Providing Hope and Help for Autism Families

**Siblings Speak Out**
Standing strong for brothers and sisters with autism

**Employment Spectrum**
Get your ASD child ready for the workforce

**Autism & Law Enforcement**
Strategies to address growing safety concerns

PLUS! Sweet Treats for Spring
A Weighty Issue

With more than 30% of ASD kids either overweight or obese—and at risk for further health complications—it’s time to take action

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

Parents of children on the autism spectrum have countless thoughts running through their minds at any given moment. They deal with the worries all parents experience, like whether a child is generally happy, sick, or safe, and also with anxieties unique to their particular situation, like how to control mood swings, prevent violent outbursts, or ensure a child well past potty-training age will actually use the potty.

Few people confronted with such perpetual stress would have much room for other thoughts, and most likely the idea of the entire family sitting down to a peaceful, healthy, home-cooked meal is beyond imagination.

But the consequences of not at least trying to foster positive eating habits are all too real. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of adults in this country and 17 percent of children are obese. While recent figures showed that the level of obesity has dropped significantly for kids ages two through five, other research casts a much more ominous shadow for kids with autism.

AN UPWARD TREND

A study published last March in the journal *Childhood Obesity* found that more than 30 percent of children on the autism spectrum are either overweight or obese. The authors concluded more research was needed to identify the factors causing this trend, but as any parent of a child with autism will attest, it is often tricky business getting these kids to eat anything—let alone anything healthy—and to engage in physical activity. That’s a terrible combination for anyone—autism or not, child or not.

Not surprisingly, obesity has been linked with a slew of medical conditions: coronary heart disease; type 2 diabetes; cancers; liver and gall bladder disease; sleep apnea and other respiratory problems; bone and joint degeneration; reproductive problems; and mental health disorders. Anyone’s risk of acquiring these conditions increases with age. Life is hard enough for children with autism. Living with disease as they get older will only make it harder, for them and their caretakers.

The dangers of obesity, especially sustained obesity, are too great to ignore. Luckily, it’s never too late for anyone to turn over a new leaf. As parents, we try our best every single day, and sometimes we fail. Children on the autism spectrum are a particularly challenging bunch, refusing to eat certain foods or partake in certain activities no matter what. But we owe it to them, if not to ourselves, to at least try.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

When it comes to food and eating, we are creatures of habit, sometimes opting to eat a particular food not because it tastes better or is healthier, but because it is familiar. Kids with autism thrive on routine and comfort, so while they may resist a new, unfamiliar food at first, a little persistence could go a long way toward adopting healthier habits.

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brown; the sensation of biting into one is similar to that of popcorn. Chickpeas are rich in insoluble fiber, which aids in digestion. As the parent of any child on the autism spectrum knows too well, solving a digestive problem can be the first step to solving a behavioral problem.

**SMARTER FOOD CHOICES**
When it comes to making smart food choices, knowing the difference between good and bad is half the battle. Take sugar, for instance. The body recognizes and digests the sugar found naturally in fruit more easily than it does the sugar added to processed foods.

Sugar hides, too, in seemingly innocuous places like ketchup and flavored milk. Aside from being linked to type 2 diabetes and obesity, added sugar was recently implicated as a major contributing factor to heart disease. The consequences of poor eating habits persist, for children and adults of any disposition.

Other information suggests the risks of obesity during pregnancy—gestational diabetes, hypertension, and cesarean delivery—may also carry over to the baby. A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* in 2012 found that children born to obese mothers were more likely to be diagnosed with autism or related developmental delays.

One of the leading contributors to poor eating habits is stress, and few people are more stressed than parents of children on the autism spectrum. Research has shown that stress causes people to seek the foods they eat out of habit, regardless of how healthy those foods are. If your go-to snack is raw almonds or carrot sticks, you’re ahead of the game, and your kids probably are too. Turning to chemical-laden processed foods will only make things worse in the short and long-term. Children with autism usually rely on nobody more than their parents. Taking care of yourself helps you take care of them.

**GET MOVING!**
Preventing or reversing obesity through dietary choices is just one part of the equation. The other is exercise, and its value cannot be overstated. It is understandably challenging to get kids on the autism spectrum involved in team sports with mainstream kids, or to run on a treadmill at the gym. But parents have every reason to intervene, and as early as possible: research has found that older children with autism spectrum disorders are significantly less active than their younger counterparts.

There are many ways to encourage children with autism (or any children!) to be more active. The American Council on Exercise (ACE) recommends building it into each day’s schedule with a physical activity “break,” and making it something the child enjoys. Children with autism sometimes wander, a behavior that can lead to dire consequences. But a supervised walk through a safe area—the park, a hiking trail, a mall—is an excellent way for them—and you—to blow off some steam.

ACE notes that swimming and light-jogging have been shown to decrease the self-stimulating behaviors to which ASD kids are prone, and that yoga can be useful to guide these children through times of transition. Yoga is also a great way to stretch tight muscles and allow for greater range of motion. Check with local gyms or the YMCA to see if any classes are geared toward people with disabilities or autism; if not, get a group of like-minded individuals together, and create one.

Aside from keeping their weight in check and providing a social outlet, physical activity is also an excellent way for kids on the autism spectrum to deal with aggression. Studies show that vigorous or strenuous exercise is associated with decreases in hyperactivity, aggression, self-injury, and destructiveness according to the Autism Research Institute. There is virtually no downside to upping physical activity for kids with autism, and the adults they will become.

Obesity is a plague in this country, and it is spreading around the world. It doesn’t have to invade your home. Changing habits is tricky business, but doing so will pay dividends in the long run, and may lead to improved outcomes in school and at home. Growing up isn’t easy for anyone, but removing the burden of bad health makes it just a little bit easier, and may provide ASD kids with something even more foreign than a new snack: it gives them an advantage.

**Note:** Information provided herein is not intended to treat or diagnose any health condition. As always, consult your healthcare provider with any questions or health concerns.