

The Sun

Newsletter

January–March 2016

Inside this issue

What is grassroots advocacy . . . 3

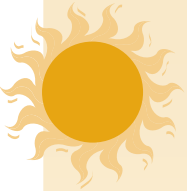
Inside Autism Delaware™ 4–6

Parent2Parent 7

The benefits of exercise 10

Activities your child may
enjoy—at little or no cost. 10

Practicing yoga
on the spectrum 11



Our mission

To help people and families affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD)



The very real need for physical activity

We all know by now what physical inactivity can do to our waists. “What some people do not realize,” notes *SymptomFind.com* (a website written by doctors, general practitioners, licensed psychologists, and health journalists), “is being physically inactive is considered a risk factor for several illnesses and medical conditions. According to the World Health Organization... [p]eople of all ages, from children to the elderly, can suffer negative consequences if they live a sedentary lifestyle and are physically inactive.”¹

But did you know that an inactive child on the spectrum can face greater health issues than an inactive neurotypical child? This article not only explains how physical inactivity can be harmful to your child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) but also offers ways to help your child become physically active. Be sure your family doctor clears your child for physical activity before beginning a new exercise program.

According to the website *run by Autism Speaks*, an autism science and advocacy organization, “[b]eing overweight can put children at increased risk for numerous health problems, both in childhood and as adults... The effects of these conditions may take an even greater toll on individuals with autism.”²

Children with an ASD diagnosis may also experience a range of coexisting health issues. “Coexisting conditions may either be treatable in their own right or may influence the long-term outcome for the child or young person,” notes *PubMed Health*, an informational website on prevention and treatment

of diseases and conditions. “When there is a focus on the diagnosis of autism, it is possible to neglect other diagnosable conditions. The most important coexisting conditions are those that occur most frequently, have a high impact on present quality of life, or may impact on the future development of the child.”³

The coexisting issues defined by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are neurodevelopmental, mental and behavioral, and medical or neurological. Neurodevelopmental issues are covered in this article. These issues include motor coordination and speech or language.

Continued on p. 8

In this newsletter, we only touch on co-existing mental and behavioral conditions (such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, and depression), but they may also be relieved through physical activity. Yoga, in particular, has been proving beneficial for people with autism.

For more, read “Practicing yoga on the spectrum” in this newsletter on page 11.

Footnotes

- ¹ <http://www.symptomfind.com/health/effects-of-physical-inactivity>.
- ² <https://www.autismspeaks.org/science/science-news/sports-exercise-and-benefits-physical-activity-individuals-autism>.
- ³ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0042122>.

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Let's move!

Sports and exercise are a big part of my life. I grew up playing basketball, played in college, coached for a while after graduating, then went into sports television as a profession. I believe in the many, many benefits of participating in sports, from character building to fostering resilience, to health and wellness, and more. But what about our kids with autism? With all of their challenges, how can we help them access all the very real advantages of exercise and playing sports?

In this edition of *The Sun*, you will find some great ideas and resources to get your child active and involved. Read it carefully for what might work for your son or daughter, and save it as a reference for the future as well. Some of the programs might not be appropriate now but could be down the road. Quite a bit of research supports the premise that exercise can reduce problem behaviors in children with

autism. So, the potential benefits are even more valuable for our population.

How to get started? Team sports are not my son's thing. But we tried them for Ethan anyway. It's always worth a try. What we settled



Marcy Kempner
Outgoing President

This is my last column as Autism Delaware's board president. I've felt truly honored to serve in a leadership role at Autism Delaware. I've been a part of this organization since our humble beginnings in the gym at the Brennen School, and will continue to keep fighting for all the things that mean so much to people with autism and their families: access to services and supports, inclusive community opportunities, quality education, and meaningful options for adulthood.

These things don't just happen. We need to push for them. I encourage all of you to get involved with Autism Delaware. You will be amazed at how much we can accomplish together.

I'd like to give a big thanks to our dedicated staff and wonderful volunteers for all the work over all the years.

Here's to the next chapter!

on is trying to keep him as active as possible with frequent walks and bike rides—weather permitting—and we found a personal trainer who ended up being a natural with Ethan. We started small—just 15 minutes of strength and conditioning—with lots of reinforcement. At first, he wanted a doughnut for reinforcement, but we saw the obvious contradiction. We got him to settle for a bagel as a “slightly” healthier option, and eventually were able

Continued on p. 10

A service of Autism Delaware



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If you look at each word separately, the term “grassroots advocacy” boils down to local people actively supporting a cause. In other words, those of us who are not running the city, state, or country can pool our resources and advocate on behalf of our needs.

Do you, for example, think that improvement is needed in the level of supports and services available to Delaware families affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD)? Thanks to grassroots advocacy, not only can you say so, but you can also make a difference.

What is grassroots advocacy?

And consider forming a team. As a team captain, you can reach more people and have fun doing it: Design your team T-shirt, and create your fundraising webpages.

