



IMT is the two-year-old brain-child of Molly Kenny, a speech-language pathologist and an Ashtanga Yoga instructor who discovered that when she combined touch or movement with verbal exercises, her patients generally experienced more spontaneous speech and improved mood. Such results convinced Kenny that a therapy blending speech-language exercises, self-esteem building, self-calming practices, and yoga postures might address the characteristics associated with autism disorders.

Although autism is a complex condition that can vary from child to child, there are a few common threads. "I have observed that most autistic children have significantly impaired social skills, difficulty staying calm, and limited body awareness," says Kenny. By merging the principles of yoga with conventional behavioral, mental, and verbal therapies, Kenny says, IMT encourages a child's physical, emotional, and social growth.

Rover, in which each child runs to the front of the room to perform his or her assigned yoga pose when called. "But before we move on to the next activity, we ask them to sit quietly and calm their bodies," says Kenny. By learning that self-calming techniques can be an adjunct to activity, autistic children discover that being asked to quiet down doesn't always have to be punitive.

Kenny's older students learn coping skills through performing what she calls "yoga stories." The game begins with each student picking a handful of cards printed with specific poses. One at a time, each student must tell a story using his or her cards while performing the poses for the group. "This is a great cognitive exercise because the students will realize they can't easily be standing in Mountain Pose, then lying in Fish Pose, and then be standing again in Tree Pose," says Kenny. "A lot of parents have told me that this practice has really improved their children's problem-solving

Breaking Barriers

A new yoga-based treatment helps autistic children relate better to themselves and the world.

Molly Kenny's unique therapy combines yoga poses, verbal exercises, and self-calming techniques.

MOST AUTISTIC children are more familiar with being told to sit still than to take Tree Pose (Vrksasana). But due to a new yoga-based treatment called Integrated Movement Therapy (IMT), 35 kids in the Seattle, Washington, area have dramatically improved their balance and sociability as well as their communication and problem-solving skills—results that are often not easily attained through conventional therapies.

The basic format of each of the 15 weekly classes taught at Kenny's studio (www.samaryacenter.com) differs based on age group and the desires of the students. "At the beginning of each class, we use negotiation skills to create a schedule of activities," she says. These range from formal pranayama or asana practice to simple game playing. For example, a class of 5- to 7-year-olds might begin with breathwork and then move into a game of Red

skills at home as well as in class." Probably the most remarkable changes have been in terms of social interaction and how the children feel about themselves. "Usually, when I first work with autistic children, they cannot name a single positive attribute about themselves," says Kenny. "But then they discover they are smart, strong, and can make friends—and they have no problem telling you so."

—Linda Knittel