

# Benefits of Yoga

**D**o you love yoga, or have dreams of loving yoga, but your schedule never allows you to actually go? There are many people who love exercise, and especially yoga and Pilates, because they are gentle on your body and have the additional benefits of providing meditation and a sense of serenity. Have you ever thought about having your child or children participate in kids' yoga? There are many studios out there that offer yoga classes for kids.

Yoga has great benefits for all children, and it can really be helpful for children with sensory challenges. If your child has sensory challenges, such as difficulty with regulation, motor coordination, imitating postures, social skills, following directions, and more, then yoga could help with all of these skills.

# for Children with Sensory Challenges



**Britt Collins, MS, OTR**

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Briefly, let's look at the meaning of some of these terms:

- ✦ Regulation refers to your child being in that “just-right state” for learning. He is happy, follows directions, has impulse control, and engages appropriately with others. We strive to regulate our kids who struggle with sensory issues, so they can be happy and function in their environment.
- ✦ Motor coordination refers to gross- and fine-motor skills, as well as bilateral coordination (coordinating both sides of the body). These skills can be hard for

some children, and yoga can strengthen these them.

- ✦ Imitating postures refers to children being able to watch someone else and then make their body move like the person they are watching. Can they imitate you if you stand on one leg or stretch your arms out wide?

Yoga can be fun and silly or serious, depending on how your child tolerates a group setting or class. There are also ways to incorporate yoga moves into your child's sensory lifestyle to help him with regulation. We try to not use the term

sensory diet anymore, if that is something you are familiar with, because creating a sensory lifestyle for you and your family is a more realistic way to function.

A sensory lifestyle is knowing what makes your child tick—what gets him revved up and what calms him down. What types of activities are good for him to do before you make a transition? Does he need movement activities paired with heavy work, to help him stay regulated or to be able to tolerate the next activity (such as sitting through math class or going to the dentist)?

Yoga for children can present itself in many forms. Your child could take a class with an instructor, who may guide the children through a series of moves and poses. Or, you, as the parent, can learn various yoga poses that would be beneficial for your child. Here are some poses you might try:



The **CHILD'S POSE** is where you lie down with your knees tucked under you, leaning forward, with your forehead resting on the floor and your arms stretched out above you or tucked down by your side. This is a great relaxation pose that stretches the upper back and arms.

tree



The **TREE POSE** is done by standing on one foot, with the other one supported on the inside leg. Your arms are pressed together at the chest or above your head. This pose is great practice for balancing. Help your child if he cannot balance independently.

cat



The **CAT POSE** is where you get down on all fours on the floor, and round your back upward. Then, you can switch to the **SEAL POSE**, where you arch your back downward and look up. The seal pose can help to develop core strength and movement.

seal



cobra



The **COBRA POSE** is done by lying flat on your stomach, then pushing up on your hands as far as your body will allow while you look upward. This pose is good for stretching the back and opening up the chest. It also helps provide deep pressure input to the arms, shoulders, and wrists.

butterfly



The **BUTTERFLY POSE** is where you sit with your legs in “butterfly” position out to the sides, with your back straight. This pose helps you work on developing core strength, posture, and flexibility.

The **ROCKING BOAT** is done by lying back and tucking your knees up, then rocking gently back and forth. This pose can target the flexor muscles of the abdomen and stretches out the back muscles.

rocking boat



side bend



The **SIDE BEND** or **TRIANGLE** pose can be done in different variations. The legs are spread slightly wider than shoulder width apart, with the arms out to the sides. Then, lean over and touch the floor with one hand, while the other arm extends straight above you. This pose can help strengthen your sense of balance, coordination, and core strength.

frog #1



frog #2



The **FROG POSE** is where you squat like a frog, then jump up. This move helps with coordination, leg strength, and deep pressure into the legs.

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There are thousands of yoga poses, and there are so many fun poses that children make up themselves—but any of them can really help with overall sensory regulation, body coordination, and strength. Children seem to enjoy working in a group together or doing “yoga time” with mommy at home. I use yoga poses throughout therapy sessions to keep kids engaged and to challenge them and their bodies. Sometimes, when your child is starting to look anxious or become frustrated while you are out and about, you can have him take a deep breath, press his hands together at his chest, and even give him a little deep pressure on his shoulders to help regulate him.

Yoga also helps children improve their self-esteem. Many children with sensory-processing challenges struggle with team sports because it is hard to coordinate their bodies efficiently, or they cannot run as fast as their peers. Children who have weak core strength or poor coordination tend to shy away from sports or athletic activities for that

reason. Yoga can be done at your own pace and gives your child an opportunity to learn the movement or pose and perfect it.

Yoga also increases the sense of body awareness. When you are moving your body through space and challenging your sense of balance and strength, you are giving your muscles feedback (information) that helps your brain process where you are in space. This can be challenging for kids with sensory issues, and yoga is one way to help them with this.

You do not have to be a trained yoga instructor to practice yoga with your child, but you should make sure that you are using safe body movements and making sure that your child is not pushing himself too hard, to the point of injury. It should be a fun and relaxing experience for you and your child.

Resources I can recommend are the *Yoga for Children with Special Needs* DVD, with Aras Baskaukas, as well as card decks that kids can use to learn yoga poses. ♦

*Britt Collins is a pediatric occupational therapist in Denver, Colorado. She works at the Sensory Therapies And Research (STAR) Center and tours the country, speaking about the benefits of occupational therapy for children. Britt co-authored the Sensory Parenting book series, as well as the OT (Occupational Therapy) DVD series. Her web sites are [www.sensoryparenting.com](http://www.sensoryparenting.com) and [www.sensorypathways4kids.com](http://www.sensorypathways4kids.com).*