World Autism Awareness Day is April 2, which falls on a Saturday this year. Wear blue, and decorate your home with blue lights. Then, take a photo to post on social media. Be sure to say that you’re advocating on behalf of people and families affected by autism.

How can I make a difference?

As a grassroots advocate, you are encouraged to call or email your elected officials when a bill is introduced to the Delaware General Assembly that’s important to the welfare of people and families with ASD.

If you joined the Autism Delaware™ Advocacy Google Group, you will be notified when it’s time to act. If you want to join, contact Alex Eldreth at alex.eldreth@delautism.org.



Also, every spring, Autism Delaware asks the community to join our mission to help people and families affected by ASD. As an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Autism Delaware relies on individuals to spend some

of their precious time and energy advocating for an ideal autism community. Sometimes, this can be accomplished by raising awareness. Other times, active participation is crucial.

How can I help raise awareness?

Ask your employer’s human resource or benefits department to consider sponsoring a lunch-and-learn session. To schedule an Autism Delaware speaker, call (302) 224-6020.

Take part in the statewide Walk for Autism. You can either serve as a volunteer or walk:

- To volunteer, send an email of interest to volunteers@delautism.org.
- To walk, register at autismdelaware.org.

How can I actively advocate at the grassroots level?

Begin by marking Thursday, April 7, on your calendar. This is Autism Delaware’s Smart Cookie Day.

Every year, Autism Delaware sets aside one day in which individuals with ASD and their families tell their personal stories to the Delaware General Assembly.

As a grassroots advocate, you are given the opportunity to tell your story and to help your elected officials understand your challenges and needs.

In addition to sharing what it’s like to live with ASD, families share freshly baked cookies with their legislators—hence the term “Smart Cookie Day.”

If you miss this opportunity, Smart Cookie Day winds down with a meet and greet at Frazier’s Restaurant on the Waterfront in Dover.

To take part in any of this grassroots advocacy, contact Alex Eldreth at alex.eldreth@delautism.org.



10th Anniversary
Walk for Autism

April 16
Cape Henlopen State Park
Lewes

April 23
Fox Point State Park
Wilmington

INSIDE Autism[™] Delaware

Planning now for summer fun

If you're like most parents, time has a way of getting away from you. So now's a good time to begin planning for your child's summer fun.

Autism Delaware offers day camp activities for as many as 30 children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The four-day fun-and-learning experience takes place at the Children's Beach House in Lewes in August. (Exact times will be announced at a later date.)

Day camp is set up for children with ASD who will be enrolled in grades 3–11 in the 2016–17 school year. Sailing, kayaking, swimming, a low ropes course, and arts and crafts provide opportunities to practice communication and social skills while each child is appropriately supported. And opportunities abound for trying something new.

For more information, visit autismdelaware.org.

How do I pay for day camp?

Through your child's respite funds.

Defined, "respite" is a period of rest or relief from caring for your child with autism. "Respite funds" help defray the cost of somebody else caring for your child—and Autism Delaware Summer Day Camp counts as respite!

To apply for respite funds, you must first apply for services from the Delaware Health & Social Services' Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS). For details and forms, visit dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/ddds/intake.html.

When DDDS has accepted your application, contact your family support worker or the respite coordinator to ask for respite services.

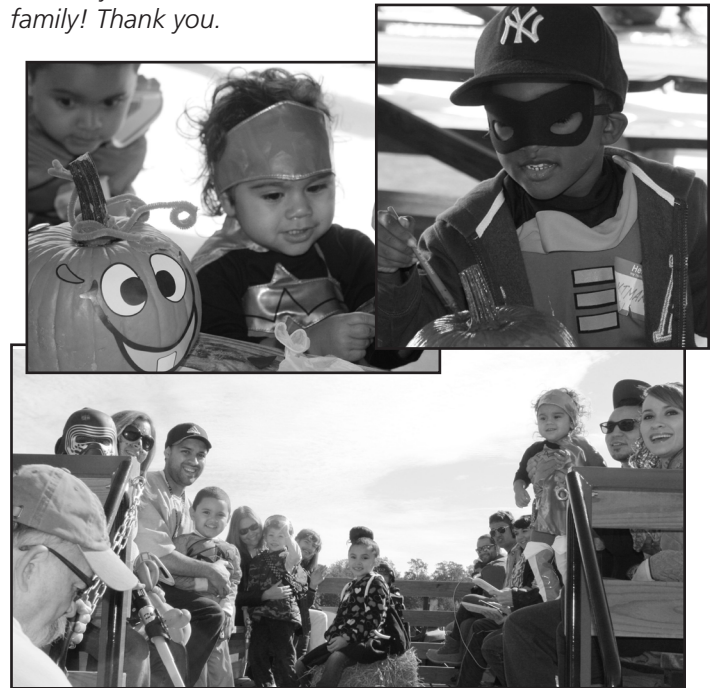
Celebrating autumn at Killens Pond

An unprecedented number of families celebrated autumn this year at the Autism Delaware Fall Festival at Killens Pond State Park in Felton.

