

## **YOGA AS MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT WITH CHILDREN**

**Laura A. Ornelas, LCSW**

**Kinship Center**

### **Yoga Therapy Overview**

Yoga is an ancient practice that has been more recently identified as an effective form of therapy, specifically for those who have survived traumatic experiences. We are excited to experience this evolution in the mental health field as part of a robust treatment regime that extends beyond “talk therapy.” As so many of us have instinctively known, trauma is stored in the body as well as the brain, and as such, symptoms of the trauma impact both. The complexity and simplicity of yoga as trauma treatment is that is healing for both.

### **Yoga Therapy for Children**

Abused, neglected, abandoned, likely having lived through the world of child welfare, our child clients have experienced complex trauma, for which we approach healing through relationship repairs. Because our clinical model is relationally based, we see the majority of our techniques as enhancing self regulation for our children through relationships with others, and yoga as a potential opportunity to enhance a relationship with oneself (an inherent opportunity to improve one’s relationship with others!) We are in experimental phases of including parents physically in the yoga practice with the child, testing our hypotheses about how and when children can optimize mindful practices.

### **Yoga as Trauma Treatment**

Children’s memories are frequently stored non-verbally. As such, we see yoga therapy for children as one in a repertoire of accessing that trauma non-verbally because that is the way in which it was stored. Further, because dissociation is a common phenomenon amongst those who have been traumatized, the beauty of yoga is that it works directly through the body (a.k.a. “bottom up processing”).<sup>1</sup> Encouraging our children to become aware of their bodies through non judgmental yoga practice dispels many of the lessons their bodies and brains have been taught by their traumatic experiences. Additionally, yoga practice allows the brain and body to learn new messages around respecting and loving their bodies, which can specifically counteract some of the behavioral concerns we see in this population during adolescence (cutting, eating disorders, promiscuity, etc.) The range of yoga poses we use in our clinics encourage the child to reach discomfort, perhaps touching somatic edges of triggering their trauma, but mindfully practicing how with our breath and awareness, we can teach our bodies to avoid being re-triggered. Further, yoga helps to obtain new bodily based experiences to substitute under stress or new painful occurrences, teaching the brain and body that the child is safe now. During our children’s yoga sessions, there are symbolic and direct conversations about “taking the practice off the mat” such as which poses can be used when the child needs to induce strength, courage or relaxation. During group children’s yoga and individual family

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<sup>1</sup> Read more on Sensory Motor Therapies by Pat Ogden.

sessions, children also learn to work with their “mind’s eye” through such techniques as guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation. Thus, children are able to take both physical and mental forms of yoga (“yoking body and mind”) into their daily living.

With clients who use these practices with regularity, we find the benefits of yoga for children to be far reaching, from acting as a natural sleep aid, to decreasing anxiety, to increasing attention, to calming children’s externalized/acting out behaviors.<sup>2</sup> We are excited to continue researching the benefits of our yoga therapy for children, and look forward to contributing this information to our field.

Laura Ornelas is Regional Mental Health Director for Kinship Center. She is also Director of the Kinship Center D’Arrigo Children’s Clinic in Salinas, CA.

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<sup>2</sup> Learn more about Yoga as Trauma Treatment through the work of Bessel van der Kolk.