



# THE EXERCISE CONNECTION

By David Geslak, BS, CSCS

**David Geslak** has been designing fitness programs for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders for the last five years. David attended the University of Iowa and received a bachelor's degree in health, leisure, and sport studies with an emphasis in health promotion. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) as a Health Fitness Specialist and by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) as a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist.

In 2004, he co-founded, Right Fit, a fitness facility that serves children with special needs. Currently, he works at Giant Steps, Inc. of Illinois, a school for children with autism, along with his role as president of the Exercise Connection Corporation ([www.ecautism.com](http://www.ecautism.com)). He has worked in all levels of fitness including as University of Iowa football assistant strength coach and as a private NFL strength coach. David found his passion when working with children with autism and will continue to educate others about how they can be leaders in health and fitness for all our children.

As Joseph stepped out of the car, I waited at the side door to greet him and his mother. Joseph had recently turned eight years old. He was wearing a jacket that was too big for his body, shorts, a t-shirt, and gym shoes. As he made his way toward me, clinging to his mother's left hip, I could tell he was nervous. When they came to the door, I greeted each of them and had my hand out so Joseph could shake it. He shook it but did not look into my eyes.

Joseph's mother filled out his health history form while I talked to Joseph. He gradually began expressing his likes and dislikes as we talked about his parents, brothers and sisters, and school. Joseph's eyes began to make contact with mine.

Joseph's parents brought him to me because they knew the importance of exercise for themselves and wanted Joseph to share the same bond. They told me they were worried that he could not skip, and his occupational therapist had been trying for six months to teach him how. He had low self-esteem and problems interacting with children his age, even when they were playing basketball on his own driveway.

Did you know that a child who can skip can read better than a child who cannot? Skipping is critical because it involves both hemispheres of the brain. Your left hemisphere is active when you use the right side of your body, and the right hemisphere is active when you use the left side. The inability to skip is an indicator that both hemispheres are not working together, in harmony, as they should. This incapability can be seen early in children's development by observing their crawling patterns. Children

who were unable to crawl when young will typically not be able to crawl efficiently when they are older. Their body and mind have skipped a natural developmental process. This ability will not just appear one day, but it can be taught. It takes time and practice, until the brain, body, and nervous system have made the connection to understand and master certain movements.

Physical activity is vital for a healthy lifestyle for all children. Physical activity offers a variety of benefits for individuals with autism. It has been documented that when participating in moderate aerobic activity, children with autism may experience increases in attentions span, on-task behavior, and levels of correct responding. Aerobic activities can include, but are not limited, to walking, running, swimming, jogging, and biking. Aerobic activity can also produce endorphins that boost an individual's mood and give a sense of control and well-being, which could help ease anxiety, depression, and mood swings, common hindrances for children with autism.

I could continue to provide you with information about the benefits, but there is something more important in helping to engage your child in physical activity: you, the parent.

I met Joseph's father when I was a boot camp instructor. He was a regular at my 5:30 am Tuesday/Thursday class, and on Monday, Wednesday or Friday I could find him awake just as early, involved in a spin class, swimming, or doing his weight lifting routine. Outside of the gym, he was a pediatrician. I never had the opportunity to see him at work, but I believe, due to

the amount of effort he put into his active lifestyle, the same dedication shone through his career. For example, when the 90-minute boot camp class was over, during which we may have run hundreds of stairs, thrown 15 lb. medicine balls across tennis courts, or jogged a few miles, he would always spend at least another 30 minutes on extra exercise. I thought I was doing enough—apparently not.

I knew that Joseph's parents wanted him engaged in sports, but many children with autism have to develop basic movement patterns first. There are plenty of movement activities to help facilitate a child's struggle with cognitive and motor development. I looked at Joseph's ability to use both hands and legs. I wanted him to try to catch with each hand and kick with each foot. Using both sides of the body can help to develop the central nervous system and the brain. Also, some studies have shown that when you train the non-dominant side, the dominant side can improve. I also watched Joseph jump, land, skip rope, and do foot patterns with an agility ladder. And even though I knew he could not skip, I wanted him to try.

Joseph then filled out a personal goal sheet. Filling out a goal sheet can be challenging with a parent close by. Many parents want to influence their children's goals. When this happens, the child's goals are not necessarily his or her own, and there may not be a personal connection with the goals, thereby decreasing the chances of reaching them. Joseph's mother did not interrupt, but it was still difficult for him to process his goals. Together we worked through his goals and can you guess what his number one was?

"I want to skip."

During our fourth session, we began with his normal routine. We jumped in place, did jumping jacks, and what I called, "The March Series." Then we moved to doing exercises on a single leg. One at a time, we would balance on each leg, then jump in place, and then hop forward. Skipping not only involved his legs, but we also had to make sure his upper body was moving properly in opposition with the legs. And then I said to him, "Hop on your right leg, step with your left...hop on your left leg and step with your right." And it clicked! After only 4 hours he was skipping everywhere! It was amazing! We



ran outside and he skipped there, too. I don't know whose smile was bigger: mine or his.

He, of course, showed his mother when she picked him up, and she later told me that when he came home from school he would skip around the entire house. Joseph had met his number one goal.

At the end of every workout with Joseph, we would build an obstacle course. This consisted of hurdles, agility ladders, balance pads, cones, tumbling mats, basketballs, and many of the other activities he worked on. In the beginning, I would set up the course, but then I let Joseph use his imagination and make a game of it.

Sometimes I wished I had his great imagination. He acted as an architect, trying to turn the whole gym into an obstacle course. Nearly every time he designed his course, I had to give him a 30-second countdown, otherwise he would be creating there all day. He talked about battling a monster or trying to win something. He always had a goal at the end of the course. And naturally, I had to join in the activity.

He was not only exercising, but he was also using all of his senses and much of his brain, every part hard at work. It was incredible to watch him create. And like his father, after an hour's session, dripping with sweat, he wanted to keep going. Once again, apparently, I had not required enough.

A boy who was once timid and frightened

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of a new experience, through exercise, gained confidence and body awareness. Exercise had become a part of his life, a part of his routine. Why? The answer is mom and dad.

His mother and father told me at times he did not want to come and work out. School had tired him out, his peers were exhausting, but his parents never gave in. More importantly, they set an example every day because they were active. If you are going to talk the talk, you must walk the walk.

I realize there are daily occurrences that you cannot prepare for when you are a parent of a child with autism. But with any schedule, you have to engage in physical activity and make it a daily goal. For most people, exercise is only a thought.

Mary Sharp, MD, author of *An Unexpected Joy*, used exercise to release her anxiety and stay focused on her main goal, helping her child. Youth fitness is a challenging issue, but it doesn't start with youth, it starts with you. By putting a physical activity on your to-do list, you will be setting an example for your children and anyone in your life.

A physically active lifestyle for children is not defined by such activities as Dance, Dance Revolution, Nintendo Wii, or weight lifting machines. It should be defined by vocabulary like balance, posture, body awareness, hand-eye/foot-eye coordination, laterality and proprioception (the sense of the orientation of one's limbs in space).

Implementing these powerful concepts can build healthier minds and bodies, vital to our children's growth and development, and can help reduce the progression of special needs that are evidenced in some of our children.

I challenge you to take the first step and create an exercise connection.