The annual event took place on October 31, so children were encouraged to wear their Halloween costumes.

Big smiles said the children enjoyed the festivities planned by Autism Delaware's family support services. Fun activities included face painting, pumpkin decorating, and the traditional hayride.

Many thanks to the families who supplemented the non-profit's lunch fare by sharing snacks and side dishes: *You helped turn an Autism Delaware social event into a holiday treat for the whole family! Thank you.*



Did you know?

Autism Delaware refunds parents as much as \$250 of the cost to attend an autism conference or workshop. The Autism Delaware stipend is available year round and can be applied to the cost of registration, travel, hotel, childcare, and any other related conference or workshop costs.

To get your refund:

Step 1: Submit a request to delautism@delautism.org, or mail it to Autism Delaware, ATTN: Stipend Request, 924 Old Harmony Rd., Suite 201, Newark DE 19713. Be sure to note the name of the conference or workshop, its date, and the anticipated cost.

Step 2: Write a summary of your experience at the conference or workshop, and submit it with your receipts to the above email or street address.



Supporting Blue Jean Ball



Opening band Just Us got the Blue Jean Ball started on September 26 in the Rehoboth Beach Convention Center. A live performance by local favorite Love Seed Mama Jump kept partiers on

the dance floor. And more than \$80,000 was raised at this year's party. The proceeds came from ticket, auction, and raffle sales.

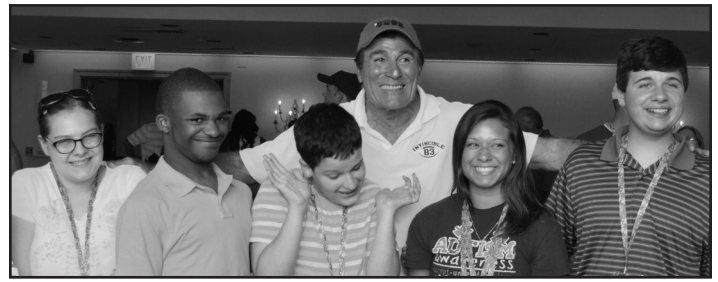
These raised funds are going to critically needed Autism Delaware programs and services, thanks to the support of

Special thanks

To Brittingham Movers' Mervin Brittingham and his staff: Autism Delaware is grateful for your help with auction items and décor during both the event setup and cleanup.

- our Blue Jean Ball sponsors, such as Hertrich Toyota; Peninsula Oil & Propane; Gildorf's Homegrown Produce; Morris, James, LLP; N.K.S. Distributors; Deakyne Law Office; and John F. Kleinstuber & Associates.
- donors—such as Jonathan Spivak, Merrill Lynch, Michael Waltrip Racing, Bellinger's Jewelers, and U.S. Senator Tom Carper's office—who supplied impressive goods and services.
- our incredibly generous and dedicated volunteers, who deserve credit for helping to organize and run every aspect of the Blue Jean Ball.

For the full listing of our sponsors and donors, visit autismdelaware.org.



#15 for Drive for Autism!

In May this year, the Drive for Autism Celebrity-Am Golf Outing celebrates 15 years of raising awareness and funds for Autism Delaware's much-needed programs and services.

Celebrities who have teed off over the years include Troy Aikman, Pat Summerall, Donovan McNabb, Darrell Waltrip, six-time Sprint Cup champion Jimmie Johnson, four-time champ Jeff Gordon, 2014 champion Kevin Harvick, Danica Patrick, Denny Hamlin, Clint Bowyer, and many more from the NFL, MLB, NHL, Fox Sports, ESPN, and the Delaware-Philadelphia sports community.

Play on the DuPont Country Club course features a spectrum of expertise and abilities. "The event mirrors the work we do at Autism Delaware," notes Drive for Autism chair Artie Kempner. "We treat everyone with respect and dignity and make them all feel special."

"The event is closed to the public so our celebrities can enjoy a relaxed round of golf with their friends," adds Kempner. "Many celebrities have personal connections to autism, but even those who don't make the outing an every year event on their schedules to raise funds in support of our programs and services."

Did you know?

Seed money from the first Drive for Autism Celebrity-Am Golf Outing helped start Autism Delaware's adult employment program. Known today as Productive Opportunities for Work & Recreation (or POW&R, for short), this program currently supports 118 young adults with autism as they first venture into their adult lives. POW&R supports include community-based vocational services; competitive, supported, and self-employment; and social and wellness activities.



Tickets to the haunted-but-not-scary train ride sold out quickly! This October event is one of many supported by Autism Delaware fundraisers, such as the Blue Jean Ball and Drive for Autism.

Support the Drive for Autism!

Become a sponsor of the biggest celebrity-am golf outing in Delaware. Call (302) 224-6020, ext. 213. Or visit autismdelaware.org.

