

BY ANGELA STEWART
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

THE CHILDREN are lying on colored mats, waiting for class to begin.

"Take your shoes off, close your eyes. You have no thoughts, no concerns," says Miriam Behar, an occupational therapist, as she gently passes a colorful silk cloth over the faces and legs of her pupils as a way to get them to relax.

Within a few minutes, they are on their feet again, positioning their bodies in all sorts of poses to resemble everything from a butterfly to a tree. This is a yoga class, and the youngsters are all special needs kids. Most are autistic.

The goal is to use yoga to give these children a sense of calmness, bringing bal-

ance to their nervous systems and enhancing their sense of personal space. Along the way, Behar is also hoping the session will boost their self-esteem, enhance their communication skills and their ability to transition more easily from one activity to another.

Bodyshop

"I like doing the poses. It makes me happy," says 9-year-old Kelly Tyler of Sparta, as she hops up and down on her mat during a yoga exercise known as the frog pose.

Kelly's class is being held at Celebrate the Children, a program in Byram for

youngsters who have difficulty communicating and relating. Behar, the instructor, is employed by the School of Complete Yoga in Chester, which is operated by Sara Carapezzi, a former special education teacher and certified yoga instructor. Her school has a nonprofit outreach called the Center for Special Needs Inc., which offers yoga classes like the one at Celebrate the Children for a small fee.

The New Jersey program was featured last month in *Advance*, a national occupational therapy news magazine. In the article, Behar noted that traditional therapy for these children uses external techniques. Yoga, on the other hand, "helps these children to go within themselves and to calm themselves, rather than relying on someone else to provide comfort for

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STEVE KLAVER/THE STAR-LEDGER

Yoga instructor Miriam Behar works with 6-year-old Kelly Tyler of Sparta during a class at The Center for Special Needs in Byram.

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A class in calm

them," she explained. "In general, yoga is a very healing process," said Carapezzi.

The various body movements and breathing exercises being used are characteristic of classic hatha yoga, the style of yoga being taught in the class. Timothy McCall, an internist who is now full-time medical editor of the online publication *Yoga Journal*, said it can help these children to improve awareness of their bodies and also to improve their balance and coordination.

He said yoga also slows the breathing process, making it regular and smooth. McCall called hatha yoga a kind of "meditation in motion."

"These children see yoga as a fun activity, although it is really helping their whole bodies to function better," Carapezzi added.

Before the children begin their yoga exercises, instructor Behar typically shows them picture cards illustrating the various poses. This helps get them excited. The attention span of these youngsters can be short, however, so the classes generally last no more than 30 minutes. A relaxation period closes out the class, with the children once again lying down on their mats.

"Is everyone ready to relax?" Behar asks. "I will be coming around with my special, magical rainbow cloth again. I want you to close your eyes and just listen to the sound of the ocean."

Colleen Goodyear of Flanders said the yoga classes are having a positive impact on her 3-year-old son, Stephen, who attends classes at the school's headquarters in Chester. Stephen has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a specific form of high-functioning autism that makes it difficult for him to pick up social cues.

Stephen can become overly sensitive to things like noise, and the yoga really helps him to relax, his mother said, noting there has been carryover at home.

"He really enjoys it. It kind of works as a calming mechanism and also makes him feel more organized," she said.

Sue Ming, an assistant professor of neuroscience at the Autism Center at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, said yoga can definitely have a positive impact on autistic children. She said researchers in alternative medicine have found that yoga can alter heart rate and blood pressure, as well as calm a "heightened adrenaline system."

"I would take this as a positive response," said Ming, who specializes in pediatric neurology.

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