

### NUTRITION

People with ASD often repeat behaviors and have narrow, obsessive interests. These types of behavior can affect eating habits and food choices, which can lead to the following health concerns.

**Limited food selection or strong food dislikes.** Someone with autism may be sensitive to the taste, smell, color and texture of foods. They may limit or totally avoid some foods and even whole food groups. Common dislikes include fruits, vegetables and slippery, soft foods.

**Not eating enough food.** Kids with autism may have difficulty focusing on one task for an extended period of time. It may be hard for a child to sit down and eat a meal from start to finish.

**Constipation.** This problem usually is caused by a child's limited food choices. It typically can be remedied through a high-fiber diet, plenty of fluids and regular physical activity.

**Medication interactions.** Some stimulant medications used with autism, such as Ritalin, lower appetite. This can reduce the amount of food a child eats, which can affect growth. Other medications may increase appetite or affect the absorption of certain vitamins and minerals. If your child takes medication, ask your healthcare provider about possible side effects.

Caring for a child with ASD can be challenging on many levels, and healthful eating is no exception. For children with ASD, a nutritious, balanced diet can make a world of difference in their ability to learn, how they manage their emotions and how they process information. Because children with ASD often have restricted diets as well as difficulty sitting through meal times, they may not be getting all the nutrients they need, particularly calcium and protein. If you have a child with ASD, you might try these nutrition strategies suggested by [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org).

1. **Be Prepared for Pickiness:** Many parents find their child's sensitivity to tastes, colors, smells and textures the biggest barriers to a balanced diet. Getting your child to try new foods — especially those that are soft and slippery — may seem nearly impossible. You may find that your child avoids certain foods or even entire food groups. One of the easiest ways to approach sensory issues is to tackle them outside of the kitchen. Have your child visit the supermarket with you to choose a new food. When you get home, research it together on the internet to learn about where it grows. Then, decide together how to prepare it. When you are done, don't worry if your child doesn't want to eat it. Simply becoming familiar with new foods in a low-pressure, positive way eventually can help your child become a more flexible eater.
2. **Make Mealtimes Routine:** A child with ASD will have to work harder at mealtimes because a busy kitchen, bright lights and even the way the furniture is arranged all are potential stressors. Making meals as predictable and routine as possible can help. Serving meals at the same time every day is one of the simplest ways to reduce stress. In addition, think about what concessions you can make for easier mealtimes. If your child is sensitive to lights, try dining by candlelight. Let your child pick a favorite food to include at every meal. Or, let your child choose a favorite seat at the table.

3. **Seek Guidance for Special Diets:** You may have heard that a gluten- or casein-free diet can improve symptoms of ASD. Gluten is a type of protein found in wheat, rye and barley. Casein is a protein found in milk. Proponents of the diet believe people with autism have a "leaky gut," or intestine, which allows parts of gluten and casein to seep into the bloodstream and affect the brain and central nervous system. The belief is that this may lead to autism or magnify its symptoms. While some studies indicate that these diets may be effective for certain children, controlled scientific studies have not proven this to be true so more research is needed. Keep in mind that restrictive diets require careful planning to make sure your child's nutrition needs are being met. Consult with a registered dietitian nutritionist before making any drastic changes to your child's diet as there can be side effects and potential nutrient shortfalls when a gluten- or casein-free diet is self-prescribed.
4. **Working With a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist:** Most children, with or without autism, can be choosy and particular about the foods they eat. A registered dietitian nutritionist can identify any nutritional risks based on how your child eats, answer your questions about diet therapies and supplements advertised as helpful for autism and help guide your child on how to eat well and live healthfully.

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## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

### APPROPRIATE FITNESS PROGRAMMING, *Eric Chessen, M.S., YCS, is the founder of Autism Fitness*

From an educational and life skills perspective, our job as parents, teachers and professionals is to regularly identify an individual's areas of need and address them in the most adaptive way possible. There is a reason so many students have difficulty in a standard classroom setting. The focus on taking tests rather than "learning how to learn" leads to skills that are not necessarily applicable to future needs and goals. For fitness programming, my hierarchy tends to look something like this (in order of importance):

1. Develop, maintain and enhance movement skills
2. Pair exercise and physical activity with reinforcement to ultimately make the activities themselves fun and part of a lifestyle
3. Increase initiation and creativity skills through exposure to various modalities of exercise (different equipment and activities)
4. Support socialization through small group activities that include elements of teamwork and helping behaviors

For those with autism who often have difficulty attending to a task for durations longer than 10 or 20 seconds, creativity and socialization behaviors are not an immediate goal. It is far more.