INSIDE Autism™ Delaware

Programs

January

2—Sensory friendly movie: *Alvin and the Chipmunks*. Carmike Cinemas in the Dover Mall. 1365 North Dupont Hwy. 10:00 AM.

6, 14, 21, 28—Bowling night. Bowlerama. 3031 New Castle Av. New Castle. 5:30–7:00 PM. **Register:** Karen.Tuohy@redclay.k12.de.us.

8—Teen/Tween game night. Autism Delaware Newark office. 6:30–8:30 PM. **Register:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

12—Parent coffee hour. Panera Bread. 3650 Kirkwood Hwy. Wilmington. 9:00 AM. **R.S.V.P.:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

12, 19, 26—Lego Club. Autism Delaware Newark office. 6:00–7:00 PM. **Register:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

14—Bounce night. Hopping Good Time. 23 Cochran Dr. Bldg. 6. Camden. 5:30–7:30 PM. **Register:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

16—Sensory friendly movie: TBD. Westown Movies. 150 Commerce Dr. Middletown. 10:00 AM.

16—Sensory friendly roller skating. Christiana Skating Center. 801 Christiana Rd. 5:30–7:30 PM.

16—Sensory friendly roller skating. Milford Skating Center. One Park Av. 5:00–7:00 PM. **R.S.V.P.:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

22—Teen/Tween game night. Autism Delaware Lewes office. 6:00–7:45 PM. **Register:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

February

2, 16, 23—Lego Club. Autism Delaware Newark office. 6:00–7:00 PM. **Register:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

6—Sensory friendly movie: *Kung Fu Panda*. Carmike Cinemas in the Dover Mall. 1365 North Dupont Hwy. 10:00 AM.

12—Teen/Tween game night. Autism Delaware Newark office. 6:30–8:30 PM. **Register:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

19—Teen/Tween game night. Autism Delaware Lewes office. 6:00–7:45 PM. **Register:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

20—Sensory friendly movie: TBD. Westown Movies. 150 Commerce Dr. Middletown. 10:00 AM.

25—Bounce night. Hopping Good Time. 23 Cochran Dr. Bldg. 6. Camden. 5:30–7:30 PM. **Register:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

March

8, 15, 22—Lego Club. Autism Delaware Newark office. 6:00–7:00 PM. **Register:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

11—Teen/Tween game night. Autism Delaware Newark office. 6:30–8:30 PM. **Register:** Heidi Mizell at (302) 224-6020.

12—Sensory friendly skating party. Milford Skating Center. One Park Avenue. 5:00–7:00 PM. **R.S.V.P.:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

18—Teen/Tween game night. Autism Delaware Lewes office. 6:00–7:45 PM. **Register:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.

19—Sensory friendly movie: TBD. Westown Movies. 150 Commerce Dr. Middletown. 10:00 AM.

31—Bounce night. Hopping Good Time. 23 Cochran Dr. Bldg. 6. Camden. 5:30–7:30 PM. **Register:** Gail Hecky at (302) 644-3410.



Autism Delaware social events, such as the spring bunny train ride, offer an opportunity to socialize and have fun.

For more info, visit autismdelaware.org.

Autism Delaware relies on volunteers to help with social events, such as bowling, beach picnic, holiday parties, and the spring bunny train ride. If you can volunteer, send an email of interest to volunteers@delautism.org.

All information provided or published by Autism Delaware is for informational purposes only. Reference to any treatment or therapy option or to any program, service, or treatment provider is not an endorsement by Autism Delaware. You should investigate alternatives that may be more appropriate for a specific individual. Autism Delaware assumes no responsibility for the use made of any information published or provided by Autism Delaware.

PARENT PARENT

Written by parents
for parents

When I used to do yoga, I was in it for the weight loss and moment of serenity. When my seven-year-old son with autism does yoga, he may be helping to improve the lives of special-needs kids. Casey may not know that's what he's doing, but by participating in a play intervention study at the University of Delaware, my son could be contributing to data that could help other children with autism in the future.

When I wrote this article, we were halfway through a 12-week play-based yoga study with researchers at UD's Move2Learn Lab. The researchers visit with Casey twice a week for an hour-long training session that includes yoga elements, such as poses, breathing, and relaxation, as well as play-based elements, like songs and cooperative games.

In between the training sessions with researchers, Casey and I do two shorter parent-led sessions at home during the week. We use a video recording as a guide. After each session, we record Casey's mood, any portion of the practice he struggled with, and other basic information, such as the date and length of the session.

Weeks before we began the yoga sessions, we visited the Move2Learn Lab on three occasions. At each, Casey participated in an hour and a half of baseline evaluations that tested his fine and gross motor skills, balance, core strength, flexibility, receptive-listening capabilities, and more. Casey will also be tested using the autism diagnostic observation schedule (ADOS) and a test of his IQ (intelligence quotient).

