

## Kids with disabilities note yoga's benefits

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Riley Jackson and Shane Perlow, both 7 and ordinarily full of energy, were lying on their backs and taking deep yoga breaths while little plastic frogs on their bellies steadily rose and fell. Soon, they were wobbling and grinning through "tree pose" and hissing enthusiastically for "cat pose." Riley, who has missing front teeth, sang "London Bridge is Falling Down" as he wiggled into bridge posture. Yoga is a part of the occupational therapy the boys do at Hands On Therapy in Pikesville, Md., where Riley is being treated for a sensory disorder and Shane gets help for handwriting problems and some related spatial issues. As the half-hour yoga session wrapped up, Shane, a sweetly polite kid with wavy brown hair, declared that he felt good. "I feel more quieter," he said. "More calmed down." Giggling and croaking like frogs might not be precisely what ancient Hindu practitioners had in mind, but as yoga continues to boom in popularity in the West, a new sort of follower is scurrying onto mats and into downward-facing dog position: a child with disabilities. A growing number of kids with attention, anxiety and learning disorders, as well as diseases such as autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis, are embracing yoga. Their parents are reporting physical, mental and emotional benefits. "People are calling about kids with almost every kind of diagnosis," said Annie Mahon, who offers what she calls "therapeutic yoga" for children at her Chevy Chase, Md., studio, Circle Yoga. "It's definitely blossoming." Yoga teachers are beginning to add a "special needs welcome" tag on their advertisements, and a variety of pediatric therapists are integrating yoga into their treatments. "There are so many parents with kids with special needs. I don't want to say they're desperate, but they really want to find ways to help their kids," Mahon said. "They may want to find complements to medication, to find natural ways to help them, and ways the kids can be empowered, too." Teachers and parents say yoga can help kids with concentration, balance, sleep, muscle development and brain function.

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