

THE EXERCISE CONNECTION

In addition to complementing various autism therapies, the benefits—both physical and emotional—from an exercise program cannot be overstated...

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I first met Brody at his home when he was 10 years old. He had classic autism characteristics: he was a toe walker, “stimmed,” and had limited verbal abilities. As he tip-toed around his dining room table, I greeted him by saying, “Hi.”

I was taken aback by his response, “No more doctors.”

Now, I was at a loss for words. Unintentionally I responded, “I am not a doctor, I’m a coach...Coach Dave.”

Brody’s statement made me realize that our children eventually get tired of doctors, clinics, and therapists—just like we do.

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One can assume the word *therapy* indicates something is wrong, which in turn means that something must be fixed. There is no doubt that children or adults on the autism spectrum face physical and cognitive challenges, but approaching them as *broken* is not how I, and you, will experience breakthroughs with exercise.

One of the most common questions I have had from parents over the past ten years has been, “My child has been out of OT and PT for years and he is starting to gain weight. How do I get him moving?” There are a variety of answers to that as we all know that our

TOP 4

EXERCISE SUCCESS STRATEGIES

children are unique and a cookie-cutter approach doesn't work—not just for exercise but any therapy or treatment you may try.

If you want to maintain your children's weight, help them lose weight, and have them live a healthy and active lifestyle, they need exercise. You (or your child's professionals) should be teaching exercise just like everything else they are learning. Yes, exercise is that important.

Just like everything in life, if we make something a part of our routine, we are more willing to continue with it. This ideology holds true with exercise for our children.

While exercise doesn't replace OT and PT, having an exercise session can help achieve goals set in both. But possibly the most important reason for having an exercise session or gym class is the opportunity to bring normalcy into your child's life. Your child wants that, whether they can say it or not. We all do, in some way, shape or form.

I think this is what Brody was trying to tell me the first day I met him. And because he did, Brody will forever be the reason I am called "Coach."

PERSONALIZE THE PLAN

Working with the autism community is both eye-opening and complicated. As a parent what you confront on a daily basis most will never understand. But those experiences will slowly turn you into an expert—on your child.

For ten years I have been introducing exercise to children with autism and have had positive results. A parent's expertise has proven to be a crucial component. I want to share how you can incorporate exercise in the most productive, appropriate and mindful manner considering the demanding schedule of an autism parent.

It has been well documented that the prevalence of obesity in children with ASD is 13.1% higher than typically developing children and 20.4% higher in children with similar developmental disabilities such as ADD/ADHD, and LD (Philips, et al., 2014). Children with ASD are less physically active than children without ASD (Tyler *et al.*, 2014).

The easiest and most productive way is to have an exercise professional come to your house and work with your child. That is what I have been doing for years—with great results. But the reality is most families can't afford the additional expense, even though establishing a consistent exercise program may be one of most helpful things they can do for their child.

It was through these experiences that I have created more tools and resources—visual supports, protocols, books and strategies—to help make it possible for parents and teachers to set up exercise programs at home and at school.

ESTABLISH TRUST TO GET RESULTS

In one study specific to autism published by Dr. Gerald Mahoney, the author states, "The facilitator (parent, other) having a visible affect of acceptance enjoyment expressiveness and warmth—are significantly related to increases in

When implementing a program to get your child more physically active, be sure to:

1 USE PICTURES

Many people on the spectrum benefit from visual supports and they can be especially helpful when you start incorporating exercise into part of your child's regular routine. The pictures teach and show them what is expected and assist you as the parent or professional. The "Visual Exercise System" in my book *The Autism Fitness Handbook* provides specific visual supports to help get you started.



2 ESTABLISH STRUCTURE

Structure and routine are vital for children's development and particularly if they are on the autism spectrum. However, when it comes to exercise, think of *regular* as opposed to *daily*. Pick a day, a time, and then get started. You might want to start out at two times a week and then gradually work up to three or four times per week. If you try to do it every single day, you are setting yourself and your child up for failure.

3 APPLY IN CROSS CURRICULUM

Exercise is a lifestyle change or a lifestyle addition. Educate your child's teachers and therapists on what exercise can do. Share with them the research and success stories in this article and in my book to promote the value of being physically active. Exercise is not only for gym class, it can be a sensory break as well.

4 REMEMBER THAT PERFECTION IS NOT THE GOAL—PERSISTENCE IS.

Be patient, be kind, be persistent. A personal trainer's job is to instruct perfect form. The typical words used to do so are "no" and "try again." Our kids hear "no" way too often. Exercise must be a positive experience. If you get them moving, even for three minutes, that is three minutes they did not spend plopped in front of the TV. Of course you'll want to gradually increase the amount of time your child spends being physically active, but you have done a good job in making this start, so pat yourself on the back. Don't focus on the form (as long as they are not being unsafe).

