

WINTERTIME WORKOUTS

Despite blustery days and frigid temperatures, exercise programs are crucial this time of year for establishing and maintaining physical fitness...

BY DAVID S. GESLAK, BS, ACSM EP-C, CSCS



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As an autism fitness specialist, I usually begin individualized instruction by introducing exercise in the home. Over the last twelve years, I've had a lot of success with this approach. Participants are typically more comfortable starting in familiar surroundings, and most homes are equipped with the many sensory supports that may be needed during an exercise session. Your children need exercise and sensory feedback all year round. In the summer, you may have taken them with you for walks, to the pool, or maybe to the health club. But with snow and frigid temperatures, I can't blame you or them for not wanting to leave the house. The good news is, while being

stuck indoors this winter, your opportunity for introducing a successful exercise routine may just heat up.

If you have read my previous "Coach Dave's Corner" columns and feature articles in the *Autism File*, you will know that I have always tried to provide practical solutions for parents and professionals to make exercise a part of their child's or students' daily routine. You don't need to be a fitness guru to begin to introduce exercise. And frankly, many fitness professionals are not prepared to work with the autism community. The fact is that teaching exercise to someone with autism is about 75% understanding autism and 25% understanding exercise. As parents, you know the

TOP 5

TIPS FOR KICKING OFF YOUR OWN EXERCISE PROGRAM

While at home this winter, try these five tips that can help you engage your son or daughter in exercise.

- 1 **USE PICTURES** — We are all visual learners, and even if your child or student doesn't use visual supports, they may need to when you start teaching them exercise. The pictures teach and show them what is expected and assist you as the parent or professional. Parents of adult clients have said to me, "My child can talk, he doesn't need PECs." Not all visuals are PECs. Visuals are an evidence-based tool that you can use to successfully introduce your child, young or old, to exercise or any new task.
- 2 **ESTABLISH STRUCTURE** — Structure and routine are vital for our children's development, particularly if they are on the autism spectrum. However, when it comes to exercise, think of *regular* as opposed to *daily*. Pick a day and a time, and then get started. You might want to start out at two times a week and then work up to three or four times a week. Or your one session per week for 10 minutes can build up to 20 or 30 minutes. If you try to do it every single day, you are setting yourself and your child up for failure.
- 3 **USE TECHNOLOGY** — Technology-aided instruction is another evidence-based practice for those with autism. Tablet devices like iPads capture our children's attention, so don't struggle to take the device away during exercise—use it! I designed ExerciseBuddy, an app, to engage and communicate with special needs clients during exercise. Nine universities have made it a part of their instruction for adapted physical educators and special education teachers, and its effectiveness for those with autism is being proven through research. Here's what some fitness experts are saying about this app:

A treatment package consisting of the Video Models and Start/Finish Schedules in the ExerciseBuddy app, in conjunction with a system of least prompts and reinforcement, taught participants to acquire physical activity skills at home and generalize the skills at local community fitness sites. (Laura Anne Bassette, Ball State University)

Similar increases in the intensity (Heart Rate & METs) of physical activity were measured when using ExerciseBuddy versus traditional, verbal teaching methods in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. (Melissa Bittner, Texas Women's University)
- 4 **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 my book to promote the value of being physically active. Exercise is not only for gym class; it can be a highly effective sensory break throughout a child's school day.
- 5 **REMEMBER THAT PERFECTION IS NOT THE GOAL— PERSISTENCE IS** — Be patient, be kind, and be persistent. A personal trainer's job is to instruct perfect form. They typically use words like "no" and "try again." But our kids hear "no" way too often. Exercise must be a positive experience. If you get your child moving, even for three minutes, that is three minutes they did not spend plopped in front of the TV. Of course, you will want to increase the amount of time your child spends being physically active, but you have done a good job, so pat yourself on the back. Don't focus on the form (as long as they are not being unsafe) and simply get them moving. ◀

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



teaching and visual strategies that best help your children in the classroom and throughout their daily routine. What you need to do is *gradually* incorporate exercise into their routine and it will become a part of their lifestyle.

