

Fitting Fitness into the ASD Household

We all know that fitness and an active lifestyle are the key components of preventative health care. Knowing and doing, however, can be a Grand Canyon leap apart. Fitness is obviously beneficial for the young autism population; there are stacks of great published research to back that statement up. The reality is that fitness is often misunderstood and can also be far too exclusive or limiting. Fitness programs for young people with autism need to consider several important factors to be successful both in the short- and long-term.

Consideration 1: Sports *Do Not* = Fitness

I have dedicated many hours of my speaking and writing time to debunking this myth. Without getting too in-depth, we have far to narrow a focus on sports as the epitome of fitness and activity for young populations. Children and young people with autism often have difficulty with team sports because they do not have the prerequisite skills to participate, and the social interaction can be anxiety-provoking. The movement in sports is also very specific. Throwing a baseball or kicking a soccer ball does not generalize or carry over to life skills or other physical abilities. Sports are not the top of the pyramid; they are a branch on a tree. The roots and trunk of that tree are general physical skills.

Consideration 2: Play is Crucial

When team sports took over as the “be-all, end-all” or physical activity, we lost the most important aspect of physical fitness: *Play*. Many young people with autism do not actively engage in imaginative or exploratory play, an essential area of optimal development. In my Autism Fitness programs, I approach the issue this way:

Structured teaching for chaotic use. Play is chaos. It is random, unique, and consistently evolving. It is also important to teach the skills needed for vigorous physical activities where they do not already exist. For example, jumping is a skill often used in play. If one of my athletes with autism does not yet have the physical ability to jump, he/she cannot *use* the skill in random, play-based situations. By teaching the skill of jumping in a structured, specific sequence, my athlete is able to first acquire the ability to jump and then use that ability in various settings (generalization).

If fitness is not fun, we would not want to do it. With children and teens on the spectrum, it is extremely important to ensure that physical fitness activities are appropriate, reinforcing, and provide variety.

Consideration 3: The Five Fundamental Movement Patterns

How can parents, educators, therapists, and others involved with the young autism population create a fun, successful, and appropriate fitness program? I use the Five Fundamental Movement Patterns as a starting point:

- **Pushing:** Movement away from the body (medicine ball throws, pushups)
- **Pulling:** Movement towards the body (climbing variations, exercise band pulls)
- **Bending/Squatting:** Lowering the knees towards the floor and returning to a standing position (Squatting variations, picking up weighted objects off the floor, jumping, bear walks, frog hops)
- **Rotation:** Movement around the body (Twisting ball throws, pivoting steps or jumps)
- **Locomotion:** Movement from point A to Point B (Short runs, hopping, animal walks)

Of course, the written word is not the best modality for demonstrating exercise in detail, and there are plenty of videos on Autismfitness.com to spur your fitness creativity.

Consideration 4: Fitness should be an everyday event, but not a stressful one

Too much too soon equals overload and aversion. Below are the “silver bullet points” for introducing and maintaining a fun, successful exercise program in the home:

- Begin with basic activities from the Five Foundational Movements. Progress or regress/simplify the exercises based on the current ability of the individual(s).
- Pair exercise with activities or situations that are already enjoyable or reinforcing. For example, five jumping jacks and then listen to a favorite song
- Always use behavior-specific praise. Not just “Good job, Brian!” Focus on what the athlete succeeded at: “Awesome job doing an overhead throw, Brian!”
- Keep verbal directions very simple. Too much explaining is confusing.
- Add “Family Exercise Time” into the home. The more opportunities for physical fitness, the faster it becomes part of a lifestyle.

Eric Chessen, M.S., YCS, Founder of Autism Fitness consults and provides workshops and lectures around the country, and recently contributed a chapter on fitness to a new book, *Autism Tomorrow*, which the authors are giving away for free at www.AutismTomorrow.com For more information about Eric and his programs, visit www.Autismfitness.com.