



# COACH DAVE'S CORNER

*When it comes to exercise and autism, persistence trumps perfection every time...*

BY DAVID S. GESLAK

Over the last 10 years I have given hundreds of presentations to the autism community. From my first presentation until now, my message has been the same: Exercise needs to be a part of the daily routine for individuals with autism. However, merely saying that does not always connect with each person in the audience.

Much like working with our children, I have had to customize my message, my delivery and my PowerPoint slides to the audience. I thought sharing success stories I have had with my children and classrooms would be enough to get people motivated to try exercise. But I have learned that isn't.

## RESEARCH-SUPPORTED BENEFITS

School administrators and therapists want the research, so I share it.

In addition to the health-related benefits of physical activity, decreased stereotypy and self-stimulating behavior are the most common behavioral improvements following physical activity for children with autism. More pronounced effects were evident following vigorous bouts of physical activity, according to an article published in *BMC Research Notes* (MacDonald, Esposito & Ulrich, 2011).

In addition, vigorous physical activities, in conjunction with appropriate behavior management practices (Lavay, French & Henderson, 1997), can be

helpful in reducing inappropriate behaviors in children with autism.

Parents and para-educators want to know the exercises they can immediately do with their children or students. In every presentation, we perform exercises along with the strategies on how to break them down into simple steps so their children and students can be successful.

Even after sharing the stories, research, and exercises, one question among all the different groups still remains, "How do I get my child to start exercising?"

I have thought to myself, "I just gave them every tool in my toolbox, what am I not saying or doing?" Then I look back at my experiences of working in these parents' homes, as a para-educator and as a fitness coordinator at a school for children with autism.

Parents and professionals are often overwhelmed, and adding another task to the list can be too much. They want the "magic pill" that will get their children exercising. While that pill doesn't exist, there is one strategy that can be just as effective.

## PERSISTENCE VS. PERFECTION

Last month I was giving a workshop and I had changed my PowerPoint slides because I was presenting to a new audience—caseworkers. Following the conference, I was reading their evaluations and there was one slide that stuck

with a majority of the participants: Persistence not Perfection.

Perfection is what many strive for in their children, which of course is not realistic and certainly not where you should set your expectations when it comes to exercise. You just need to get your children moving their bodies. Don't worry if the exercise doesn't resemble what you've seen on TV or how you demonstrated it. If you get your child to start moving more than he has before, then you've done a great job.

You often hear that you need to exercise for sixty minutes a day, five days a week. While that would be fantastic, most people can't commit to that amount of time and if they do (the typical New Year's resolution), they are overwhelmed and have given up within the first month. This is an unrealistic expectation to put on our kids and ourselves.

To begin, you may only do five minutes or one exercise a day. And be persistent with it. If you can do that for your child or students, that is success. Then, gradually, I want you to build on that success. This is the same approach I have taken with all my champions and classrooms.

If you haven't tried exercise yet, I promise, it's worth the effort. ◀

### DAVID S. GESLAK, BS, ACSM-HFS, CSCS ...

...Coach Dave, founder of the Exercise Connection (EC), is widely recognized for the pioneering of structured visual exercise programs, as well as his insightful and dynamic presentations. Dave has experience as a para-educator and was a Fitness Coordinator at Giant Steps, a school for children with autism. He is an author, advocate, hosts a TV Show "Coach Dave" on The Autism Channel, and trains parents and professionals across the world on his protocols. He employs individuals with autism at the EC and is developing the first employment program, incorporating exercise, within Hart Schaffner Marx, a company in Chicago. The autism community has enthusiastically embraced Dave's message and is especially encouraged by his results. ◀

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For more information, check out Coach Dave's book *The Autism Fitness Handbook: An Exercise Program to Boost Body Image, Motor Skills, Posture and Confidence in Children and Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, available on [Amazon](#).