Exercise Has Extra Benefits for Children with Autism

Being active promotes health and fitness for all children. For those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), exercise has even more to offer.

More Than Just Physical Fitness

Many kids with ASD engage in repetitive behaviors. For example, they might flap their hands, rock side to side or spin in circles. These actions can sometimes get in the way of learning and connecting with others.

Exercise may help ease such behaviors. In one small study, this benefit was seen when the exercise was similar to the repetitive behavior. Tapping a ball reduced hand-flapping, and jogging reduced body-rocking. One theory is that exercise gave the children the sensory stimulation they craved, so they felt less need for the behavior afterward.

There’s also evidence that exercise may help children with ASD:
- Improve motor skills
- Enhance social skills
- Be more focused at school
- Build confidence

Encouraging Exercise at Home

To help your child with ASD get more physical activity, make it a predictable part of the weekly routine. Set aside specific exercise times.

Keep each session short and sweet, especially at first. Even just five to 10 minutes can have a positive impact.

Ask your child’s healthcare provider or gym teacher for suggestions about things to do. Print out pictures of those activities to use as visual aids. Or turn on a fitness video game.

Sources include the American College of Sports Medicine, the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.