When we complete the program, Casey will go through similar testing to show, hopefully, growth in some areas. Likewise, videos of the in-home sessions will be evaluated for the development of his skills.

My family started attending the University of Delaware's Adapted Sports Club nine years ago because, while both of my sons have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), my older son was also diagnosed with Asperger's markers. [Asperger's syndrome is now defined as autism spectrum disorder.] The markers centered on social and repetitive behaviors.

I wasn't sure how sports club would help my sons past teaching them sports skills (although those skills alone would have been worth it), but my kids have benefited tremendously. The first, most important way was improved social skills. Every week, the kids work with a college student—plus other students in cooperative games—so my sons are learning how to talk to their peers, differently-abled peers, and mentors. In the cooperative games, my kids learn how to cooperate by passing a basketball, even when they have a chance to make the point, as well as how to be gracious winners and losers.

As my sons have gotten older, the challenges have gotten more complex, so they're learning how to set goals and, once they've been met, to set new goals. My older son struggled

The overall purpose of the study is to compare the effects of four different interventions (one of which is yoga) on the motor and social communication skills of children with autism between 3 and 14 years of age.

Researchers hope that the knowledge gained from the study will contribute to an understanding of how play-based interventions benefit children with autism, and may help develop a treatment to enhance the social, communication, and motor skills of children with autism.

The only compensation we will receive for being part of this study is \$50.00 at the completion of the testing and yoga sessions. I will also get copies of Casey's ADOS and IQ test results.

Supporting Casey in this study is a big commitment of time for little compensation, but if Casey's participation proves that exercise intervention produces gains in children with autism, then maybe it will help open the doors for more therapies and treatment now considered "alternative."

I believe that exercise and movement can be beneficial not only to physical development but also to cognitive and behavioral improvement. But until there is enough support to prove this, insurance companies will not pay for them, which makes it harder for a family to implement methods of treatment that may make a huge difference in a child's life.

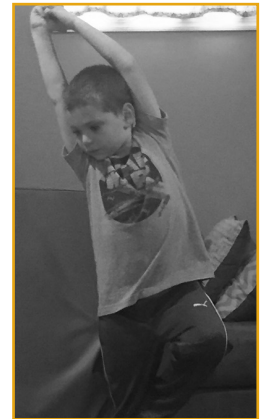
—Cory Gilden

with his free throw for the longest time. Once he learned this, he learned how to throw and catch a football. Now, he's learning how to dribble in field hockey.

My sons have also gained leadership skills. In the nine years we've been in the program, my kids have grown from little kids into some of the biggest kids there. Now, they question why they still have to go to sports club! But I know that interacting with smaller kids will benefit my sons just as much as it will the smaller kids. For example, the college students helped educate my sons when they were younger on when to talk, when to control the impulse to interrupt, and what is appropriate to talk about. Now that my sons are on the other end of this interaction, it's teaching them patience, an essential quality in a leader or mentor.

My older son started kindergarten with a pretty intense individualized education program (IEP); now in ninth grade, he is taking honors classes. One of the factors in his success is UD's Adapted Sports Club led by Iva Obrusnikova, PhD, MSc, MEd—and I'm so glad both of my kids have had this opportunity.

—Kate Cottle



Casey Gilden learning one of yoga's balance poses

The very real need for physical activity Continued from p. 1

Motor coordination issues

We begin here with motor coordination issues because “around 80 percent of children with autism have motor coordination issues that include clumsiness and difficulties with gaze or eye movement control.”⁴

According to *The National Autistic Society* website out of the United Kingdom, the movement and coordination issues that sometimes accompany ASD are called dyspraxia. Included under this term are gross motor skills (such as running) and fine motor skills (such as tying your sneakers).⁵

The best way to treat motor coordination issues is physical education (or PE, for short), notes *MedlinePlus*, a health information site supported by the NIH’s National Library of Medicine.⁶ Adapted PE and how to advocate for it will be covered in the next issue of *The Sun*.

To help you work with your child on these motor coordination issues, continues *The National Autistic Society* website, an occupational therapist or physiotherapist can create a program. At-home activities may include playing catch with balloons and trampolining. For better results, demonstrate the activity by standing beside your child instead of across from him or her.⁷

Other motor coordination issues that your child may experience are low muscle tone and postural control.

