

**...and keep on moving!**

**Swimming-** Water provides sensory input that may help to organize a child with ASD. Swimming is a repetitive activity that promotes strengthening, coordination, and endurance.



**Tossing, catching, kicking a ball-** These activities may be performed with a parent or sibling to promote turn taking and hand/eye coordination. Start with one-on-one ball games and then introduce more 'players' to promote social interaction.

**Play at a community playground** This environment provides a variety of play options. Choose a playground that your child is familiar with and visit it early or late in the day to avoid crowds.

## **Good Exercise Habits Early in Life = Healthy Lifestyles**

Regular physical activity reduces risk for chronic diseases later in life including:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Certain cancers
- Diabetes
- Obesity



**Limit 'screen time'** – Time spent in front of a TV or computer should be two hours or less per day. Time away from the 'screen' means more opportunity for movement and social interaction.

Establishing positive physical activity habits early in life is key to a healthy lifestyle. Talk to a pediatric Physical Therapist to help incorporate **60 minutes** of activity every day!

This brochure is a collaboration between the UNC Department of Physical Therapy and the UNC Center for Development and Learning, part of the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities.  
For more information, email [Catherine.wilson@cdl.unc.edu](mailto:Catherine.wilson@cdl.unc.edu)



**Let's Get  
Moving!**

Encouraging  
physical activities  
for your child with  
an Autism Spectrum  
Disorder

**Physical activity is a  
crucial part of a child's  
mental and physical  
health.**



### Did you know?...

- Compared to peers, children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)...
  - are less active<sup>1</sup>
  - are more likely to be overweight<sup>2</sup>
  - do not exercise regularly<sup>3</sup>
- Only 20% of parents report their child with ASD exercises regularly<sup>3</sup>
- Children should participate in **60 minutes** of physical activity on most days of the week<sup>1</sup>

### Benefits of Exercise include:

- Improved fitness and self-esteem
- Decreased anxiety
- Better sleep and digestion
- Increased opportunity for peer interaction
- Maintenance of a healthy weight

1. Pan & Frey. Physical activity patterns in youth with ASD. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. 2006; 36: 597-606.
2. Curtin et al. Prevalence of overweight in children and adolescents with ASD. *BMC Pediatrics*. 2005, 5:48-54.
3. Easter seals. Living with Autism Study. [www.actforautism.org](http://www.actforautism.org).

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Most children are active with peers. Why is it difficult for my child to participate in organized group activities?**

Social, communication, behavior, sensory processing, and motor planning challenges often seen in children with ASD can affect your child's ability to participate in some organized activities. Your child may:

- not play imaginative games
- not engage in turn-taking for team games
- be challenged and frustrated by activities that require a lot of body coordination
- be stressed by team sports requiring close contact and group cooperation.

**My child prefers to play by herself with games and activities that do not require a lot of movement. Aren't these just her preferences? Why should I interfere?**

It is very important to add daily physical activity as part of her routine because of the great benefits of exercise. This pamphlet suggests opportunities for children to get exercise doing activities performed alone, with family members, and with familiar peers. Allow your child to express her preferences by giving her choices of physical activities such as biking or walking in the neighborhood.

**My child is resistant to change...how do I increase his activity without upsetting him?**

Slowly present a new activity to your child and then add it into a daily, structured routine. Find out which activities your child enjoys and practice the activity on a regular basis to promote skill development. A child's preferred activity may change over time, so routinely assess your child's interests.

## Try some of these activities with your child:

**Walking-** Take a walk together to an endpoint that is familiar and rewarding. Even short walks throughout the day, such as to the mailbox or parking farther from a store entrance, add up to increased physical activity. Use a pedometer to track your child's steps each day.

**Jumping on a trampoline-** Safe use of a trampoline promotes lower extremity and core strength. The sensory input of jumping up and down can be organizing for children with ASD.

**Martial Arts-** Karate, Tae Kwon Do, and other martial arts promote focus, discipline, balance, and coordination. Your child may perform these activities with a group of children, but he is not dependent on contact for success of the sport.

**Bicycle/Tricycle riding-** Bike riding improves endurance, coordination, and strength. The rhythmic nature of pedaling mimics some repetitive traits associated with ASD.