By categorizing movement categories, parents, educators, therapists and other professionals can develop balanced programs that are appropriate for any individual or group. Instead of focusing on a particular sport or individual muscle group (arms, legs, shoulders), movement-based exercise teaches the body to function as a cohesive, optimized unit. For example, upper-body pulling motions, from pull-ups to monkey bars to resistance band pulls, incorporate the upper back muscles, shoulders, arms and hands. In addition to developing strength and stability, these exercises can aid with posture. Have you ever told someone to "sit up straight?" The fact is that you cannot force good posture. It has everything to do with the proper muscle stability. Again, a program that includes pulling as a component, as opposed to walking on a treadmill for 40 minutes, has tremendous benefit for a variety of physical and adaptive abilities. How do we put together a program that is suitable for an individual or group of people with autism? It is important to consider the participants' current level of ability and tolerance for new activities or tasks. I have found much success with using animal-based movement patterns for mobility and movement assessment.

Bear walks, crab walks, frog hops, gorilla steps and various improvised movements allow for creativity while exposing the athlete to multiple forms of the five fundamental patterns. Other favorites are hops, jumps, overhead carries with soft medicine balls or SandBells, a variety of throws and swinging long segments of rope. Many of these modalities would be considered non-traditional, but historically speaking, they have a far more embedded and proven place in physical culture than any machine or aerobics class out there today. They are also fun, inexpensive and conducive to providing fitness for any age or functional level.

*Eric Chessen, M.S., YCS, is the founder of Autism Fitness. In addition to working with his athletes on the autism spectrum, Eric consults with parents, educators, fitness professionals, and therapists around the world. He is the creator of the Autism Fitness Toolbox/PAC Profile Method and the author of several E-Books. For more information, visit [www.AUTISMFITNESS.com](http://www.AUTISMFITNESS.com) and his blog, [www.EricChessen.com](http://www.EricChessen.com). The following abbreviated post appeared in the Summer 2014 edition of the Autism Advocate. Read the post in its entirety [here](#).*

There are several agencies including special Olympics, YMCA, and Parks and Rec who have adapted programs available.

## STRESS

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Stress – something parents in general are all too familiar with. When a family has a child on the autism spectrum, unique stressors are added.

An individual with autism may not express their basic wants or needs in the manner we would expect. Therefore, parents are left playing a guessing game. Is the child crying because he/she is thirsty, hungry, or sick? When parents cannot determine their child's needs, both parties are left feeling frustrated. The child's frustration can lead to aggressive or self-injurious behaviors that threaten his/her safety and the safety of other family members (e.g., siblings). Stereotypic and compulsive behaviors concern parents since they appear peculiar and interfere with functioning and learning. If a child has deficits in social skills, such as the lack of appropriate play, stress may be increased for the family. Individuals lacking appropriate leisure skills often require constant structure, not a feasible task in the home environment.

Finally, many families struggle with the additional challenges of getting their child to sleep through the night or eat a wider variety of foods. All of these issues and behaviors are physically exhausting and emotionally draining for families. For families of children on the autism spectrum, these can be a particularly difficult challenge. Scheduled dinnertimes may not be successful due to the child's inability to sit appropriately for extended periods. Bedtime routines can be interrupted by [difficulties sleeping](#). Maladaptive behaviors may prevent families from attending events together – for example, Mom might have to stay home while Dad takes the sibling to his/her soccer game. Not being able to do things as a family can impact the marital relationship. In addition, spouses often cannot spend time alone due to their extreme parenting demands and a lack of qualified staff to watch a child with autism in their absence.

Taking an individual with autism out into the community can be a source of stress for parents. People may stare, make comments or fail to understand any mishaps or behaviors that may occur. For example, individuals with autism have been seen taking a stranger's food right off his/her plate. As a result of these potential experiences, families often feel uncomfortable taking their child to the homes of friends or relatives. This makes holidays an especially difficult time for these families. Feeling like they cannot socialize or relate to others, parents of children on the autism spectrum may experience a sense of isolation from their friends, relatives and community. For information on how to deal with stress, read [Stress: Take a Load Off](#).

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