

## Holistic healing: Morristown studio offers special-needs yoga

Jan. 23, 2013 10:46 PM, |

Dr. Yana Kofman, a physical therapist with Pediatric Therapy and Yoga of Morris, works with Michael Torrens, 9, of Livingston. She said one of the goals for Michael's therapy is to improve his stability. / Karen Mancinelli, for the Daily Record

Written by  
**Kristen Pakonis**  
Special to the Daily Record



The buzz of cars and fast-paced foot traffic of downtown Morristown fades away as you enter the doorway of The Yoga Way Holistic Center.

The quiet space is exactly what owner and director Dr. Yana Kofman was going for when she opened the Elm Street studio four years ago.

“Yoga is about finding who you are and finding your own voice, and falling in love with yourself,” Kofman said. “What we do here is so much more than just chanting or breathing, or doing eye exercises or standing in a posture.”

The studio is home to two yoga businesses — The Yoga Way Holistic Center, which hosts a variety of yoga classes for adults, seniors and children; and Pediatric Therapy and Yoga of Morris LLC, a private practice which specializes in pediatric development disorders and providing children with special needs therapeutic yoga.

Kofman has almost 15 years of experience as a pediatric physical therapist and has been practicing “Yoga for the Special Child,” a formal yoga method which focuses on the natural development of children with special needs.

Through the technique, a therapist uses principles of yoga through movements, breathing, and gravity. This method has been effective for babies and children with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism and other developmental disorders, attention deficit disorders, and learning disabilities, Kofman said.

“I found the connection between the yoga postures and developmental milestones to be critical,” Kofman said. “I’m able to take the child back to the milestones that he or she didn’t spend enough time on or skipped all together or just never developed in first place.”

As a licensed New Jersey board certified physical therapist, Kofman uses her analytical mind to solve each child's individual challenge. To solve these puzzles she uses yoga. "I get to assess, analyze, and understand where the pathology is and close the gaps," she said.

"For a child who is walking, but not skipping or galloping, I work on standing still in a tree pose. But in that moment it's not about the tree pose, it's about grounding and rooting and working on their strength, balance and endurance."

Nine-year-old Michael Torrens of Livingston has been working with Kofman for almost two months on developing gross motor skills, and already his balance and strength have improved.

During the most recent session in a small carpeted room, Kofman sits close to Michael on a mat and engages him in new postures because of his rapid progress. As she guides him to hold a pose, Kofman speaks encouraging words. "You are making me so proud," she tells him softly.

Kofman's genuine excitement fills the room with an uplifting energy. "He has more endurance," she said. "This sustained effort wasn't there last week."

Kofman and Michael have embarked on a journey together. "It's not just about doing 10 postures because that's what yoga is supposed to be," Kofman said. "But rather, what does he need today versus next week, and growing from there."

Michael's smile shows he is enjoying the time spent with Kofman, and his willingness to practice the yoga techniques has facilitated his development.

Anna and Javier Torrens, Michael's parents, are just as dedicated to the Yoga for the Special Child methods. Although they only visit the Yoga Way studio once a week with their son, they sit in the room to observe each session so that they can continue practicing the same sequences with Michael at home.

"Every day we do stuff with him," Anna Torrens said. "His legs are definitely much stronger now."

Michael never went through the typical developmental crawling stage as a baby, his mother said. Today he can walk with assistance, but he remains seated most of the time.

"This is getting him used to the movements and getting him moving," Torrens said as Kofman guides Michael into a child's pose.

Kofman said one of the goals for Michael's therapy is to build enough strength and stability for him to independently move his body. During that process, she hopes to build the child's self esteem and feed the emotional soul.

“The premise is to make the child feel that they are doing it on their own, and I’m just guiding them,” Kofman said. “And from that develops a very strong ability to feel good about whom you are. I really want that for every single kid.”

Kofman works with people of all ages and developmental needs, and she recognizes that each person has a need to feel loved and accepted by society no matter their diagnosis. “If others judge or bully you, you don’t always have control over what they have to say. But, you do have control over how you feel,” Kofman said.

For a child with a high intellectual quotient but with an inability to connect socially, make eye contact or stand erect, Kofman will work on strengthening emotional intelligence through yoga movements.

“We work on chest opening and chest lifting because through the physical of opening and lifting up their spine and chest with various postures we are able to uncover the feeling that they are good enough,” Kofman said. “If you can accept who you are others will accept you too.”

Kofman’s holistic perspective allows her to see the whole child and the connections within the body. When a family comes to the Pediatric Therapy and Yoga of Morris studio Kofman evaluates the child’s cognitive, physical, and behavioral functions to determine the type of therapy that will be most beneficial for the family. The child has the option of practicing in either a group or private therapy program depending on the evaluation outcomes.

Kofman says her work is “based on a connection and establishing a trust and love between the child and the therapist.”

The bond she forms with the child becomes obvious at the end of each session. Kofman sits in front of the child, with legs folded and crossed, and gently holds the student’s hands in hers. They both take a deep breath and exhale with a sustained “Om.”

“Repeat after Yana,” she says to the child. “I am peace. I am joy. I am light. I was given all of these special qualities when I was born. And because of the light inside of my heart, I am not afraid of anything or anyone. Om Shanti Om.”

The session concludes with a respectful and loving hug.