

## Ai Chi for Kids

Inhale. Let the music surround you. Embrace movement. Exhale.

That and a whole lot more is Ai Chi. The effects are profound. A technique once thought to be for adults has become an equally powerful tool for children of all sizes, shapes, ages and abilities. It is a unifying force drawing many into one space and time. For very young children, a bond is created between the music, the movement, and the adult partner. Everyone benefits.

Ai Chi was created by Jun Kunno in 1993. From its inception, Ai Chi has morphed into Ai Chi Ne and Ai Chi 3, has been adapted to best serve special populations. It has proven to be an easily modified program to address concerns of many individuals.

### **DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE USE OF AI CHI POSTURES**

For the very young (3 and 4 year olds), Contemplating, Floating, Uplifting, Enclosing and Soothing most closely align with typical motor developmental skills. Core development is important to developing functional life skills. To balance, use both sides of the body effectively, color, use scissors, turn the hand palms up for a high five, maintain an upright position all require core strength. Very young children are developing muscles of the core.

Within the first 5 moves of Ai Chi, the core is gently challenged as the children hold arms away from the body, supinate and pronate the hands, move shoulders through frontal, sagittal and transverse planes all while maintaining stand balance. For the young child, the wide base provides additional support for core work. Postures paired with awareness of breath encourage the child to explore movement more freely and fluidly.

Five -7 year olds are introduced to Gathering, Freeing, Accepting, Accepting with Grace. These postures transition from static to dynamic balance, incorporate bilateral integration, introduce one foot stance, transition from a wide to a narrow stance, increase sensory processing including visual perception, vestibular integration, proprioception facilitation. Postural control is challenged and strengthened.

7-10 year olds add Rounding, Balancing, Flowing, Reflecting and Suspending. These postures expand on integration of the upper and lower extremities. Rounding and Balancing require single leg stand with active hip flexion and extension with bilateral symmetric movements of the arms. Flowing, Reflecting and Suspending incorporate lateral or circular movement with symmetrical midline crossing of both the upper and lower extremities. Flowing requires motion of the upper extremities in opposition to lower extremities (flexion/adduction and extension abduction).

### Use of music

Young children respond well to music that has a steady beat. Subtle transition points within the music assists the children with transitioning movements. Music increases focus and encourages free flowing movement. "Ai Chi Synchrony" appears to engage older children as "Ai Chi in3" draws the attention of younger children and promotes fluid, controlled movement with corresponding breath. Both bring unity in a group while maintaining individuality. Jamaican reggae music is fun to use and its strong rhythms attract participant's attention and engagement. New age music also focuses attention and promotes participation by creating a calm environment.

When using music, it is helpful to limit verbal language. By selecting music for specific ages or groups, spoken language (verbal directions) can be kept to a minimum or not at all. Limiting verbal language allows the child to focus on the rhythm and produce smoother motor responses. Visual attention to demonstration of postures is facilitated and attention to task improves. Gestural or gentle physical cues (tactile input) assists the child who may have limited body awareness.

### MODIFICATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The sixteen foundation postures can be transformed into an endless series of movements tailored to meet the needs of participants. For example, after completing 3-4 sets of Enclosing, it is easy to stop with both hands at midline, shoulders flexed to 90 degrees. Interlace the fingers during the inhale, hold the posture on the exhale. Begin the next inhale by flexing the shoulders slightly (like moving up to 12 on a clock) and exhale with the downward movement to 6 o'clock. On the next inhale, circle the arms back up to the 12. Repeat three times, stop at 12, take a resting breath and move in the opposite direction.

Using concepts from the Unpredictable Command Technique by David Ogden, continuous positional changes, and mixing familiar with unfamiliar moves will encourage increased functional movement, awareness of position in space, awareness of movement and controlling movements voluntarily. For example, after completing 4 repetitions of flowing, expand the movement to:

- Inhale, bilaterally reach hands overhead ,  
Exhale, reach bilaterally to toes. (familiar movement)

Then add unfamiliar movement:

- Inhale, arms go overhead,
- Exhale right hand to left shoulder.
- Inhale in place
- Exhale, left hand goes to right shoulder,
- Inhale in place.
- Exhale, right hand moves from shoulder to 90 degrees shoulder flexion in sagittal plane
- Inhale in place
- Exhale, left hand moves from shoulder to 90 degrees shoulder flexion in sagittal plane

In position for Contemplating, repeat breaths x3.

Learning Ai Chi on deck as well as in the water aids in the development of sensory processing skills. The vestibular and proprioceptive receptors are activated through the bottom of the feet when standing on deck. Stand on foam swim mats on deck to increase subtle body changes and engage the body to maintain balance. Head position changes (reaching up and down, following the course of arm movement) benefits the vestibular system. Music benefits auditory processing and interpretation of movement as demonstrated by the practitioner relies on visual perception and motor planning.

### Working with special groups

With simple adaptations, Ai Chi can be incorporated into treatment sessions with ease.

### CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL/PSYCHOSOCIAL DIAGNOSES

Examples include ADHD, Anxiety, Autism or Mood disorders (depression or bipolar disorder)

Common behaviors may include an increase in activity levels, a decrease in focus, sensory disruptions, communication, speech and language delays, difficulty with transitions or change, challenging social interactions, mood changes.

Keeping in mind that behaviors are communication, considerations for adaptations may be: increased focus on breath for calming and focus on easily identifiable personal space for each individual, allowing time to integrate one movement pattern before introducing the next, facilitating sensory processing by environmental engineering and appropriate use of music, personal interactions, and amount of new information. Use alternative communication when needed.