▼ **VISUAL SUPPORTS ARE KEY**—Roan is able to independently identify all his body parts, which began by using the Visual Exercise System.



▼ **MAKING EXERCISE FUN**—Improving his ability to cross midline of the body, Roan holds the Frog Position while clapping with Coach Dave.



▲ **TAKING A BREAKER**—Helping to calm and refocus Roan, Coach Dave works on breathing techniques, during exercise sessions.

the child’s language, social competence, joint attention, and self-regulation.” This is a powerful study that you may want to bring to your next IEP.

Try putting yourself in your child’s shoes for a moment. Each day someone you hardly know is following you around with a clipboard and tracking your every behavior. They are prompting you through your every action. They watch you, make a mark on a piece of paper, and go back to staring at you. Some would argue that they are being engaging. Sure, “Wash hands,” “pick up,” and “try again” are results-oriented but not very social.

When I started working with Roan, he was three years old. He also had classic autism characteristics: no eye contact, “stimming,” echolalia, and scripting. He wanted to play with his toys but he was also bouncing from wall to wall. Talking and prompting did not gain his attention. So, when he grabbed his trucks, I grabbed one too. For weeks this was the routine, however, I had an exercise visual card

in his field of vision. When I eventually got his attention I would point to the exercise visual, then model the exercise, and finally ask him to do it with me. He began to exercise. I did this for a month and each week I would add a little more. After one year of exercise, for one hour a week, he was not only choosing his own exercises but maintaining better attention and focus.

The positive results that exercise has had on Roan have been documented and proven through research. After moderate aerobic activity, children with autism may experience increases in attention span, on-task behavior and levels of correct responding (Rosenthal-Malek & Mitchell, 1997).

Parents, you don’t have to be a fitness guru to have your child start exercising. Neither does your support worker or therapist. Sometimes it just takes you, a sibling, or anyone who connects with your child to start the process. Trust your gut—you probably know who that person is. And keep that research study in the back of your mind with

▼ **FOCAL POINT**—Using a white-board, as a visual support, helps Brody to stay focused on his routine.



▼ **CONSISTENCY COUNTS**—Exercise has been a part of Brody's weekly routine for the last three years.



▲ **REDUCING TENSION**—Coach Dave teaches Brody the Superman, while lying on a foam roller. The foam roller can help to improve posture, reduce tension in the neck and calm the nervous system.

everything else you do with your child. If he or she is not responding to a therapy or intervention, it may not be the therapy you need to change—it might be the instructor who has failed to make the connection.

THE BENEFITS ARE NOT JUST NUMBERS

When I began working with Rachel, who has Asperger's, she was 14 years old and just finishing her freshman year in high school. She went to an alternative school where she was experiencing tremendous anxiety with social communication with her peers. She would come home from school crying, frustrated, and angry. The last thing she was thinking about was exercise.

I began by simply listening to her. No exercise, just listening. Never having experienced high school as a female or on the autism spectrum, I tried my best to provide helpful input.

In addition to that input, I would explain to her how exercise could help her at that very moment. Exercise

can reduce stress and anxiety and improve sleep (Autism Research Institute, 2004). So, we began by stretching—as she kept talking—and as she would allow, I added more challenging exercises.

Now, four years later, exercise is a valuable and rewarding part of her weekly routine. She has graduated from high school and credits exercise with giving her newfound hope, confidence, and optimism. So much so, that in 2014 Rachel and I spoke at autism conferences across the United States to share her story.

I can't tell you that every child will have the same results as Rachel. On the other hand, I would tell you that exercise will almost always provide some benefit. It is also important to understand that if Rachel were being measured by the "clip-board" technique of pluses and minuses, her parents would have given up on exercise in the first week. Instead, as you can imagine, they are thrilled and grateful for the tremendous progress she has made.



▲ **CONFIDENCE BUILDER**—Rachel, who started exercising by only wearing her school uniform and slip on shoes, now has the confidence to wear exercise clothes while presenting nationally at autism conferences.



▲ **TEAMWORK**—Rachel will be one of the EC Champion's featured in coaching video's in the EC's partnership with NCHPAD. Here Rachel works with Noel, who is non-verbal, to help improve hand-eye coordination.

this may be true in some situations, it doesn't take into account a child and family impacted by autism. Your goals are very different. You are looking for positive progress.

Some people push their bodies to the extreme when exercising. This mentality often leads to physical injury and discourages many people to continue.

