comfort within their bodies and to be more accepting of others are especially important at this age." She observes that these kids respond well to having fun, being silly, and meeting reasonable challenges. It's an important time to create a sense of community by sharing space and partnering in postures.

Yoga doesn't have to be always practiced in the classroom. Parents can take advantage of yoga for their twice-exceptional kids. Goldberg says, "Parent/

"You can't get it wrong in yoga..."

— LG

child classes are a wonderful way to level the playing field and interact with your child in a non-judgmental, accepting space." She advises looking for an experienced teacher who has been trained in teaching children with diverse needs. Teaching yoga to children



Stance from the S.T.O.P. and Relax curriculum

is very different from teaching adults, she says. And teaching children with diverse challenges takes an even more specific set of skills.

High-ability kids can offer special challenges in terms of getting them to engage and practice. Goldberg notes that the key is in balance between success and challenge. "They can't think it's too easy or babyish, or they won't try it," she says. "At the same time, if it's too hard, they may be discouraged easily." Addressing students in the most respectful manner sets a tone for the class, and teaches the power of empathy and acceptance. According to Goldberg, these are not easy skills for many of our special kids.

Conclusion

Scientists and advocates increasingly see yoga as a possible solution to important issues. In an article titled "How Yoga Could Help Keep Kids in School," *Forbes* quoted a yoga advocate concerned about the societal cost of school drop-outs:

This is not some feel good, foo-foo practice from the Himalayas. This is based in cutting edge neuroscience, trauma research, and in somatic psychology. This is vital to ensure our well-being, and to our economy. Let's come together under the banner of transformative practices, and put forward the essence of yoga, not the hype. This is simple. Anyone can do this, anytime, anywhere. If you can move, if you can breathe, then you can do the practice.

(From <https://goo.gl/vFfZny>)

And twice-exceptional children can indeed move, breathe, and practice yoga. Louise Goldberg has seen how they can internalize her techniques. Remember the visual cues? Soft face? Goldberg relates a story of a student who approached his apparently agitated mother with a visual cue: "Deep breaths."

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