

THE DEVOTED PARENT'S GUIDE TO AUTISM

MORE  
HAPPINESS  
THROUGH  
HEALTHY  
COMMUNICATION



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## Hello, Mom or Dad!

*You know your child with special needs or autism better than anyone, and you want to help her or him to communicate to the best of her or his abilities. Being a parent makes you the most important person for your child!*

*But where's the help for YOU to understand and empower your child? You've come to the right place.*

*As an ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist, I've been working with people with autism and special needs for over 20 years. I strive to achieve more, just like you*

*do, every day. Together, through my articles, videos, and apps, we can significantly help your child in the convenience of your own home.*

*In this e-book, you'll learn new and creative ways to improve your child's communication "fitness." My goal is for your child to create stronger social bonds with you and everyone he or she meets.*

*After you've tried a few of my techniques, feel free to email your questions, comments, or concerns to me at [karen@icanforautism.com](mailto:karen@icanforautism.com).*

☺ *Karen*

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# Motivate Your Child to Move!

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*Does your child enjoy the playground and sports, or would he or she prefer to sit on the couch engrossed in TV shows or video games?*



Brain-based research shows that physical activity can increase attention span and memory, prepare the brain to learn new information, and improve behavior. If your child remains sedentary, what gets in the way? At the heart of any action is motivation. To kick-start your child's natural drive to get moving, mobility has to be pleasurable and meet his or her individual needs.

## **FIND THE APPROPRIATE CHALLENGE LEVEL**

By giving your child the power to control the level of challenge that is right for him, he will feel capable and fully engaged. For example, using pieces of paper crumbled by your child, a sibling can hold an empty wastepaper basket for shots while your child chooses how far or close. Over time, your child may

venture to take higher risks, such as attempting farther shots, within this safe and supportive environment.

## USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE

The most powerful tool to shape how your child thinks, feels, and acts is your choice of words. The power of communication builds positive, trusting relationships which weigh heavily on motivation.

Praising their effort can encourage more effort: "It's wonderful that you are jumping rope."; "You dance so beautifully."

Give nonjudgmental approval to maintain effort: "You're trying lots of different ways."; "That's great that you keep going."

Make honest, encouraging comments about the physical activity itself: "Skipping is fun!"; "Climbing these stairs is hard work, and I can't wait to reach the top...it's going to feel great!"

Note your child's contributions with family members that create a comfortable sense of belonging: "Your brother is having so much fun playing tag with you!"; "It's so nice that you are pitching the ball for your sister."

Support your child's belief in himself and his abilities regardless of the results: "Running fast is hard to do, and you're doing it so well!"; "I am here to help you."

## FUN PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!

To pique motivation, you can encourage teamwork, communication, and stronger relationships within your family using these fun activities! Be sure to consult your child's occupational therapist and/or physical therapist to modify according to individual needs. Your child can enjoy these as 'brain breaks' after or 'brain and body energizers' before concentrating on homework, during commercials of a TV show, or simply any time!

**Groove n' Move:** Songs like Gloria Estefan's "Get on Your Feet!" and Van Halen's "Jump!" can rev your child up to get up from off the floor onto his feet or jump when the song indicates. Your child or siblings can change it up with other actions, like from a standing position "Get on Your Elbow" to the floor or "Kick!" rather than jump. This is great for children with limited language skills as they can watch and follow along.

**Imaginary Sports:** Sometimes the equipment, language, strategy, and/or contact of sport can be overwhelming for a child with special needs. With or without talking, one child can make believe she will swing a bat while her sibling is pretending to pitch the ball in this imaginary baseball. For solitary sport, your child can pretend to "swim" on the floor (moving arms and legs while on the back or the tummy).





**Line It Up:** Around the house, have your child crouch under the sofa, climb the stairs, and lift the couch cushions to find index cards with different colors of rainbow, birthdates of family members, or states east-to-west for him to line up in order.

**Treasure Hunt:** Hide trinkets such as stickers, decorative pencil erasers, or plastic jewelry in different places that your child must hop, jump, or skip towards while she expresses location words of where the treasure is hidden like “under the table” or “behind the plant”.

**Twist on Musical Chairs:** Forming a circle of chairs with one less chair than the number of players, a leader stands in the middle and says, “All my family members who like panda bears/who have never gone camping/who are wearing jeans have to get up and find another seat quickly!”

