

Exercise

Introduction

Exercise and play are an important aspect of childhood development for all children. Many children with autism have impairments in gross and fine motor skills, sensory process and motor planning, and all children with autism experience social deficits. These deficits can make them reluctant to participate in physical activities and team play with other children. Research also shows that a large percentage of children with autism are either overweight or at risk of developing weight issues.

For these reasons, encouraging your child to exercise and build movement into their daily lives is extremely important. Physical activity has been scientifically proven to have a positive impact on children. Exercise can help a child develop their motor skills, including balance, coordination and flexibility. It may also improve their mood and have a calming effect on them. Research shows that exercise improves a child's quality of sleep. Exercise also helps them maintain a healthy weight and may reduce self-stimulating behaviors in some children. The CDC recommends that children get about 60 minutes of physical exercise per day.

Types of Exercise and Play Activities

Here are some exercises and activities that may be beneficial for your child. Remember that each child is unique, and your child may prefer one type of activity over another. Being flexible and allowing them some choice is a great way to keep them motivated!

- 1) **Swimming** – Many children with autism love the water! You can encourage water play by enrolling them in swim lessons or by playing games with them in the pool. Water offers a weightless environment for children with coordination challenges, and can have a positive impact on their muscle development. Some organizations have swim instructors who are trained to work with special needs.
- 2) **Walking and hiking** – Walking and hiking are excellent ways to get your child to exercise and improve their balance and coordination. You can make walks and hikes a family event or team up with other families and explore different neighborhoods or hiking trails close to you. Start with shorter walks and hikes and build up to more challenging ones if your child enjoys the outdoors.
- 3) **Adaptive gymnastics** – Adaptive gymnastics are gym classes designed for children with special needs. These classes focus on developing fine and gross motor skills, coordination and muscle development. Instructors are trained to work with special needs and can monitor your child's progress over time. These classes work on specific physical development goals that you have for your child and can be a great way to fulfill some of the sensory processing needs or deficits your child may have.
- 4) **Trampoline** – Jumping on trampolines burns many calories in a short amount of time, and is great for coordination and balance. You can purchase a small trampoline for your house or try an indoor trampoline facility where your child can jump on large wall to wall trampolines. And to make it more fun, you can show them different types of jumps. Be aware that large trampolines can be very dangerous for children with low muscle tone or significant body awareness issues. Please consult your child's physical therapist, occupational therapist or physician for recommendations if your child has these identified issues.
- 5) **Ball skills** – Playing different ball games, that involve catching, kicking, throwing, and dribbling such as basketball or soccer, improves hand-eye coordination, timing, and core strength. Some children like the repetitive nature of ball games.
- 6) **Playground** – Visit a playground and teach your child different types of movements, such as climbing on a play structure, swinging, or hanging from the monkey bars. You may need to reinforce desired behaviors by providing your child with a treat or sticker for being active at the playground instead of playing in a single spot, such as the sand.
- 7) **Adaptive bikes** - Many children love riding bikes, and there are several bike and trike options available to children with special

needs, that offer more stability than traditional bikes. Remember to use a helmet for safety!

Creating Opportunities for Exercise

One of the challenges that many parents face is that children with autism can be reluctant self-starters when it comes to physical exercise. Let's take a look at some ways in which you can encourage them to get moving.

- 1) **Schedule time for exercise** – A great way to ensure that your child gets adequate exercise is to schedule time for it. You can take regular morning walks, hike on the weekends, go to the park during the day, or sign them up for classes such as swim, gymnastics or other sports.
- 2) **Walk vs drive** – Also, look for opportunities to walk rather than drive in your daily life. Maybe you can walk to a friend's house or to school. Just a few additional minutes of movement each day can have huge long term benefits.
- 3) **Organize play dates** – Organizing play dates at an outdoor location is another idea to consider. You can take along balls, Frisbees, baseball equipment or any other game your child likes to play.
- 4) **Use visual aids** – For children who are not yet verbal, using pictures of what you want your child to can be useful. You can include pictures of the different activities you will do at the park, or on a hike. You can also create a social story to teach your child about a new game or activity.
- 5) **Indoor play areas** – Another option is going to an indoor play area with climbing structures, swimming pools, bounce houses, or trampolines. This can be good for cold weather, or as a special outing for a child.

If your child is very reluctant to exercise or play, you should look for opportunities for exercise in your daily life. For example, you could have your child play catch with the dog, walk to the mail van or mail box to get mail, or even assist you in outdoor chores such as yard work. You can also take your child to the mall or supermarket and have them walk with you to get some exercise. Another option to try is a Wii or an X Box for games which require

movement. And don't forget to use positive reinforcers such as stickers or small treats when they are active.

Conclusion

We hope that you have found these ideas useful. Remember, that for children who are reluctant to exercise, you may need to actively engage with them, rather than expecting them to take the lead. Make exercise more fun by being flexible about what your child does for exercise and keeping it play-based. Remember to offer lots of praise and support. You can find additional resources on our website, www.porchlighteducation.org.