

Yoga and Physiotherapy for Children: A Common Ethical Approach

Martine Samé*

Doctor in Philosophy, Doctor in Sciences of Education, Paris

*Corresponding author: Martine Samé, Doctor in Philosophy, Doctor in Sciences of Education, Paris. Email: martine.same@free.fr

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Introduction

A Short Dialogue to Set Up Our Space for Reflection

This article has been inspired to me by a little 9-year-old boy who told me one day: “Physiotherapy, in fact, is a bit like yoga”.

This child has been having occasional physiotherapy sessions with me since he was born, and has practiced “Yoga for children” for 2 years.

“What does yoga bring to you?” had I asked.

“It does me good” he had answered.

“Does you good???”

“Yes, it is very relaxing and makes me feel less stressed”.

“And what about physiotherapy?”

“Same thing. It is relaxing too”.

As I had been very surprised at this answer (his rehabilitation is mostly based on massages, passive and active mobilisations, balance exercises...), I went on talking with him and asked him for the first time “tell me, what is a body for you?”

“Oh! A body is VERY IMPORTANT. (a few seconds later), yes, without my body, I couldn’t live”!

Nine years old...

It made me think of Rousseau’s so beautiful words in L’Emile: “To live is the job I want to teach him”, and I decided to enlight this article with an “Ethical eye” which, maybe, could explain why, for a child, yoga and physiotherapy can be almost similar.

Ethics in Yoga and Physiotherapy for Children

Several standard definitions of ethics can be given, but I refer to ethics as a branch of philosophy involving constant questioning our practice and permanent seeking for human courses of action. As far as yoga and physiotherapy for children are concerned, the ethical field I explore is more particularly related to a common and shared ethics of health, well-being, responsibility and care.

Even if yoga and physiotherapy practitioners use different technical tools, they have a professional ethics in common: both take care of children, guiding on their personal pathway “Sons and daughters of this life which is eager to live and live again” as K. Gibran says in *The Prophet*. But what is a child? I am not asking who this child is, but what is a child. What is the essence of a child? This philosophical question is indeed at the origin of our ethical approach of children whose full humanity can then be recognized, taken into account and respected as such because children are entirely autonomous beings able to think, feel, talk, choose, refuse, suffer, agree, move, participate to a decision making, “Living a humanity in its naked and fragile truth” (I. Pipien) [1-7].

In an ethical approach, a lot of questions can be examined and thought about as for instance the one I asked to the little boy, and that I should have asked right from the beginning of our relationship: what is a body? And what is a body to you? There is a union (Descartes) or a unity (Spinoza) of body and mind: what can it mean for a child? And what does it mean exactly for us? If a body can be considered as “The vehicle of our being-in-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty), which world are we talking about? And which body-vehicle are we looking for?

Each child and each practitioner being unique, these questions might be essential before and during a physiotherapy assess-

ment or a yoga afternoon and could help us as professionals to go further deeper in each individual child's project.

Ethics in Yoga and Physiotherapy Practice for and with Children

Ethics is the concrete part of our philosophical search and knowledge for a better human practice. We have seen that children are full human beings, even if they have less experience and reasoning cognitive abilities than adults. One of the best ethical way to respect their dignity is to listen to them, to their words or their silences, to let them express their own creativity and personality, far from any theoretical normativity, to give them the time to become "I". Ricoeur explains that "I becomes a human being when I can tell a story", and the time we chose to offer, despite all material and financial constraints, is one of the most precious ethical gift for a child in yoga and physiotherapy practice.

In French, physiotherapy and rehabilitation are called Re-education, and I believe that this word is much more wide open to ethics than its English translation. Re-education can be defined as learning and teaching life with and despite an injury, a disability, a disadvantage. Education in yoga also aims at giving birth and feeding (physically and morally) young kids in emotional or-and-physical trouble sometimes. This is why we can talk, just like for children at school, of an ethics of pedagogy, an ethics of education. For example, drawing a child's attention to the importance of concentration and sometimes silence can be an ethical way to help him

communicate with himself and with others, discover tolerance and respect, try out the limits of a frame he will then be able to lean on in order to better jump off it...

Walk, breathe, sit up, stand still, lift arms high, in one word: move! Would an ethics of movement be the main common point between yoga and physiotherapy? I think so, and it may be what the little boy felt without being aware of it. For Aristotle, movement means evolution and change, natural development. An ethical approach of movement in yoga and physiotherapy, colored with respect and humanism, that is to say emphasis on the singular human expression and potential of every child, can help both disciplines lead to a more serene and secure horizon, ground for new adventures...

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