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EXERCISE IS FOR A LIFETIME

You may be thinking, "My child already has OT and PT. Why does he need exercise?" For many children, OT and PT will eventually end, either because they have met their milestones, they are pain-free or, unfortunately, insurance may have run out. And while exercise should be partially the school's responsibility, many schools don't see it that way, even though the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates Physical Education. Exercise doesn't replace OT and PT, but having a regular exercise session can help students achieve goals set in both. Exercise is for a lifetime, and research proves that it goes beyond the health-related benefits for those with autism.

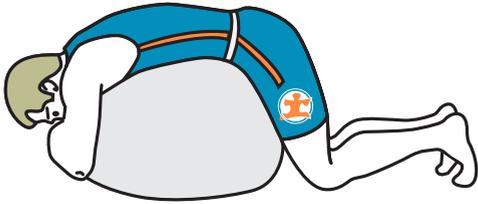
COLLECTING BENEFITS

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). Exercise can reduce stress and anxiety and improve sleep (Autism Research Institute, 2004). Also, vigorous

STABILITY BALL HUG

OBJECTIVE

Help to relieve stress and calm the nervous system.



HOW TO

Have child kneel on the ground and place the stability ball at his knees. Next, have him lay his stomach on the ball and gently hug it. Make sure that his feet stay in contact with the ground to maintain balance.

HOW MANY

- ▶ Perform one to four sets for 20–60 seconds.
- ▶ If your child requires more time, allow it, as long as he's not trying to get out of exercising or a specific activity.

COACHING TIPS

- ▶ This can be paired with other exercises within a program.
- ▶ Students may want to lie on their backs, which is okay, but be aware of their surroundings and ensure that they are safe.



Some students compare lying on a Stability Ball to lying on a Squeeze Machine. While it may not elicit the exact benefits, it can be a great and cost-effective alternative.

physical activity, in conjunction with appropriate behavior management practices, can be helpful in reducing inappropriate behaviors in children with autism (Lavay, French & Henderson, 1997). Other research has demonstrated that exercise can increase on-task behavior (Mahar, 2007) and decrease stereotypical behaviors (Bachman & Fuqua, 1983). It is my hope that knowing this will prompt you to take action this winter.

Having worked in the autism community for over 12 years, I have seen many parents become stressed about teaching exercise because of the time commitment. The media and some research (although it often changes) will tell you that 60 minutes of exercise a day is best, and if you can do more, that's even better. While it may be true for some, this guideline doesn't always work for those with autism.

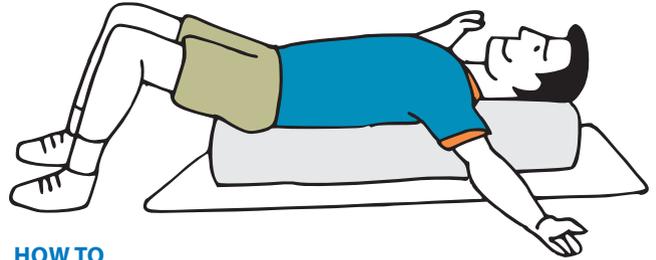
SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

On January 1, most of America has made a resolution to exercise and eat healthier. The gyms are packed and fruits and

LOG EXERCISES

OBJECTIVE

To help improve the individual's proprioception while increasing the flexibility and range of motion of the shoulder girdle.



HOW TO

It is important that you model how to get onto the log. When the child squats down to sit on it, you may have to adjust the log during the process. It is important that the child's bottom is on the far end of the log and that he then lies back. The back of the head should be on the log and in a neutral position and the neck should be relaxed.

HOW MANY

- ▶ Begin with 30 seconds for the general stretch. If they want to stay on longer, that's fine as they are in a safe position.
- ▶ When performing the arm actions, have them do 8–12 reps.

COACHING TIPS

- ▶ Palms should face up.
- ▶ If the hands are not on the ground, that is okay. Don't force them down, as this means that the muscles of the neck and shoulder girdle are tight. This will happen naturally; keep practicing and watch to see the improvement.
- ▶ Make sure the neck is not arched back. Chin should be down. You may have to prompt to get the neck into a neutral position.



