

# **Practical Pointers**

## **Helping your child with Autism Spectrum Disorder be Physically Active and Reduce Stress at Home**

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Exercise, both high energy and stress reducing physical activity, is one of the most underutilized and cost-effective interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This is particularly important with children staying home during the COVID-19 shelter-in-place edicts by governors all across the U.S. Interestingly, a recent survey through SPARK (Simons Foundation Powering Autism Research) of over 8,000 families with children with ASD about life during the COVID-19 pandemic found many parents use breathing exercises, yoga, prayer, meditation and other mindfulness exercises. Parents further reported that these activities were helpful in dealing with the situation.

Unfortunately, many children with ASD do not participate in regular physical activity and spend a significant amount of time in sedentary behaviors including screen time. This is not doubt amplified with schools closed and children having to stay at home during the current pandemic. Children must also be feeling stress not understanding why they cannot go to school and see their teachers and classmates. How can parents help their child with ASD stay active and participate in stress-reducing activities? The purpose of this practical pointer is to present general tips and specific suggestions to parents on how to help their child stay active and reduce stress during this unprecedented time of uncertainty

### **Staying Active at Home – Six Tips**

#### **Tip #1 – Be Flexible**

The important thing is getting your child active, so be flexible to make it happen. Parents know their child better than anyone, so think about the following factors that match the child's strengths and preferred routines when creating physical activity:

- Type of Activity (walking, strength exercises, Yoga)
- Time of Day (morning, afternoon, evening)
- Amount of Time (many short bouts of 5-10 minutes of activity vs. one bout of 30-45 minutes of activity)
- Intensity of Activity (slow walk with dog v. fast walk/jog down the road and back)
- With Others (participating alone or with parent/sibling)

#### **Tip #2 – Make it Fun**

All children including those on the spectrum will be more attracted to physical activity that they perceive as fun. Here are some suggestions to make physical activity fun for your child:

- Use videos that have cartoons, action and music.
- Going for a walk while listening to music.
- Doing an exercise routine with music (child's choice) in the background.
- Using a child's strong interests makes physical activity more fun.
- Actively playing with the dog in the house or backyard.

**Tip #3 – Schedule Physical Activity**

If you use some type of schedule to plan your child's day, add 10-15 minutes of physical activity multiple times during the day or one bout of 30-45 minutes of physical activity. If physical activity/relaxation is very unmotivating for the child, then add a specific reinforcer at the end of the activity ("if you complete the physical activity, then we can have a choice of a banana or apple for snack").

**Tip #4 – Provide Choices**

Give your child multiple choices of activities, and then let your child choose. If you want to see your child do some calming activities, then give choices from different Yoga videos, relaxation videos, or using calming activities you have used at home. For cardio, choices could be watching an active video, doing an exercise routine, going for a walk, or just dancing/moving to music.

**Tip #5 – Set Goals**

Goals such as walking the dog for 15 minutes or completing two active videos helps the child see a target. Set a specific number of activities such as the following exercise routine with specific targets for each activity:

- Do 10 jumping jacks
- Do 10 modified push-ups (on knees or wall push-ups)
- Lie on back and do bicycle movements with legs for 30 seconds
- Jump 10x over a paper towel placed on the ground
- Stand and alternate marching motion touching right elbow to left knee/left elbow to right knee
- Rest for one minute, and then repeat routine 3 more times.

**Tip #6 – Participate with Child**

Most children will have more fun and stick with the physical activity longer if parents (or siblings) participate with the child. It is even more fun for the child to watch a parent or sibling struggling with a Yoga position or getting winded with cardio activities!

**Home Physical Activities**

What follows are specific physical activities that can be completed at home with children with ASD.

