Yoga is about mind-body connection. For students who are visually impaired, yoga can provide the added benefit of helping develop awareness of where they are in space — an important skill in navigating the world without sight.

Natasha Baebler, who is legally blind and has a passion for adaptable yoga, teaches Fit Abilities, a yoga program that helps students address visual needs as well as social emotional needs.

Helping people understand how their body moves and the relationship the body has to space is important to Baebler. “These are crucial skills when navigating the world with a cane or a guide dog,” she said. “I want the kids to feel what it is like to move freely and confidently. I want them to know where they are in space and to help that next step be a little less awkward.”

The Fit Abilities Program began with a successful six-week pilot at Griffith Elementary in the Ferguson-Florissant School District, and has since expanded to a 12-week after-school program.

“Yoga makes me strong and it feels relaxing,” said Carter Clay, a student at Griffith who is participating in his second session of Fit Abilities.

Julie Johnson and Bonnie Lenz, SSD teachers of the visually impaired, developed the program with Baebler. They said yoga helps students focus, self-calm and re-energize for learning opportunities.

“I thought exposing our students to Natasha, who travels with a guide dog, would be a perfect opportunity for them to see an empowering person in our community with visual impairments,” said Johnson. “We thought it was important for our students to see someone in a leadership position that could relate to their experiences.”

The students’ enthusiasm has grown, according to Baebler. They are becoming more actively engaged in songs, games and discussions. High-energy songs are used to help students have an outlet for both stress and energy.

Shamya Cook, a first-grade student at Walnut Grove Elementary School in the Ferguson-Florissant School District, said, “Yoga helps me to breathe and to focus my brain.”

Baebler received a variety of services from SSD through the Lindbergh School District when she was in second through eighth grades.

After dealing with her own struggles, she opened her own studio, U Can Do Yoga (UD Yoga) to help individuals with disabilities gain benefits from yoga.

Fit Abilities is open to students of all ages. In addition to Griffith Elementary, the program is also being offered at Kennerly Elementary in the Lindbergh School District.
PROGRAM TEACHES PARENTS TO BE LEADERS

SSD’s Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) provides training to parents of children with disabilities on topics designed to help them with their child’s educational journey. Topics range from how to be a part of a productive meeting to how to positively interact and collaborate with other parents and school officials.

Participants, who are chosen through an application process, attend three full days of training on Saturdays once a month for three months during the fall. Applications for the 2017 PLI program are due May 1.

Jim Votino, a 2016 PLI graduate, shares his experience below.

"The Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) is yet another great resource that Special School District (SSD) offers parents. I am grateful I was chosen to be a part of the program that teaches leadership and allowed me to build new connections.

This year at the PLI, we were lucky enough to have several great speakers. After hearing Kathie Snow discuss the ideas from her book, “Disability is Natural,” I learned that at parents and educators, we need to focus on independence, assume competence, don’t underestimate our children and don’t make them participate in therapies when they aren’t progressing or make them do things they simply dislike doing.

It’s also extremely important to our children to follow their own personal interests and strengths. We should have the same expectations for them that we have for all students, and make the necessary accommodations for them to succeed.

Kathie shared historical knowledge of how people with disabilities have been treated over the years and how that has evolved.

She shared that we are just beginning the process of learning how to help people become part of our communities rather than isolate and segregate them. It is good to see how much we have progressed as a society. But we know we have a lot further to go.

We were also fortunate to have speaker Derrick Dufresne share a lifetime of experiences and lessons about the early days of behavioral support treatments, therapy and inclusion.

He was able to illustrate in a deeply moving way just how important it is for our children to engage with others in social situations and the consequences if they don’t. They need to be part of their community, develop friendships and have the best skills possible to interact with others.

Derrick emphasized that the only way to develop these skills is to practice them over and over.

Having these skills is essential to developing friendships, too, and having relationships with people reduces chances of being lonely, which is linked to poor mental and physical health. It was a very inspiring and gripping talk.

Additionally, we participated in a focus group regarding SSD’s Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP), which is currently gathering data through surveys with SSD parents about their satisfaction and concerns in the District.

The data collected will assist in updating SSD’s five-year plan. It was great to share our experiences and input and be a part of a continuous effort by SSD to adapt and evolve the plan for the future.

Lastly, SSD Parent Education and Diversity Awareness (PEDA) program administrators Michelle Levie Perez and Debra Fiasco did a fabulous job teaching us some common sense approaches to getting the most out of our relationships with our kids, teachers and staff.

They were able to provide additional perspectives from the perspective of those that work with students day in and day out. As parents themselves, they have years of experience in advocating for their own children. It’s really true that everyone just wants to help children with what they need to succeed and it is important for all of us to work together to make that happen.

