Healthy Holiday Exercise Ideas, Winter Fun without the Sun

By Ryan Lockard

Winter is coming, which means your life is about to be a little more chaotic than it already is. Changes in routine along with the gloomy Pacific Northwest weather during the holiday season can often lead to increased levels of sensory overload, anxiety and depression, especially for those on the autism spectrum.

While there might be a tendency to just want to sit on the couch and enjoy holiday goodies, a positive plan to keep you and your family physically active during the holidays helps improve self-regulation and may help in reducing the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Here are five ideas to increase your family’s activity level and decrease the stress of the holiday season.

1. Add activity to your holiday traditions – You probably already have an assortment of family traditions that accompany the holiday season. One of my favorite traditions is cruising the neighborhoods to see all of the beautiful Christmas light displays. Whatever your traditions are, try to add an active twist to it. If you’re like me and you enjoy seeing the holiday lights, make a list of the neighborhoods that you want to visit and plan to do some individual or family walks instead of simply driving through. If you have a wearable tracker (like a Fitbit), set a goal for how many steps you aim to reach. This will increase your sense of accomplishment once you are finished.

2. Put an umbrella in the car – Whether we are visiting the grocery store to stock the refrigerator or going to the mall to grab that perfect gift, most people have the tendency to drive around scouring the parking lot for the closest
possible open spot. It’s not because we’re lazy, but we all just know that the sun doesn’t like to visit the PNW during the holidays and we want to stay dry! This year put an umbrella in your car and create a new habit by parking away in the farthest spot possible. You will avoid the parking lot pandemonium, get some extra exercise, and stay dry in the process. That’s a win, win, win!

3. **Make the TV your workout partner** – “Only five more minutes!” Does this sound familiar? A lot of kids look forward to their holiday break because of the increased screen time. I was no different when I was younger and used to see how many seasons of World Series Baseball I could play lounging in my bean bag chair. Replace that bean bag chair with the old exercise bike that you have in the garage. (If you don’t have an exercise bike, they can be found for around $50-$100 on Craigslist.) Add incentive for riding the bike by allotting an extra ten minutes of screen time.

If they aren’t the video game type and instead are glued to watching the TV, join them and use the commercials as exercise time. Do simple bodyweight exercises with them to increase your heart rates. If you live in an apartment complex or have access to a stairway, walk up the stairs ten times each time a commercial break occurs. Often kids are more inclined to do the exercises with you, instead of by themselves.

4. **Create an exercise reward system** – Incentivize exercise with an exercise sticker chart. Assign different stickers for different activities and have a reward for a certain amount of stickers. Did you walk 30 minutes looking at the Christmas lights? **Red sticker**. Did you and your child walk farther in the parking lot? **Green stickers** for both of you. Did you do exercises during the commercials of a 30-minute cartoon? **Blue sticker**. You can assign the stickers and rewards however you want, but this should be a fun (and visual) way for the family to track their increased activity. Keep it fun and keep each other motivated!

5. **Make time for YOU** – With all of the chaos that the holidays bring, it can be very easy to forget about yourself. This leads to feeling tired, burnt out, and dreading the holidays next year. Making time for yourself is a MUST. You want to enjoy the holidays, not have them increase your anxiety. Try to take a nightly bubble bath or simply wake up five to ten minutes earlier in the morning to meditate. This will do wonders for your mood and psyche. Plan time to get out of the chaos and take care of yourself.

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**Just play around with the proportions of cornstarch and shaving cream until you get the right consistency to make a snowball.**
Everyone seems to remember that wonderful book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, that charming book about the boy with Asperger Syndrome who set out to solve the mystery of a dog who had been murdered. It had a positive, upbeat tone and was about a very high-functioning young man who could potentially learn to live on his own as an adult. Now, there is a much darker version; Jem Lester's new book *Shtum*, is not the feel-good, sweetness and light story of a person with ASD who speaks fluently and who sets out to conquer the world and discover the cure for cancer. Instead, this is a sad yet funny novel about a man whose marriage is falling apart at the seams, who is a chronic alcoholic and who is raising a son who is significantly affected by autism. Johah, who is ten, is completely nonverbal, not toilet trained and is not able to function independently so he must have 24/7 care and support. When bad comes to worse between Ben Jewell and his wife Emma, he and Johah move in with his aging father. The author mixes dark humor with stark reality as he describes his deteriorating marriage, living with his father, and raising a ten year old boy who wakes up with a soiled diaper and who strews food all over the house because he can’t tell anybody what he wants or needs. Yet, Ben gives him all the love he can, while at the same time, taking frequent trips to the pub to drown his sorrows in a sea of alcohol which he continues into the night.