**Active Videos**

Active videos could be a great choice for many children with ASD given that many children on the spectrum enjoy watching videos. Fortunately, there are many organizations that have created great active videos. Many of these videos are short to keep the child's attention. Others have a series of workouts that the child can choose. Still others are longer that can be an entire workout. Table 1 presents a sampling of active videos and links:

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Table 1  
Active Videos

### Pre-K and Elementary Age

*Gonoodle – Movement videos* – <https://www.gonoodle.com>  
*Gonoodle also at* - <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2YBT7HYqCbbvzu3kKZ3wnw>  
*Special Olympics – Young Athletes* - <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/community-building/young-athletes/young-athletes-activity-guide/YoungAthletes-Activity-Guide-Print.pdf>  
*Sworkit* - <https://app.sworkit.com/collections/kids-workouts>  
*Beachbody Kids Workout* - <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6880106>  
*9-minute Exercise for Kids* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc4QS2USKmk> (9 minutes)  
*Locomotor Activities* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNKffCXuZRk&t=99s>  
*Drums Alive* -  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aztywPOqCOU&list=PL8c37GDyh5koHOfuT3WbwwHnK8aSa-GsH>

### Middle and High School Age

*Special Olympics – School of Strength* - <https://www.specialolympics.org/school-of-strength?fbclid=IwAR0qEMYNp2CVeFWARN3sknf4j-xUOcIW5Xi9a009z1SXjsYZTGkS90tOB74>  
*Special Olympics – Fit 5* - <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/fit-5/Fit-5-Guide.pdf>  
*Sworkit* - <https://app.sworkit.com/collections/kids-workouts>  
*UFit Home Exercise Program* - <https://justdoufit.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/UFIT-Sample-Home-Workout.pdf>  
*National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)* -  
[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCe6g\\_cr5MzrYQ12aOuwNWA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCe6g_cr5MzrYQ12aOuwNWA)  
*Drums Alive* -  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aztywPOqCOU&list=PL8c37GDyh5koHOfuT3WbwwHnK8aSa-GsH>

## **Outside Activities**

There are many activities that can be performed safely in the yard, in the driveway or in the neighborhood including the following:

- Tossing a frisbee or ball back and forth with a parent or sibling.
- Creating hop scotch with chalk on the driveway.
- Bowling using empty 2-liter cola bottles, roll of paper towels or water bottles.
- Target tossing such as tossing sponges or rolled up socks into a large cooking pot or laundry basket.
- Navigating an obstacle courses can be created in the yard that include going under, over, and through obstacles.
- Going for a walk, bike ride or jog around the neighborhood with a parent or sibling. A simple the walk/jog can be more interesting by making it a scavenger hunt. For example, a child has to identify something that is red, yellow, blue, and green on the walk. You can add more colors or have the child find 3 things that are red to make it more challenging. Other ideas include identifying types of cars (find 3 Fords and 3 Chevys) or different types of animals (find 3 different types of birds and two squirrels).

## **Inside Exercises**

there are many simple, safe activities that can be completed inside. Below are some suggestions:

- Create an exercise routine. See tip #5 above for an example of an exercise routine. Pick activities that you know the child can do independently or with little help. You can create a picture schedule for the child to follow, or you can create a video on your smart phone to help the child follow the routine.
- Create an indoor obstacle course. This might include walking a tape line on the carpet (walk backwards or sideways to make it more challenging), crawling under dining room chairs, jumping/hopping on a series of spots on the carpet (spots can be pieces of paper), lying on the floor and log roll from one part of the family room to the other. Ask the child to create some obstacles too.
- Create challenges with equipment. There are lots of different challenges you can create with a sock rolled into a ball or a piece of rope. Table 2 presents some activities to do with a piece or rope or string.

