



BRIDGING THE FITNESS GAP: A PRIMER ON EFFECTIVE FITNESS FOR THE AUTISM AND NEUROADAPTIVE POPULATIONS

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INDUSTRY INSIDER | #010

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Eric has spent nearly 20 years coaching individuals of all ages and ability levels, and teaching professionals and parents around the world.

Eric leads the Autism Fitness Certification for attendees across the world. He is also co-founder of strength equipment company StrongerthanU.com. He resides in Charlotte, North Carolina, US.

LINKS

W: <https://www.autismfitness.com/>

F: <https://www.facebook.com/TheAutismFitness/>

Y: <https://www.youtube.com/TheAutismFitness>

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BRIDGING THE FITNESS GAP

Decades ago, families and professionals focused campaigns on “awareness,” then “acceptance” of autism and neuro-diversity. Today, a greater emphasis on embracing those with autism has pushed advocacy forward. While the amount of acceptance, understanding, and opportunities for the autism and neurodivergent population vary widely across the globe, there exists growing recognition of the need for fitness programs that meet the unique needs of those with ASD/ND.

Autism and related neuro-diversities are a spectrum. From complex behavioral and cognitive challenges to highly independent self-advocates, it is difficult to succinctly convey all the ways autism can present. The predominant characteristics of autism include challenges in social interaction, abstract thinking, executive functioning, and often processing delays.

Many on the autism spectrum present behaviours including rigidity around scheduling, activities, and habits.

Motor dysfunction and strength deficits among individuals with ASD are common, while greatly overlooked. While these are more prevalent for those with complex profiles, higher cognitive capabilities are not necessarily an indicator of optimal physical skills.

In addition to the preexisting physical deficits (motor and strength), sedentary lifestyle habits and inaccessibility to appropriate, meaningful fitness programming, particularly for teens and adults, has the ASD population lagging in physical ability and quality of life. These issues culminate in higher incidences of preventable medical complications and challenges as individuals enter adulthood. It is imperative that professionals are trained and understand how to implement appropriate, meaningful fitness programs that serve the ASD/SN athlete.

For professionals working in a fitness/movement capacity with the autism/neurodivergent population, it is crucial to understand and approach programming with an understanding of skills and potential complications.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FITNESS PROGRAMMING FOR THE ASD/NEURODIVERGENT POPULATION VERSUS GENERAL POPULATION?

Motivation and motor imitation. We often do not have the “luxury” of the athlete being motivated to engage in exercise for the first few (or first many) sessions. Typically, it is a parent/caregiver who has made the inquiry and arrangements for the individual to work with a fitness provider. A similar situation arises in the adapted physical education setting as well. Individuals with moderate-to-significant cognitive challenges may not understand why they are being asked to perform these exercises or their intended purpose.

