Exercise Benefits for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Key Points:

- Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder can have a difficult time exercising the way a typically developing child would.
- Exercise can help to decrease stereotyped behaviors and reduce the risk for obesity in children with ASD.
- An exercise program designed specifically for children with ASD will have the most benefits for those children and their families.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by social communication problems and restrictive, repetitive behaviors. Along with poor social and communications skills, it is common for children with ASD to have poor motor skills when compared to their typically developing peers. These deficits, along with certain medications often used to help treat ASD, can put a child with ASD at a higher risk of becoming overweight or obese than other children their age. Fortunately, exercise can increase overall health and fight obesity in most populations. Along with the improved fitness, exercise has even more benefits for children with ASD. Exercise has been shown to reduce stereotypical behaviors in ASD, such as rocking or repetitive finger movements the person may use to self-regulate.

Medications and behavioral therapy are often used to help combat specific symptoms common in ASD; unfortunately, most treatment plans do not incorporate physical activity. This may be due to the need to adapt programs to the needs of children with ASD. For example, typical physical education curriculums in school are taught in a gymnasium, which may be a difficult setting for children with ASD that have sensory issues. Physical education class is also normally one teacher instructing students to play a team sport, which does not account for the varying ability levels of all children, with or without ASD.

Figure 1: Typical exercise barriers and the characteristics of ASD that lead to the need for intervention.
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To give children with ASD an exercise program that will be most beneficial, it must be planned for their specific needs. Interventions should be prepared and executed by a collaborative team working in the best interest of the child; parents, educators, nurses, psychologists, and exercise professionals can all work together to plan a specific program\textsuperscript{2,4}. An individualized exercise has been shown to best improve behavior and fitness in children with ASD\textsuperscript{4}. In order to best communicate what the professional is asking of the child and to help them feel comfortable, visual aids and social stories should be used within the intervention\textsuperscript{2,7}. Parental involvement and enthusiasm has been shown to encourage the child to participate in exercise and improve treatment\textsuperscript{4}.

References