**Paper Plate Balance:** With novel background music such as ragtime, each family member tries to balance a heavy-duty paper plate on their heads while walking around the house, telling each family member interesting things that happened today. If your son’s plate falls, his conversational partner (perhaps his sibling or you) has to pick it up for him without causing their own plate to fall. Safe in this accepting environment, your child will discover that it’s ok to take risks, feel silly, and make mistakes while sharing with others.

**Which Way to Go?:** With fun music in the background, family members take turns drawing a series of about six arrows in various directions. Then, he points to each arrow for the rest of the family to take a step in whichever way is displayed. This is great for children with limited language skills or who cannot read. If able, your child can make it trickier with verbal instructions to move backwards, the opposite direction, or in right-to-left sequence.

**Ball Craze:** Using lots of inexpensive, little items like ping pong balls, pick up sticks, or jacks spread throughout the backyard, one family member (or several on a team) have to gather and place these items into a bucket before being tagged by another family member who is throwing several foam balls at him or them.

## SWEATING YET?

Movement allows children to have more control over their abilities - and it's FUN! While external rewards like a prize or a special sweet treat can be effective for short-term gains, maximizing your child's internal motivation leads to a more consistent desire for physical activities. You play a crucial role to motivate your child by providing opportunities for success through positive communication and supportive relationships. ❖

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# Communication: The Social 'Nutrition' Behind Healthy Kids with Special Needs

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*A lot of us vow to eat healthier and exercise more as we realize the importance to our well-being. However, some children with special needs may view good health and fitness as tedious, punishing tasks that are forced upon them. With the right types of communication and social interaction, you as the parent can create a new way of life with your child that has long-lasting benefits.*





## FOOD

Giving your child the power to choose, shop for, and prepare some meals using these activities may give him or her a better understanding which could grow into a preference to eat healthy foods more often.

### **My Plate is Great!**

With your child, search through magazines for pictures of different food categories like vegetables, meats, and fruits. Explain the language behind more complex words like 'dairy' and 'grain' by giving common examples of them (cheese/yogurt; rice/bread, etc.). Have your child think of and find pictures of other examples. Label these food categories on different paper plates and bowls, and then glue the pictures.

### **Welcome to Johnny's Restaurant!**

Now that your child understands the names and categories of foods, together with you he can create new recipes, unique food combinations, and different ways to prepare foods using these ideas:

- Perhaps your child enjoys French fries but is afraid to try a baked or mashed potato, despite that they are all the same food in different forms. To help your child realize how a simple potato can transform into many delicious foods, cook several potato variations with his help and broaden his tastes along the way.
- The next time you're preparing a meal, have your child join you to observe and get inspired to create her own recipes. Show her all the different ways items can be cut, and use language such as "diced / chopped / julienned / crinkle cut". Further demonstrate how foods can be cooked, such as, "grilled / boiled / baked / raw". These concepts can inspire her to spend more time with you in the kitchen and create her own recipes. Encourage her to choose a 'color of the day' and pick out a healthy food to be prepared the way she prefers (e.g., "purple - eggplant - sliced and baked"; "tan - chicken - grilled").

### **“Aisle” Do It Myself!**

With your child, make a grocery list of all the food items necessary for a meal. When you both go to the supermarket, he can further use his language skills to figure out the aisle that contains what he needs (e.g., ‘milk’ within the ‘dairy’ aisle; ‘chicken’ within the ‘meat’ aisle).

### **Yuck or Yum**

While preparing the food and at the dinner table, you can model positive statements to encourage your child to try different food items:

- “Mmmm...take a whiff. This smells so delicious.”
- “This soup is filled with healthy, yummy vegetables.”
- “This julienned squash looks just like French fries, but I like the way these ‘squash fries’ taste better than French fries.”
- “I didn’t think I would like the taste of this turnip, but it’s really terrific.”
- Of course, it is important to allow your child to share his opinion even if it’s not positive.

### **Too Much, Too Little, Just Right!**

Help your child develop accurate measures for portion control in order to eat treats like cookies, cake, chips, and candies more responsibly. With these foods, fill a side plate, saucer, or shot glass to demonstrate how much quantity that words like “few / some / a little bit” actually mean. To enjoy beverages in moderation, mark a fill-line on the outside of paper or plastic cups.