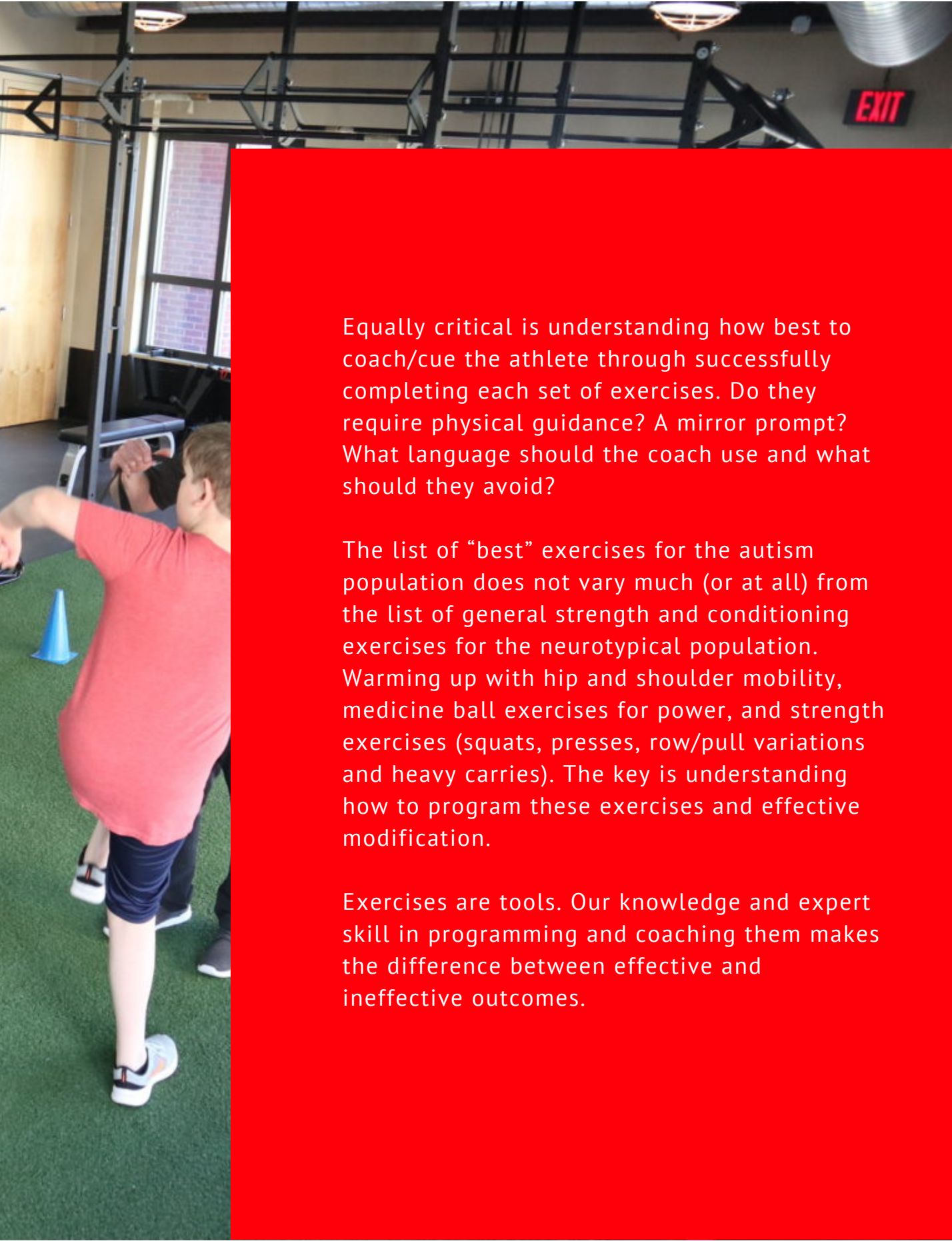
Motor imitation can be an obstacle as well. Many individuals with autism have difficulty following demonstrational cues, often moving too quickly through the exercise and/or not controlling the movement through full range of motion. This can be a result of physical, adaptive/behavioral, or cognitive complications, and often a combination of the three.

WHAT ARE THE BEST EXERCISES FOR THE ASD/NEURODIVERGENT POPULATION?

There's no such thing as an "autism specific exercise." Exercise selection for the autism athlete should follow a best practices approach for developing fundamental strength, stability, and motor planning skills. Focusing on strength in the major movement patterns (push, pull, squat, hinge, carry, locomotion) with an emphasis on control through a full range of motion is a sound approach.

For this population, simply having a list of the "best exercises" is going to fall far short of useful. The strength and motor deficits we commonly observe mean we have to modify most of these exercises, using specific strategies for coaching and cueing. We could have an overhead press in the program, however the coach/practitioner must know what to look for with respect to compensatory movement, engagement, and motor control.