### NEUROLOGICAL CONDITIONS

This category includes children identified with 1. TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURIES: Toxic, Penetrating, Closed Head, Anoxia 2. MOTOR DISORDERS: chorea, tremors, tics, dystonia, parkinson's, ataxia 3. FUNCTIONAL NEUROLOGICAL DISORDERS/CONVERSION DISORDERS: Muscle imbalances: hyper/hypotonia, spasticity, paralysis, partial or complete loss of sensation, seizures, altered visual motor control creating difficulty reading and writing, educational/cognitive concerns, unexplained pain, decreased alertness

### ADAPTATIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH NEUROLOGICAL CONCERNS

Water temperature is critical to the success of the individual in an Ai Chi class especially those with increased tone, decreased thermoregulation or low tone. Water between 88 and 92 degrees will assist in reducing tone and allow for greater freedom of movement. Proprioceptive processing may be limited when in chest deep water. Awareness of body position in space and graded control of movement may be dampened. Initially focus on breath to calm the mind and body.

## ORTHOPAEDIC AND MOTOR DISORDERS

Examples: Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida, Muscular Dystrophy, Scoliosis, Hyperkinetic Disorders.

Common behaviors associated with Orthopedic Disorders: Abnormal muscle tone, impairments in completing of personal life tasks, motor impairments: balance, stability, coordination, gross and fine motor, persistence of primitive postural reflexes, sensory impairments, oral motor dysfunction.

For children with orthopedic conditions Ai Chi Ne may allow the individual to actively participate with assist for balance and upright positioning. Guided movement places the practitioner behind the participant. Practitioner provides gentle assisted movement within the limits of the participant. Ai Chi can also be performed in a seated or horizontal position (Gathering, Freeing, Accepting) . Participants are encouraged to visually focus on hand movement . For children with limited weight bearing/balance, initial focus on upper extremity movements with trunk and lower extremities supported at wall or rail or can sit back on practitioner's leg(s). Weights or buoyancy cuffs on extremities or trunk can assist with postural control and increase a base of support for active movement. Warmth vests or jackets assist with maintaining warmth, providing gentle deep pressure or assist with regulating temperature. Initially focus on breath to calm the mind and body.

## COGNITIVE AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas. These conditions begin during the developmental period, may impact day-to-

day functioning, and usually last throughout a person's lifetime.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/developmentaldisabilities/facts.html#ref>

Developmental disabilities may include individuals with hearing impairments, visual impairments, cerebral palsy, autism, ADD/ADHD, cognitive impairments, brain injury learning disabilities, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Down's Syndrome, Muscular Dystrophy

## ADAPTATIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH COGNITIVE/DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

The area of cognitive and developmental disabilities is broad and includes persons with a wide variety of special needs. Adaptions, like with all other categories, are as personal as the individual. There is no limit to resourcefulness. In addition to adaptions described in the above categories, below are additional suggestions to consider.

Sensory differences (visual acuity or processing, auditory acuity or processing):

Generally, demonstrate postures by mirroring or using Ai Chi Ne. Avoid light touch, use firm, gentle touch. Focus on breath using visual or tactile cues to demonstrate inhale and exhale. Allow time to establish attention to task; eliminate as many environmental distractions as possible.

For vision impaired, use poly spots or bath mats to define space for movement and safety. For hearing impaired, use mirroring of postures, eliminate all visual distractions when possible.

For children with cognitive impairments, especially young children, keep instructions/guidance simple and consistent. Use visual cues by demonstrating, signing or using picture cards. Define personal Ai Chi space using tactile and visual cues. Allow adequate time to process verbal cues. Allow adequate time to transition from locker room to deck, deck to pool. Also allow adequate time to process movement and add new postures slowly.

Ai Chi, whether performed in its purest form or performed with adaptations, enriches children's participation in daily life. Gentle changes in body, mind, and spirit emerge with healing breath and fluid movement. Keep adaptations as simple as possible to offer a productive challenge for functional skill growth. And when challenges emerge, just remember to breathe.

## Resources

Website Article. *Unpredictable Command Technique. Aquatic Therapy 2. NCHPAD*. Retrieved on May 25, <https://www.nchpad.org/223/1456/Aquatic~Therapy2>.

Evi Verbecque, Paula Hentschel Lobo Da Costa, K. Luke Vereeck, Ann Halleman. *Psychometric properties of functional balance tests in children: a literature review. First published: 11 December 2014* Retrieved on May 25, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dmcn.12657> Retrieved on May 25, 2019.

Gross Motor Milestone Series: Single Leg Balance <https://www.mosaicrehabmt.com/gross-motor-milestone-series-single-leg-balance/> Mosaic Rehab., copyright 2019 retrieved May 24, 2019.

**Johan Lambeck and Urs Gamper *Ai Chi as a sequence of postural control movements* Retrieved May 25, 2019. <http://clinicalaichi.org/ai-chi-as-a-sequence-of-postural-control-movements/>**

Sova Ruth (1999). *Ai Chi Balance Harmony and Healing*. DSL, Inc. Port Washington, WI.

Sova, Ruth. *When Two Flow as One: Ai Chi as Bodywork*. Retrieved on May 5, 2019. Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals. [http://www.massagetherapy.com/articles/index.php/article\\_id/1006/When-Two-Flow-as-One](http://www.massagetherapy.com/articles/index.php/article_id/1006/When-Two-Flow-as-One).

## Music CD's

Ai Chi Synchrony

Lemahieu, K. *Ai Chi in 3*.