Table 2

**Sample Challenges with Rope/String**

1. Put your rope on the floor in a straight line?
2. Move over your rope? Show me different ways? (crab walk, bear walk)
3. Move around your rope? Show me different ways? (gallop, jump, hop, skip)
4. Move slowly around it? Fast or medium speed around it?
5. Move at a low level around it? High or medium level?
6. Move backwards around it? Sideways around it?
7. Balance on your rope on two feet?
8. Balance on your rope with one foot?
9. Walk across your rope like it was a high wire in a circus?
10. Walk across your rope backwards?
11. Walk across your rope sideways?
12. Jump across your rope? Did you make it across? Try again? Jump farther?
13. Make your rope into a circle on the floor?
14. Jump into the circle? Jump higher? Higher?
15. Jump out of the circle? Jump backwards out of the circle? Jump sideways?
16. Walk around the circle without touching it? Gallop, hop, skip around it?
17. Move slowly around it? Fast or medium speed around it?
18. Move at a low level around it? High or medium level?
19. Move backwards around it? Sideways around it?
20. Walk on the circle so your feet barely touch the floor?
21. Pick up your rope and, standing in one place, turn around in a circle?
22. Pick up your rope and wiggle it like a snake?
23. Walk backwards as you wiggle your snake?
24. Move at a low level and wiggle your snake?
25. Move at a high level and wiggle your snake?
26. Make your snake wiggle into another child's snake?

Partner activities

1. With a partner, make your ropes into a big circle?
2. Move around the big circle keeping your feet on the rope? Backwards? Sideways?
3. Move around the big circle while holding your partner's hand? Backwards? Sideways?
4. Jump into the circle then out of the circle? Hop into the circle then out of the circle?
5. Jump into the circle then out while holding your partner's hand? Jump backwards?
6. Hop into the circle then out while holding your partner's hand? Hop backwards?
7. Hold one rope between you and the child and move around the space? Try going backwards? Try going sideways?
8. Hold the rope with your partner and turn around in a circle together?

## Home Relaxing Activities

Relaxation and stress reducing activities are also important for children with ASD who are forced to be at home due to COVID-19 quarantine. There are many Yoga and mindfulness videos for children that are free and easy-to-follow, As noted earlier, many children with ASD love to watch videos, and fortunately there are many good Yoga and mindfulness videos designed specifically for children. Table 3 presents links to some of these relaxation videos.

Table 3

### Yoga and Relaxation Videos for Children

#### *Yoga for Children*

*Yoga for Kids with Autism* – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce9hOTCt2no>

*Yoga for Kids* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X655B4ISakg&t=60s> (25 minutes)

*Sun Salutations & Yoga with Animals - Yoga for Kids* -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oGR5xucItI> (8 minutes)

*We're Going on a Bear Hunt: A Cosmic Kids Yoga Adventure* -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAT5NiWHFIU> (16 minutes)

*Going on a Dragon Hunt: Yoga Version* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyI3qukcTiI> (8 minutes)

*Yoga for Kids with Animals: Smile and Learn* –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XCQfYsFa3Q> (4 minutes)

#### Relaxation Activities for Children

*5 Minutes Body scan Meditation for Families and classrooms* -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A0S54yAgEg>

*3 Minutes Body Scan Meditation - Mindfulness For Kids And Adults* -

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihwcw\\_ofuME](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihwcw_ofuME)

*Calming Exercises for Kids: Breathing and Stretching* -

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyvuaL\\_2avY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyvuaL_2avY)

*The Listening Game | Cosmic Kids Zen Den - Mindfulness for kids* -

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUIGKhG\\_Vq8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUIGKhG_Vq8)

Some children can achieve a calmness by simply listening to meditative music and lying on a bed, couch or floor. YouTube is one source for relaxing music. A timer can be set to cue the child when relaxing time is finished. This type of relaxation activity can be used before stressful times such as before mealtime, before transitions, or before bedtime.

Finally, a routine of calming activities can be created that a child can follow independently with a picture or video schedule or with the help of a parent or sibling. Parents and children know what calming activities have proven to be effective at school or at home. Below is a sample calming routine:

- Squeeze a ball for a count of 20 with right hand; then count of 20 with left hand.
- Breath in through nose and blow out with mouth (smell the flower; blow out the candle). Repeat 10x
- Move arms slowly overhead and down to side. Repeat 10x
- Do movement song slowly (e.g., head, shoulders knees and toes)
- Tense muscles in face for count of 5, then relax face for count of 5. Repeat arms, hands, stomach, legs and feet.
- Rocking slowly in rocking chair or sitting in regular chair or on floor and rocking body slowly.
- Take a piece of paper and crayon/pencil and slowly draw circles for a count of 10. Rest for 5 seconds and repeat.