At mealtime on a divided paper dish, have your child write the food category to be filled within each meal (e.g., ‘meat’; ‘grain’) so that she can visualize the portions. For foods that can be eaten in large quantities like healthy fruits and vegetables, give her a huge labeled plastic bowl to demonstrate the sense of endlessness. If your child has more advanced language skills, you can use a variety of different-sized plates, bowls, and cups to compare that she can eat “at least this much or more”, or, “at most this much or less.”



## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Engage your child in the following activities that are fun instead of fatiguing. Be sure that your child is given medical clearance for physical activity.

### **'Workout' of the Box**

Though your child may be accustomed to traditional exercise routines like jumping jacks or pushups, he might find it more fun to use his imagination to make up his own movements with catchy, descriptive names. The 'snowball' can be made when he is seated on the floor, pulling his knees in with his hands. The 'monster walk' comes alive when your child tries to touch his toes to his outstretched hands. When using the 'jump rope', your child turns his wrists as though he is holding the jump rope while jumping.

Your child can incorporate such routines in between turns of playing a board/video game, or after sets of homework that involves drills, such as multiplication or spelling. Using more advanced math and language skills, your child can track how many exercises have been done by counting upwards, downwards, or by 5's or 10's. When your child wants to tell you about the new

exercises she has designed, she can expand her language skills by creating a name for them, explain the movements, and describe the sequence.

### **Over, Under, and Everything in Between**

**Books:** Read stories together that match your child's language abilities and emphasize movement, like *Rosie's Walk* or *The Berenstain Bears Inside Outside Upside Down*. Have your child do the same actions, and maybe even change the characters to be different animals (e.g., "Hop like a bunny through the hallway."; "Gallop like a horse across the yard."; "Crawl like a crab under the table.").

**Toys (with physical assistance if necessary):** Play with pogo sticks and Sit-and-Spin using language like "jump higher/lower" and "spin faster/slower." Or, use traditional toys in different ways, like placing a hula hoop on the ground to "jump into/out of."

**Games:** Enjoy Duck-Duck-Goose and musical chairs using language like "tag/pat/tap" and "chase/catch/grab." Or, create games like Simon says with action words like "jump/shake/kick" (e.g., "Simon says, 'Kick your leg and then shake your arm.'").

**Dance moves:** 'YMCA' and 'The Chicken Dance' are a few good ones the whole family can get involved with. While having loads of fun, you can provide visual models of the repetitive movements for your child to follow along with ease. You can explain the concepts behind the moves like, "With my arms are up and out, I look like the letter Y!"

### **Small Steps**

Just like for adults, try a few simple changes to get your child moving more:

- Climb the stairs versus taking the elevator or escalator. Model encouraging language like "It's so healthy to climb the stairs." Add supportive, reassuring language like, "If we get tired of climbing the stairs, we can take a little break or use the handrail to help us."

- Park farther away from stores while you and your child fill the time by casually chatting about what you need to purchase.
- To break up constant sitting on the couch, put the TV remote and the household phone in different places using location words for child to retrieve like “under the sofa / behind the lamp.”
- Have your child do some household chores while using encouraging language like, “Wow! Thanks so much for helping me carry these big boxes!” and, “Oh! We have to scrub this annoying stain even more!”

### **Get Published**

Depending upon your child's language abilities, help him write his own “Fitness Magazine” with drawings, stories, and instructions of all of the new skills he is learning. He can proudly show it to everyone, including his classroom teacher, occupational therapist, physical therapist, and physical education teacher.

## **HEALTHY BENEFITS AWAIT!**

With these suggestions, your child can develop healthy practices that become automatic, natural customs to feel a sense of independence, control, and accountability. All the while, you and your child will spend more quality time connecting and growing closer to each other. ❖

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## About the author

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Karen Kabaki-Sisto, M.S. CCC-SLP, has been a communication expert for over 20 years. As a certified Speech-Language Pathologist and Applied Behavior Analysis Instructor, Karen has been empowering people with autism & special needs to have more meaningful conversations like never before.

Her highly effective I CAN! For Autism Method™ - perfected for over 10 years and now incorporated within the iPad app "I Can Have Conversations With You!™" is changing lives through improved social and language skills. It is 100% fun for both kids and adults to use! Join the conversation at [www.iCanForAutism.com](http://www.iCanForAutism.com).