Log Exercises can be like self-massages, helping to reduce stress and tension in the neck. This is very important for our children but can also benefit mom and dad. So make sure you try this exercise too! ◀

vegetables are replacing many of the calorie-packed snacks and meals in the fridge. But by February, many people have returned to their more comfortable habits. Why? They have set their expectations too high, and when they don't achieve their goal of 60 minutes of exercise and three healthy meals a day, they give up.

I don't want you to take this same approach when introducing exercise for your child, or even for yourself. Find five to ten minutes one day per week to introduce an exercise or

THE FITNESS FACTOR

Kentucky's Stewart Home School emphasizes exercise and sound nutrition in its program for students with developmental disabilities...

By Geoff Dubrowsky

Daniel Dubrowsky, featured on the cover of this issue of the *Autism File*, entered the Stewart Home School in Frankfort, Kentucky in 2015 when he was 19 years old. He was almost six feet tall and weighed over 240 pounds. His access to food at home was unlimited except for cabinets that were locked—until he found the key. He was not very active and was resistant to most physical activity.

The Stewart Home School is a 122-year-old private school serving the developmentally disabled. Its campus spreads over 600 acres, providing a complete structured environment for over 290 students. The students range in age from 16 to 87. Students have their own rooms and eat their meals with a handful of friends in their buildings. The rest of the time is spent on the move, going from class to class or between recreational activities. The school carefully monitors the health and physical fitness of students. Besides walking around the campus and managing the blue grass hills, students are encouraged to get and stay in shape.

The school's skillful use of peer modeling creates environments that are hard to duplicate. The campus has a fully equipped workout facility that is part of class curriculum. The students at Stewart encourage each other by working out side by side.

Since arriving at the school, Daniel has seen his meals limited to three per day and snacks once every other day. His school curriculum was designed to include both gym and a workout session. Since everyone else was doing it, he did it; he tried and he liked it.



▲ **ALL IN THE FAMILY**— Danny enjoys spending time exercising with his grandmother, Sally Dubrowsky.

After just six months, Daniel's clothes were falling off him, but more importantly, he was smiling. After a year and a half, Daniel has matured into a healthy, responsive 170-pound young man. His eye contact is back, his skin looks better, and overall, he's relaxed and happy. "Before he arrived at the Stewart Home School he seemed to be always on edge," as my wife Rosemarie Dubrowsky observed. "But the edge seems to be gone. He is at peace in his body."

GEOFFREY DUBROWSKY...



...received an MBA from Long Island University. Having lived in New Jersey over 30 years, Geoff is the owner of Video Knowledge of NJ Inc., a video production company created in 1980. The company has an extensive portfolio but its main focus has been on filming Standardbred horses. Geoff and his wife Rosemarie had a son in 1995 and by the end of 1997, both had become autism advocates. He has served on the executive boards of numerous local and national autism organizations including the board of the NJ Council for Developmental Disabilities, where he fought to keep individual options open. Geoff is committed to making everyone understand that "one size does not fit all" when it comes to caring for people with disabilities. While on the board of VOR, he was introduced to The Stewart Home School. After visiting the school several times, Geoff realized it would be a wonderful place for his son to flourish.

group of exercises to your child. Then do it again (the same day and time) next week. Use a clock, countdown board or schedule to keep your child on task, and maybe even provide some sort of reward for finishing. If the reward is going to be food, please make it healthy (apple, etc.). What is important to understand is that if your child or you are getting five to ten minutes more of exercise than your body is used to, there still is a benefit! Your job, or that of the support team, is to slowly build on their success and add more time and/or exercises to each session.

When I talk with new families, I let them know that while I am scheduled to work with their child for 60 minutes, we may not be exercising the whole time, especially in the first

few sessions. And think about it: Most people who exercise for an hour aren't actually exercising the entire time. Those first sessions are about building the relationship between you and your child/student and establishing their relationship with exercise. For many children and young adults who have had physical education, it has been a frightening or disheartening experience. Be conscious of this as you begin your sessions. ◀

FIND OUT MORE

► **Stewart Home School** <http://stewarthome.com>