Although most children with ASD can be taught to make eye contact, many say “eye-to-eye contact can be anxiety-producing or over-stimulating,” notes the *about health* website. “Therapy, therefore, should focus on communication skills in general rather than on enforced eye-to-eye gaze.”^A

Low muscle tone (also known as hypotonia), refers to a muscle’s resting length. When it’s greater than average, it causes hyperextension at the joints. “[B]ecause the muscles have increased resting length, it literally takes longer for the muscles to contract. Therefore, the individual may seem slow to get going or even lazy, but there truly may be a physiological reason behind it,” writes licensed occupational therapist Rachel Trost, MS, OTR/L, in her article on the *North Shore Pediatric Therapy* website. “Also, because it requires more energy to get the muscles moving, these individuals may be reluctant to move, or conversely, they may move more because sitting still is exhausting and uncomfortable.”⁸

Although the muscle’s actual length at rest cannot be changed, low muscle tone can be addressed by “strengthening the muscles around the [hyperextended] joint.... Pediatric occupational and physical therapists are trained to recognize low muscle tone and treat the negative effects.”⁹

“It is important to understand,” notes the *Skills for Action* website (an information-only blog by South African physiotherapist Pam Versfeld), “that the low tone, which is seen in joint hypermobility, is caused by the structure of the muscles themselves. The only way to improve the tone in muscles with lax connective tissue is by strengthening the muscle, which will increase the stiffness in the connective tissue that forms the tendons and myofascia.¹⁰ [Myofascia is the connective tissue around muscles and organs in the body.]

Some simple home exercises—when done with care—are offered on the blogspot *Hypermobility Hope* at hypermobilityhope.blogspot.com. Please note that a qualified therapist remains the best way to help assure that the appropriate therapies are selected and used safely.

Postural control—Some children with ASD struggle with keeping the trunks of their bodies steady and with aligning their heads and bodies for balance, continues the *Skills for Action* website. “In addition, the child may have weakness in the back and muscles that makes sitting erect tiring, and weakness in the neck muscles [that] makes it difficult to keep the head steady.”¹¹

For help creating a plan to improve your child’s postural control, visit skillsforaction.com/help-your-child. In addition to a fitness plan, the site offers remedial activities, such as leg and trunk exercises and arm strengtheners.

More postural control and balance activities are listed on the website *Leaps and Bounds: Pediatric Occupational Therapy*. These activities range from imaginary play to walking on stilts.¹²

Note: Whereas postural control affects how your child sits upright in a chair, “an erect and alert posture is also affected by mood. Often, a child will sit erect when he or she is interested and engaged with a task. The same child, when faced with a task that makes him anxious... will adopt a slumped posture, which reflects his or her mood.”¹³

Continued on p. 9

Footnotes

- ⁴ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/11/141124081032.htm>.
- ⁵ <http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/related-conditions/dyspraxia/dyspraxia-and-autism-spectrum-disorders.aspx>.
- ⁶ <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001533.htm>.
- ⁷ <http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/related-conditions/dyspraxia/dyspraxia-and-autism-spectrum-disorders.aspx>.
- ⁸ <http://nspt4kids.com/parenting/low-muscle-tone-what-does-hypotonia-mean>.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.skillsforaction.com/joint-hypermobility>.
- ¹¹ <http://www.skillsforaction.com/autism-spectrum-disorders>.
- ¹² www.leapsandboundsot.com/resources/activities-to-improve-postural-control-and-balance.pdf.
- ¹³ <http://www.skillsforaction.com/autism-spectrum-disorders>.
- ^A <http://autism.about.com/od/whatisautism/a/Autism-Symptoms-And-Eye-Contact.htm>.

The very real need for physical activity Continued from p. 8

Speech or language issues

If your child has been diagnosed with verbal apraxia, he or she may have trouble coordinating the muscles used to talk. This speech disorder “is not due to weakness or paralysis of the speech muscles (the muscles of the face, tongue, and lips),” notes the NIH website, *National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders*. “Developmental apraxia of speech (DAS) occurs in children and is present from birth.... DAS is different from what is known as a developmental delay of speech, in which a child follows the ‘typical’ path of speech development but does so more slowly than normal.

“Speech-language therapy is often helpful [for DAS],” continues the NIH site. “Therapy is tailored to the individual and is designed to treat other speech or language problems that may occur together with apraxia.... Support and encouragement from family members and friends are also important.”¹⁴

Support for family members and friends who want to work with a child’s verbal apraxia can be found at these resources:

- speechtherapyideas.com/homepage/categories/activities-hpc
- speechandlanguagekids.com/autism-resource-page
- info.speechtails.com/blog/bid/142455/Speech-Therapy-Ideas-for-Preschool-Children-with-Autism

Where do I start?

Unfortunately, no one-size-fits-all exercise program exists for children on the spectrum. Why? Because no two children on the spectrum respond the same to sensory stimuli—or to treatment.

“Autistic children and those with developmental coordination disorders do not learn new motor skills in the same way, possibly because of differences in the way

their brains form new connections. They often need support and additional practice when learning a new skill,” notes the *Skills for Action* website.¹⁵

Some trial and error may be needed before finding a physical activity that works for your child, but once you do, it can help move your child into a more social life in school and in the community.

“Helping a young autistic child to acquire some of the basic motor skills and fitness levels that are needed for participation in the classroom and in the playground is important,” continues the *Skills for Action* site. “Autistic children respond well to motor skills training when it is approached in a way that is adapted to the child’s particular needs and goals.