I was recently talking with a mom at an autism conference and she said to me, "I took my son to a personal trainer at our local gym, only once, and now he won't go back because the trainer worked him too hard."

This is a very common story. This trainer had no experience with autism. The fact is that teaching exercise to an individual with autism is about 75% understanding autism and about 25% exercise. Neither the mom nor trainer understood the unique challenges they were confronted with. My guess is the trainer got more than he bargained for.

One of the core characteristics of individuals with autism is that they have heightened sensory systems. And what their body experiences through exercise we may never completely understand. I have learned that by incorporating breaks, using visuals, rewards, and giving positive reinforcement results in positive progress. This "pull approach," as I might call it, is in stark contrast to most trainers "push" philosophy.

Start your children or students out slowly. Engage them in a few exercises but not for an extended period of time. It may only be one exercise on a Tuesday before school. Or it could be five minutes spent exercising before they go to bed. They have to experience success and then you can build on it. There is no reason for the student, parent or professional to feel overwhelmed.

BEING PHYSICALLY FIT IS JUST ONE BENEFIT OF EXERCISE

Engaging our children in exercise can be challenging especially if they are older and set in their routine. However, it doesn't have to be if you use their motivators and current interests. That can be the start you both need.

In many therapeutic settings, the emphasis is put on data collection which is extremely important in those settings. But to start an exercise program, it is critical to get the child focusing on the visual supports—not on *you* focusing on *them*.

Parents and professionals, I know that many of you need the evidence base in order to make it a part of their IEP or to be covered by health insurance. If you need research articles, contact me and I will give what is available. But please, whatever you do, don't wait to make exercise apart of their life. You can't afford to.

Rachel's parents will tell you that at the end of an exercise session on her most stress-filled day, watching her go from tears to smiles is, as they say, priceless. And data-less. I'll leave it up to the researchers to find the best unit of measure.

SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE

You may be saying to yourself, "Coach Dave, exercise is another hour in my day that we just don't have." I got it. As I said before, this is not a cookie-cutter approach. The fact is anything is better than nothing, especially as you first begin trying to get your child more physically fit.

We are told through TV fitness shows, research, and magazines that the more exercise we do, the better. While

▼ **STRENGTH & STABILITY**—Anthony successfully performs the stability ball dumbbell press. This exercise has improved his core stability, muscular fitness and, of course, his confidence.



▼ **A TRUE CHAMPION**—Anthony always shows off his “gun’s” following his workouts!



Anthony, who is diagnosed with Asperger’s and osteoporosis, was 13 years old when I began working with him and is now 18. He made it very clear that he did not want to exercise. When I would walk into his home he would say, “Not Coach Dave.” By this point, I learned this was typical, and that it was my job to turn that around.

His mom shared with me his love of comic books. Each session I would use those as his reward. But that was then. The comic book motivator has vanished and been superseded with *Rocky* themed workouts. Anthony watches montages of *Rocky* movies, as we simulate the exercises, he flexes, grunts, smiles—and is determined to get strong.

Over the last four years I have watched Anthony mature both physically and emotionally. He used to stand at my shoulder but now is taller than me. His physical strength has dramatically improved and his confidence, much like his height, is through the roof!

In the summer of 2014, Anthony asked me to be his job coach and accompany him to his first interview. He was dressed for success and a bit nervous.

We entered the interview room but he did all the talking. He sat tall, chest boastful and had great eye contact. He patiently answered questions and even independently shared that he was on the spectrum. It was like

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We entered the interview room but he did all the talking. He sat tall, chest boastful and had great eye contact...It was like watching a boy become a man.

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watching a boy become a man. And that man got his first job.

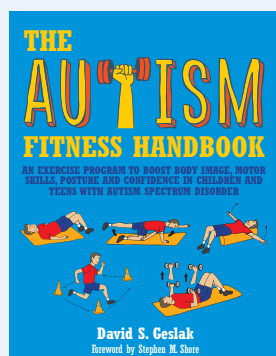
I share these stories and my mission with you in hopes that you and your children will experience similar results. Brody, Rachel, Roan and Anthony were not striving to be the best athlete, nor, did they want another therapy. They desired a relationship, a challenge and a bit of normalcy.

Starting an exercise routine is a great and rewarding adventure. It’s worth the effort. Go ahead and make the exercise connection. See what it can do for you. ◀

FIND OUT MORE

Coach Dave’s new book has been designed to help parents and professionals successfully achieve the exercise connection.

www.jkp.com/usa/catalogsearch/result/?q=autism+fitness+handbook



The Visual Exercise System iPad App is due out in the Spring of 2015. Sign up on the EC email list for updates.

www.visualexercisystem.com