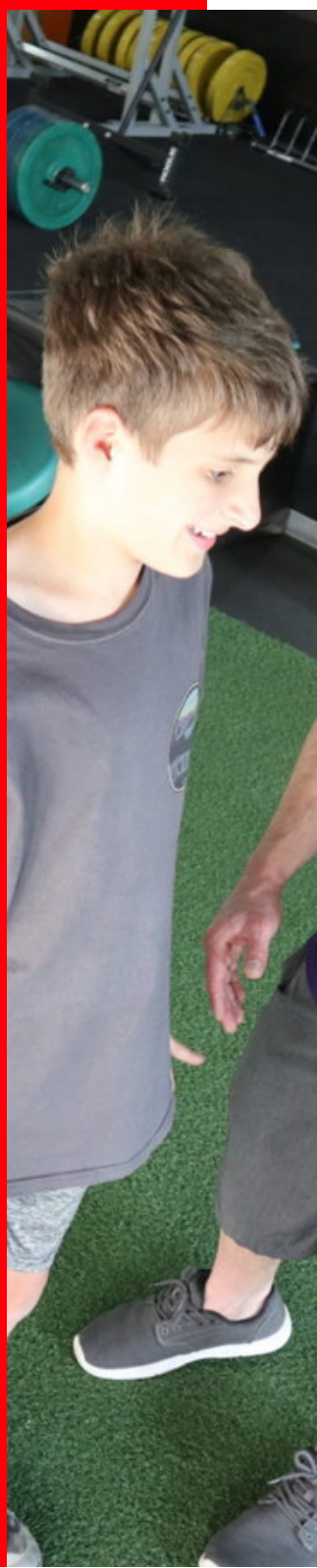


Equally critical is understanding how best to coach/cue the athlete through successfully completing each set of exercises. Do they require physical guidance? A mirror prompt? What language should the coach use and what should they avoid?

The list of “best” exercises for the autism population does not vary much (or at all) from the list of general strength and conditioning exercises for the neurotypical population. Warming up with hip and shoulder mobility, medicine ball exercises for power, and strength exercises (squats, presses, row/pull variations and heavy carries). The key is understanding how to program these exercises and effective modification.

Exercises are tools. Our knowledge and expert skill in programming and coaching them makes the difference between effective and ineffective outcomes.

HOW DO I MOTIVATE SOMEONE WITH AUTISM TO EXERCISE?



Motivation is the most apparent obstacle in the way of fitness for many people with autism. The abstract nature of exercise (what is it for?), rigidity around new activities, aversion to challenging movement patterns, and frequent distraction can all be factors. In Autism Fitness™ programming we use a few behavioural concepts and practices with great success.

First is to meet the athlete where they're at physically, adaptively/behaviourally, and cognitively. This means assessing and understanding not only their current physical ability levels with each exercise, but their current willingness to participate.

Offering choice between exercises gives the athlete a sense of autonomy and control, which can lower anxiety and increase on-task performance. Offering a choice between overhead band walks and cone touches eliminates a “have to” dynamic with our athlete. Rather than “You have to do cone touches now,” we can give the athlete options and have them select the preferred exercise to start.

Many athletes need a longer timeline and consistency to gain comfort and confidence. This has direct implications for how and why we

- Set expectations by using clear contingencies
- Prioritise exercises
- Modify movements
- Provide positive feedback/behaviour-specific praise

Fitness professionals coaching the ASD/neurodivergent athlete must understand that athlete's current level of motivation and engagement, know of any processing delays, and the language and cues that best support their progress.

WHAT'S THE NUMBER 1 MISTAKE YOU SEE WITH COACHING THE ASD/ND POPULATION?

There are two, actually; Overcoaching and overprogramming. Attempting to long-form explain what the athlete is going to be doing usually confuses and overwhelms. For both neurodivergent and neurotypical populations, the less explaining the better. In Autism Fitness™ programming we use the following mantra...

Label > Demo > Do and Cue.

Give the name of the exercise, especially if it is unfamiliar to the athlete. Demonstrate the exercise while the athlete is attending. Have the athlete perform the exercise so you can provide appropriate and effective cueing/coaching and modification of the movement as needed.

Over-programming is the second mistake. Our ASD/ND athletes don't need much variety in programming. Having more than 1-2 exercises per movement pattern can be counterproductive as it...

- May overwhelm the athlete
- Does not provide sufficient time and practice to result in a training effect

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH THE AUTISM POPULATION AND WANT TO START?

Going through a course or program to learn more about autism and neurodiversity can be a helpful start, however no amount of education will replace experience. Volunteering or shadowing/observing an organisation or company that serves these populations is a crucial aspect of both safety and coaching capability.

Eric Chessen, MS, is the Founder of Autism Fitness™ and Director of Neurodivergent Programming and Innovation for Inclusive Fitness. His Autism Fitness™ Certification is for high level professionals who want to bring the best fitness and adapted PE programs to their athletes. The Level 1 Certification offers virtual practical dates in both US and Singapore time zones.

Note:

In Autism Fitness™ programming we refer to all our clients/students as athletes. Regardless of where they are at in their fitness journey, they are considered capable of learning, improving performance, and gaining skills that will enable them to lead a higher quality life. When you read the word “athlete” in this article, it includes any and all program participants, not only those few who have sport-specific goals.

Learn more about Eric Chessen online
<https://www.autismfitness.com/>



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