

## LIFESTYLES

FITNESS

### **Special-needs kids find calm with yoga therapy**

By Aimee Heckel

Boulder Daily Camera

POSTED: 09/02/2014 12:01:00 AM MDTADD A COMMENT

BOULDER — Debbie Stone wanted to do everything she possibly could to help her son after he was diagnosed with autism, but the idea of shuffling him from one treatment to the next — only some of which were covered by insurance — was a nightmare.

If only one place offered all his treatments in one location, and if only the programs were low-cost or free, she thought.

In 2012, she decided to do something about it. Stone created the New York-based nonprofit Pop.Earth, which offers low-cost holistic services for children with autism and other developmental disorders.



AJ Baggett, 8, center, watches his father, Joe, with helper Karyn Sullivan, strike a yoga pose during a special-needs yoga class for children at the Yoga Pod in Boulder. (David R. Jennings, Broomfield Enterprise)

The autism spectrum spans neurological disorders, from difficulty with social interactions to language delays to repetitive behaviors.



Cooper Baggett, 3, also pictured below, is helped by his mother, Amy, while following yoga instructor Chris Capitelli, who leads the Pop.Earth special-needs yoga class for children. (Photos by David R. Jennings, Broomfield Enterprise)

Pop.Earth recently opened its first of many planned branches across the nation. It now offers low-cost to free yoga classes at the Yoga Pod in Boulder.

The classes run on Saturdays and are open to kids with any disability or special need.

About 40 percent of children with autism or other developmental disorders receive alternative treatments, according to a study published in the Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not approved any medications to specifically treat autism.

"It bothered me that these kids were missing out; you were forced as a parent to make a financial decision, versus doing what's best for your child," Stone says. "It's a tough choice to make."

If you can't afford a Pop.Earth class, Stone says, she won't turn a child away. Parents can offer to help set up, clean up or volunteer in some other way to offset the cost.

In New York, she runs the Om Holistic Center for Autism and Developmental Disorders, a unique center that offers yoga, Reiki, NAET, music and art therapy, massage, nutritional support and counseling — all subsidized in part by donations and fundraising.



Cooper Baggett, 3, holds a pose following Capitelli's prompts. (Photos by David R. Jennings, Broomfield Enterprise)

Boulder's branch of Pop.Earth offers yoga, with a different spin. The instructor, Chris Capitelli, incorporates aromatherapy and craniosacral therapy into the class and uses flip-books, stories, animal sounds and visualizations to help engage the kids.

"Even within the class, there is a holistic approach with different components," Capitelli says.

Pop.Earth plans to expand Boulder's offerings to include nutritional support and more.

Stone found that craniosacral therapy, nutrition, yoga and breath work eased her son's anxiety in new situations, taught him discipline to stay in one place and helped alleviate his rocking movements.

"When he's on the yoga mat, those things disappear," she says. "It's amazing to me."

Other teachers have seen yoga help children with autism harness their energy, connect with other people in a non-competitive environment and improve body awareness.

Although scientific studies to back up the benefits of yoga for people with autism are few, some studies have shown regular yoga can improve nonverbal communication, imitation skills, spatial awareness, eye contact, play patterns and more.

Stone says she is collecting data for a university study and so far has noticed about 98 percent of parents report their kids are happier and calmer after class.

Capitelli says he sees a difference, too.

"Just come and check it out once and see what you notice in your kids. You might be surprised," he says.

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