“Start slowly, deal with anxiety, allow the child to select goals, provide the right sort of encouragement and rewards during a training session, and structure the task for success.”¹⁶

Some activities your child may enjoy and benefit from—at little or no cost to you—are listed in this newsletter on page 10.



Your child may not understand or appreciate how exercise feels. “[I]f the child is anxious, he or she will often avoid challenging tasks and may also dislike the strong sensations that arise from physical effort, such as a fast beating heart or discomfort that arises from working the muscles hard.”^B

Also remember: A child on the spectrum may experience hypersensitivity to the activity’s stimuli—from the Velcro straps on his or her sneakers to background conversations.

“It’s a balancing act,” notes Autism Delaware resource coordinator Heidi Mizell. “So, be aware of your child’s responses before you begin a new program.”

A qualified therapist is the best way to help assure that the appropriate therapies are selected and used safely.

Autism Delaware provides parent packets that include a list of therapists in your area. For a free packet, call (302) 224-6020 or (302) 644-3410.

Or visit autismdelaware.org.

Parents need to find a way to work comfortably with their child’s sometimes frustrating behavior. One way is mindfulness training.

“Mindfulness is an awareness of the present moment,” explains *The Guided Meditation Site*. “In the here and now, everything just is... and there is great peace in that.”^C

Several simple exercises for learning and practicing mindfulness can be found at the-guided-meditation-site.com.

Footnotes

- ¹⁴ <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/Pages/apraxia.aspx>.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.skillsforaction.com/autism-spectrum-disorders>.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ^B <http://www.skillsforaction.com>.
- ^C <http://www.the-guided-meditation-site.com/mindfulness-exercises.html>.

Let's move Continued from p. 2

to fade that out completely. (Thank goodness!)

Over time, Ethan worked his way up to the 45-minute workout he now does three times a week. He has lost weight, and his balance, posture, and strength are fantastic. Hiring a personal trainer is not cheap, but the health benefits really do promise potential cost savings. We are grateful that we are able to afford it. If this is not a possibility for you, I am sure you will find something else in this issue of *The Sun* that will get you and your child going. To quote our First Lady, Michelle Obama, "Let's Move!"

Activities your child may enjoy—at little or no cost!

Challenger Division—Little League® created the Challenger Division especially for youth with disabilities, aged 5–18, but youth who are older may be eligible if still in school. The program is free and available to children in Wilmington, New Castle, Newark, Bear, Middletown, Smyrna, and Milford. For more information, contact Lisa Johannsen at (302) 378-2530 or lajohannemail@aol.com.

Open Doors—The YMCA of Delaware offers a sliding fee scale to people of all ages, abilities, and income levels. Called Open Doors, this financial assistance applies to fees for programs as well as to YMCA membership. To apply, visit ymcade.org/membership/financial-assistance.

Special Olympics of Delaware (SODE)—Except for bowling (which may require a small weekly fee), all SODE programs are free for participants. Parents who wish to get their children involved should contact Cheryl Talmo at (302) 831-3223 or at ctalmo@udel.edu.

Also, SODE shares an official training site at the Hockessin Athletic Club for swimming, powerlifting, and circuit training (weight training). This program is free. For more information, call Kristi Smith-Willis at (484) 643-2948.

TOPSoccer—TOPSoccer is a free program designed specifically for children with physical and mental challenges. As a community-based program, it is geared toward each player's development (instead of competition), and players are grouped by ability (not age). The goal is to experience an improvement in self-esteem and social skills as well as fitness. For details, contact the club nearest to you:

New Castle—Kirkwood Soccer Club: Call (302) 322-4220, or send email to ksc@kirkwoodsoccer.org.

Middletown—Middletown-Odessa-Townsend Soccer Club: Contact Susan Reitz at susanreitz13@yahoo.com.

Kent County—Contact Dafne Carrnight at (302) 644-3410 or dafne.carrnight@delautism.org.

Nassau—Henlopen Soccer Club: Contact Larry Magee at (443) 691-0463 or info@henlopensoccerclub.org.

The benefits of exercise

When the federal government mandated exercise programs in public schools decades ago, exercise was understood to be beneficial. Today, not only have those public school programs largely disappeared, but we have also experienced a phenomenal increase in tools of convenience: We no longer have to get up to change TV channels or to pick up the telephone.

