

# FitFacts®

## Healthy Nutrition and Physical Activity for Children with Autism

HERE ARE 10 IDEAS TO HELP MAKE MEALTIMES AND ACTIVITY BREAKS INTO POSITIVE EXPERIENCES FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASDs):



- 1. Create opportunities to be successful.** Set your child up for success by making it easier to do the “right thing.” For example, create a healthy home in which healthful foods are the only options.
- 2. Reward generously.** Reward children for exhibiting positive behaviors instead of punishing them for acting inappropriately. Give smiles, hugs, high fives and stickers. “Catch” your child trying a new food or appropriately playing a new game and praise him.
- 3. Keep a consistent daily schedule that includes meals, snacks and physical-activity breaks.** All kids thrive on routines, and that is especially true for children with ASDs. Avoid offering foods and drinks (other than water) outside of the scheduled times. Also, keep the schedule posted as a visual reminder.
- 4. Eat family meals.** Family meals help the child become an integrated member of the family, and allow other family members to model healthy eating behaviors. Keep mealtimes calm and free of distractions.
- 5. Include at least one food the child likes and one “new” food at mealtimes.** Increase the chances of acceptance by repeatedly offering the “new” food on consecutive days paired with a food the child already likes.
- 6. Ask for help.** Some children with ASDs have issues that interfere with healthy nutrition patterns. In these cases, it is essential to consult a registered dietitian, occupational therapist or other professional specifically trained in working with children with ASDs.
- 7. Respond to self-stimulating behaviors with physical-activity opportunities.** Research supports using repetitive aerobic activity such as light jogging and swimming to help decrease self-stimulating behaviors.
- 8. Break it down.** Children with ASDs are more likely to be successful when physical activities are broken down to their component parts. Teach a new sport by starting with the fundamentals in organized steps, rewarding the child when they have mastered a step.
- 9. Use yoga to transition.** Yoga increases a child’s flexibility and interest in physical activity. It also serves as routine opportunities for soothing between transitions.
- 10. Support and share.** Engage with other families who share your interest in improving health, nutrition and physical activity. Also, seek support from organizations committed to optimizing quality of life for children with ASDs, like Autism Speaks, The Autism Society, American Academy of Pediatrics, Interactive Autism Network, and National Institute of Mental Health.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[American Council on Exercise](#)

[American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[Autism Speaks](#)

[Interactive Autism Network](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health](#)

[The Autism Society](#)