Adapted Physical Activity for Adults With an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
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Rafael is a 23-year-old male who was diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) during his elementary school years. As a child and during his teenage years, Rafael did well academically but had significant difficulty making friends and interacting socially with others. He reported that he enjoyed math and science and did well in those classes. He noted that he dreaded physical education (PE) classes for several reasons. Given his poor motor coordination, Rafael struggled to engage in activities, particularly those that required agility and good hand-eye coordination. Additionally, the gym environment often felt overwhelming to him, both because of the loud noises around him, as well as the less predictable nature of the class. Rafael also noted that the social demands present in team sports made it uncomfortable for him to fully participate. He explained that he was often the last one to be picked for teams, which resulted in him feeling left out and embarrassed.

Current Trends in Physical Activity:
- To date very few studies have examined physical activity in individuals with ASD. However, there is research to support positive outcomes following physical activity interventions including, but not limited to, positive skill development (Yılmaz, Birkan, Konukman, & Erkan, 2005) and increased distance in a snowshoe/walk/jog program (Todd & Reid, 2006).
- Despite these benefits, the physical activity patterns in adults with ASD have followed a similar trajectory to those of typically developing adults with physical activity patterns decreasing throughout the lifespan (Pan & Frey, 2005).
- The rise in sedentary behavior across individuals is associated with increased levels of obesity, and unfortunately, adults with disabilities are at an increased risk for both obesity (Melville, et al., 2008) and low levels of fitness (Ellis, Cress, & Spellman, 1992; Gillespie, 2003). These findings may in part be due to a lack of opportunity to participate in physical activity.

Evidence Based Research in Physical Activity Interventions:
- The majority of physical activity interventions aimed at increasing physical activity in individuals with autism have focused on school aged children (ages 6–18), and as a result, there are very few interventions targeting physical activity in adults with ASD.
- Therefore, there is a great need to develop and provide physical activity intervention for adults with ASD. The implementation of a physical activity intervention program would not only provide immediate benefits for those who participate, but would also serve as a template for future adapted physical activity programs for adults with ASD.

What is Adapted Physical Activity?
- Adapted Physical Activity (APA) is often referred to as ‘physical activity adapted and modified for individuals with disabilities,’ however, this definition fails to capture the comprehensive nature and scope of this field of study.
- More accurately, it can be defined as, “a cross disciplinary body of knowledge, which encompasses a philosophy of attitude and acceptance of diversity, with adaptations to instructional strategies and techniques to accommodate motor differences” (Reid, 2003).
- “APA also involves a process of promoting independent self-determined physical activity” (Reid, 2003).
How Can Adults With ASD Benefit From Engaging in an APA Program?

- The health related benefits of engaging in physical activity have been well established and include, an increase in general health status (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006), improved cardiovascular health (Morris & Froelicher, 1993), an increase in psychological benefits (Biddle, Fox, & Boutcher, 2000), and improved muscular strength and endurance (Pollock, et al., 2000).
- In addition to the health related outcomes, engagement in a community based APA program would provide participants an immediate opportunity to engage in a social context with peers. Social opportunities can also extend beyond the scope of the intervention, with new opportunities for social interactions during transition to the participants’ respective gyms.
- By building physical activity into a weekly routine, adults with ASD would be more likely to adhere to the routine long after the program is completed and experience the lifelong benefits from participating in regular physical activity.

Announcing the Sunfield Movers and Shakers Program!

- This January, Sunfield Center will be offering a social skills adapted physical activity program called the Sunfield Movers and Shakers, for adults with ASD.
- Starting on January 11th, 2012, the Sunfield Movers and Shakers will meet on a weekly basis, and with the support of students from the University of Michigan's School of Kinesiology, will learn about the benefits of physical activity and practice a number of adapted exercises in the context of a rich social environment.
- For more information regarding participation in this program, please call Sunfield Center at (734) 222-9277 or visit our website at sunfieldcener.com.

Suggested Links:
The international federation of adapted physical activity: http://www.ifapa.biz/
Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly, the official journal of the international federation of adapted physical activity: http://journals.humankinetics.com/apaq.

References: