

Movement & Children with Autism



Learn How to Use Your Child's Strengths To
Help Them Be All They Can Be

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About the Author: Joni Redlich



Joni Redlich graduated in 2000 with her Masters in Physical Therapy and then completed her transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy degree in 2002. Joni is a Board-Certified Pediatric Certified Specialist and has vast experience working with children of all ages with a variety of developmental and neuromuscular disorders. Joni is Total Motion Release (TMR)- Tots & Teens certified and is passionate about empowering children and their families to breakthrough limits using this therapeutic approach. She combines this with background in NDT, vestibular rehabilitation and motor control.

Dear Parents,



We know...

“Why is a Physical Therapist writing a guide about Autism Spectrum Disorders? We have been referred to speech therapy, occupational therapy and behavior intervention. We have so much going on. What can you possibly have to say?”

But...

Movement is the foundation of EVERYTHING, from looking at mom to playing with a toy. I began my career working with children on the autism spectrum from all over the world. I learned enough Spanish, Italian and French to do therapy sessions in each of these languages! At this practice our neurologists referred more and more often to Physical Therapy as part of a child’s therapy program. Why? Because they saw the children improve in all other areas faster. The children would begin speaking in their PT sessions rather than in their speech sessions! The children would learn how to use their bodies better and suddenly eye contact would improve. This was 18 years ago!

Since that time, the research has supported what I experienced first hand. Although the obvious challenges of speech and social skills are there, there are underlying motor difficulties that affect ALL of these other areas of development.

Let’s look more in depth...

Early Childhood Movement and ASD

Movement is an integral part of our social, emotional, and physical lives. A 4-month old excitedly kicks her arms and legs in response to the funny face dad makes, so he does it again. An 8-month old will crawl to get her favorite rattle, shake it to hear the sound it makes, and then look at mom to share the experience with her. An 18 month-old takes mom's hand, walks her to the kitchen, and says "juice" while pointing to the refrigerator. As a child grows, the length and complexity of movement sequences become more sophisticated.



Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders have a hard time coordinating the myriad of movements needed to complete these interactions. Although children with ASD are often not diagnosed until they are far out of infancy, studies of children later diagnosed with ASD showed motor differences that had been undetected as infants. These motor differences in children with ASD are often due to difficulties with motor planning, sensory processing and low tone.



Motor planning challenges make it difficult for a child to time, sequence, and execute a movement, such as reaching for an object, crawling towards mom, or activating a toy.

Sensory processing differences can alter a child's life experience. The child may be over or under sensitive to smell, sight, sound, touch, or movement. They may also have difficulty tuning out sounds, smells, or sights in the background. They also may have difficulty looking and listening at the same time.

Low tone, or decreased stiffness of the muscles, requires the child to use more energy to move, can delay motor development, and further alters the sensory feedback a child receives during movement. Despite low tone and often accompanying excessive flexibility in some of the body, there is often tightness and asymmetries in the core, where the foundations of quality movement develop.



Children with ASD will learn to walk at an average age, but the quality of their movements are often poor. They often walk on their tiptoes or have problems looking and walking at the same time. A majority of children later diagnosed with ASD skip the crawling stage. Crawling requires coordinating opposite sides of the body and good core control, that many children with ASD don't develop on their own. As the child gets older, they may struggle to perform more advanced skills when they have not mastered these core foundations.

Children with ASD often have difficulty with balance, putting their hands out to catch themselves when they fall, and lack variety in their movement strategies. These differences may look like clumsiness, poor attention, hyperactivity, gross motor skill delay, flat feet, toe-walking, poor posture and frequent w-sitting.

Physical Therapy at Kid PT

Many adults know about physical therapy from their own experiences. Physical therapy for children with developmental disorders is very different than orthopedic physical therapy for back pain or a knee injury!



When a pediatric physical therapist works with a child, we look at the **whole** child. It is not about how strong a certain muscle is, but how much control they have of their movement system to be able to use their **bodies, eyes, ears** and **balance** all while being able to **think** and **learn**.

Learn more about the **3 Pillars of Movement** our Physical Therapists Use at Kid PT!

THE KID PT GUIDE TO:

MOVEMENT THERAPY FOR THE CHILD WITH AUTISM

ALIGNMENT

WHY ALIGNMENT MATTERS FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD?

Alignment means how the body stacks up from head to toe. It also means having equal access to movement in all directions.

Imagine, sitting leaning on one side of your bottom all day and then trying to pay attention and write at the same time. Balancing out the body can make life so much easier on our kids that are already to make sense of the world.

ACTIVATION

WHY ACTIVATION MATTERS FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD?

Without an active core, breathing, regulation, vision and more are all affected! Activating the core is a key foundation for all of these areas!

Once the core is active, then the child can develop more strength and endurance.

INTEGRATION

WHY INTEGRATION MATTERS FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD?

You may be familiar with the term sensory integration, but we need to also integrate the body's sensory systems AND postural systems. They are reliant on each other and one can't work without the other!

Put all the pieces together and children have the foundation they need for learning and daily life!

Children with developmental differences often compensate really well (kids are BRILLIANT at compensating) for their weaknesses, but it catches up to them when they are doing higher level skills and learning new things. Filling in missing foundational pieces of development can make a BIG difference! Our therapy programs are built around the **individual** child, not a diagnosis or a cookie cutter plan, based on our evaluation findings and together with **your** goals. We would love to help your child soar!



We know you take a lot of time and thought into making these decisions for your child and we totally respect that. We are happy to take the time to answer your questions!

Just call to schedule a Free Discovery Visit or a Phone Consult with one of our Physical Therapists.

Reach out anytime- we LOVE questions! You can call or text (908) 543-4390 or e-mail us at info@kidpt.com.