PLI was not only a great opportunity for me to learn as much as possible to help my own family, but to share the knowledge and experience to help others, too. It was a great experience. My thanks to SSD for all they do!

The SSD Parent Education and Diversity Awareness program sponsors the PLI. The program was funded entirely by the Special Education Foundation from its inception in 2007 through last year. To date, 190 parents and guardians have graduated from the institute.

SSD Parent Leadership Institute – Apply by May 1

The Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) is accepting applications for its 2017 program to be held in three sessions on Sept. 9, Oct. 7 and Nov. 4.

There is no cost to participate. Applications are due May 1.

Parents from St. Louis County whose children receive special education or 504 services, First Steps and early childhood services are encouraged to apply.

Download the application at http://bit.ly/PLL_application or contact Debra Fiasco by e-mail at dmfiasco@ssdmo.org or by phone at 314.989.8108.
This summer, the Special Education Foundation’s executive director, Diane Buhr, will assume a new role for the organization as she steps down from her current position. David Diener will lead the Foundation beginning July 1. Buhr will help with the transition for several months and continue to write grant applications.

Buhr has been involved in the Foundation since its establishment in 1984. She was instrumental in its resurgence in fall 1997. She became a part-time employee in 2001 and was hired as full-time executive director in 2003. Under her leadership, the Foundation’s annual budget grew from less than $50,000 to nearly $600,000. She developed, secured funding for and implemented programs, including the Dana Brown Teacher Mini-grants and Fred Saigh Leadership Program. The number of students with disabilities served has grown exponentially during her tenure.

Diener served on the Foundation board from 2001 to 2012. He is an attorney and investment advisor, most recently with St. Louis Trust Company. He was instrumental in securing a first large grant, which, along with the initiation of a golf tournament, put the organization on an upward trajectory that continues today.

Mark Your Calendar:

- The Women Leaders Boutique, Fashion Show and Luncheon is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, April 12, at the Sheraton Westport Chalet. For information or to register, visit the Events section of the SEF website at www.sef-stl.org/events.

- Applications for camperships are due April 3, except for the Sammy Goldman “Living Big” and Laura K. Sherman Laughlin camperships, which are due March 10. Applications are available in the Programs section of the SEF website at www.sef-stl.org/programs.

It’s a Family Affair

By Elizabeth Hutchcraft
Teacher, Neuwoehner High School

Reading together will help develop a love for reading and it starts at home. Children need their parents to be their role models with daily practice in order to be successful with reading.

Here are some great before, during, and after reading strategies to employ at home when you and your child are reading.

BEFORE READING TOGETHER
- Sit together in a comfortable, well-lit place.
- Hold the book so your child can easily see the words.
- Decide on a “read together” format:
  - Choral Reading: Ask your child to read aloud along with you (reading the same text at the same time).
  - Echo Reading: Read a sentence, then ask your child to read the same sentence.
  - Shared Reading: Take turns reading aloud, with each of you reading a different part of the text, switching back and forth as you read.

DURING READING
- Read with expression to make the story come alive.
- Stop and discuss new vocabulary words.
- Talk about how you might understand a new word from looking at the surrounding context or from a picture on the page.
- Talk about what is happening in the story and what might happen next.
- Ask questions.

AFTER READING
- Help your child summarize the main idea.
- Discuss the problem and solution of the story.
- Help your child make connections to the real world.

Lifelong literacy is revolutionary and constantly growing. This process can flourish in the home with constant repetition and modeling. Reading can be a magical bond between families!

COMING UP

@SSD
HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP FRIENDSHIPS & SOCIAL SKILLS
March 1, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
SSD Central Office, Room 61
This workshop will offer strategies for parents to help children develop friendships, school strategies for building friendships and strategies that help children with language and learning differences, including autism, develop social skills.

INCLUSION: THE KEY TO SUCCESS!
March 2, 6:30-9 p.m.
SSD Central Office, Room 61
Learn how quality inclusive education provides better outcomes for most students with disabilities. Create an action plan with steps you can take to help your school plan for more inclusive programming for your child.

JOURNEY TO ADULTHOOD
March 9, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
SSD Central Office, Room 60
This workshop provides information and strategies to help parents begin a discussion about this important but often uncomfortable topic with their sons and daughters. Preparation for adulthood begins during childhood. This training will allow parents and those who work with kids with specials needs to work upon the foundations that they have already built or to establish new foundations upon which to work.

For more information about these events or to register, visit http://bit.ly/ssdworkshops or call 314.989.7807 or 711 (Deaf/HH).