Regarding people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), evidence has been collected over the years that shows how exercise can help regulate behavior and improve focus and concentration. Accordingly, individual education programs (IEPs) for students with ASD need to include breaks for stretching, jumping, or walking throughout the day.¹

Exercise is also gaining consideration as an aide to improve brain function. "Animal studies found that exercise increases both the number of small blood vessels that supply blood to the brain and the number of connections between nerve cells," notes the website *National Institute on Aging, Turning Discovery Into Health*, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Institutes of Health (NIH). "In addition, exercise raises the level of a protein in an area of the brain important to memory and learning. Research in humans shows that exercise can stimulate the brain's ability to maintain old network connections and make new ones vital to healthy cognition."²

Teaching professional Carla Hannaford, PhD, documented the results of specific exercises in her book *Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head*. Hannaford describes tale after tale of remarkable change in skills and attitudes affected by movement. With diagrams and detailed explanations, she discusses the complex interaction of neurons, ganglia, and other components of the human brain, and offers a convincing argument about the impact of movement. Hannaford also cites other researchers and professional educators from other cultures who, she claims, have "intuitively recognized [that] numbers, letters, and writing can all be taught effectively with lots of movement."³

From a program called Brain Gym®, Hannaford describes a few basic movements that may help your child with ASD, including the cross-lateral walking in place, the lazy 8 cross-lateral writing exercise, and the energy yawn.⁴

Because exercise programs are no longer mandated in most public schools, the family has become responsible for encouraging physical activity. Whether Brain Gym® or some other exercise program, physical activity offers a range of potentially great benefits to children on the spectrum.

Footnotes

¹ Fred R. Volkmar & Lisa A. Wiesner. *A Practical Guide to Autism: What Every Parent, Family Member, and Teacher Needs to Know*. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009) 432.

² <https://d2cu3n3kl6hbmr.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/DoExerciseAndPhysicalActivityProtectTheBrain.pdf>.

³ *Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head* (Arlington VA: Great Ocean Publishers, 1995) 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 119–127.

Practicing yoga on the spectrum

By practicing yoga regularly, anyone may benefit from the positive impact of the Hindu discipline on behavior, focus, strength, flexibility, balance, and self-regulation. And for people who are sensitive to the sounds, lights, and smells of the world around them, yoga also offers autism-specific benefits, such as a familiar setting and instructor, modified pacing, and a structured routine that promotes learning and independence.

Additionally, yoga may reduce the outbursts and repetitive nervous movements associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Yoga practitioners believe the poses prepare the body to release nervous energy, which gets stored in the muscles and tissues.

"We could all use the benefits of yoga in our everyday lives," notes Autism Delaware™ staff member Ann Athas, who is an avid yoga practitioner and has a grandchild with ASD, "so making yoga a part of an exercise routine makes a lot of sense. Just ask some of our Sussex County POW&R participants!"

Some of the young men and women in Autism Delaware's adult employment program—known as Productive Opportunities for Work and Recreation (or POW&R, for short)—take part in a 45-minute class that provides a calm, safe, and caring environment for the practice of yoga. Only a quick road trip from the Autism Delaware Lewes office, the class is held on the first and third Tuesday morning of each month—in a room donated by the Cancer Support Community in Re-

hoboth Beach's Medical Arts Building.

"The yoga room is used mostly by cancer survivors and patients who are seeking a way to ease pain and decrease anxiety," explains Athas, "but now, due to Autism Delaware's partnership with the Cancer Support Community, the room is an oasis for young adults on the spectrum who, otherwise, would not have an opportunity to breathe easy."

"There are so many wins here," adds POW&R assistant director Melissa Martin. "Our participants on the spectrum get to relax, breathe, stretch. We have a facility available to us—at no charge! And it all culminates in the Wings of Hope Butterfly Release."

The butterfly release program is a celebration of life that honors and remembers those who have been touched by cancer. Wanting to acknowledge the generosity of the Cancer Support Community, the POW&R participants donated \$3.00 per class throughout the year and, by this past September, raised \$235.00 to sponsor live and seeded butterfly keepsakes.

The POW&R participants bestowed the honor on Glyn Edwards. A yoga enthusiast, Edwards designed the classes specifically for young adults on the spectrum.

"We hope to continue this partnership and make it available to even more POW&R participants," states Martin.

For more information about Autism Delaware's yoga program, call Melissa Martin at (302) 644-3410.



Practicing yoga stretches in the specially designed class for young adults with ASD are [front row] POW&R participants Will Crist and Jerry Meece; [back row] Madison Nicoletti; Rebecca Meece, DSP; Andrew Bergmann, and Rose Campbell.



Participants in the Wings of Hope Butterfly Release in September 2015 were POW&R participants Rohan Patel and Will Crist, POW&R assistant director Melissa Martin, yoga instructor Glyn Edwards, and POW&R participants Dan McHale and Jerry Meece.

Resources: On yoga and autism

- *Yoga Therapy for Every Special Child*, by Nancy Williams © 2010: Singing Dragon (Jessica Kingsley Publishers)
- *Yoga for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents and Caregivers*, by Dion E. Betts and Stacey W. Betts © 2006: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- *Yoga Therapy for Children with Autism and Special Needs*, by Louise Goldberg © 2013: W.W. Norton & Co.

For more resources, visit the internet, and type in "yoga and autism."



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Helping People and Families Affected by Autism

Walk for Autism celebrates 10-year milestone

Every April for the last nine years, people have participated in the Walk for Autism to help raise awareness and funds for Autism Delaware's programs and services. Join us as we celebrate 10 years!



autismdelaware.org