The book is harrowing but all too true—we are so used to reading about and seeing on the news, stories about people with ASD who had early intervention and who won the lottery—they are “cured,” they go on to get a PhD in molecular biology, marry the woman (or man) of their dreams, move to a house with a white picket fence and have their 2.5 children and live happily ever after. This novel, while absorbing and hard to put down, is a wake-up call if there ever was one. There are many more parents out there who are raising children and yes, adults with ASD who have not found that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but who instead, must endure sensory overload, lack of supports and a nervous system that keeps them from using the toilet, showing signs of affection even though we know deep down, that the love is there.

This could have been a thoroughly depressing read were it not for the humor and the insights that the author imparted, especially the importance of loyalty. The author gives an unsparing glimpse of how hard it is to live with a person with such severe autism without supports and without therapies. In order for Johah to go to the wonderful school that his father found for him, Ben and Emma must go through a tribunal and I was fascinated by the description of the tribunal process—a long and entangled legal battle that sometimes doesn’t work. I hope people are ready to read a novel that reflects the darker side of raising a child on the autism spectrum because while it isn’t a fun summer beach read, it is necessary to see the truth.
HOT HONEY VANILLA MILK

Everybody knows chocolate milk and cocoa, now for something a little different. If you've just been outside sledding, shoveling, or just walking home from school, this drink will warm you through and through.

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cups milk
- 2 teaspoons honey
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- pinch of ground cinnamon

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Put all the ingredients in a small pot and with the help of an adult, place it over medium-low heat and cook until warm, about 3 minutes.
- Whisk or stir from time to time.
- Pour equal amounts into two mugs or cups and serve warm.

Enjoy the simple things
Bagel Snowmen

**Ingredients:**

- Regular and mini bagels
- Plain cream cheese
- Licorice rope or sour candy belts (for scarf; the latter was perfect because it has a coating of sugar, which makes it look like a fuzzy scarf)
- Dried cranberries, chocolate chips, raisins, small round nuts, red hots (for buttons, eyes, or mouth)
- Pretzel sticks (for arms)
- Mini carrots, cut into discs then carrot shapes (for nose)

**Directions:**

- Spread cream cheese on a regular sized bagel and one half of a mini bagel. Cream cheese should cover the entire bagel including the hole.
- Place bagels on a plate with the smaller bagel on top.
- Decorate however you like with the accessories

*Reprinted from: www.babble.com*
The Autistic Advocate, by Kieran, is written by a person on the Autism Spectrum with a wife and three kids. I was riveted by the first post I saw, entitled “We Are Not OK,” a post about the sorry state of adults with ASD that introduced me to the concept of Masking or Social Camouflage. This involves suppressing your autism-related behaviors such as stimming or vocalizations in order to appear “normal” or at least more acceptable to the outside world. This post was written to highlight the #TakeTheMaskOff social media campaign on Facebook and Twitter where people could share their experiences of being “unmasked.”

The author explains Masking as having to constantly try to blend in by scripting every word and action for different situations and by suppressing the urge to jump, flap, and make noises...think of how stressful that would be! It gets worse—it is thought to now be a factor in the higher than average suicide rate among young adults with ASD which is shocking and disheartening.

But the site delves into much more than just the topic of Masking. On the right hand side of the page is a clickable index of topics from Autism to Cure Culture to Sensory and much more. Each post delves into Kieran’s feelings and experiences both as a father and an individual with ASD himself having been diagnosed as an adult like I was. Other posts warn about “Autzis,” people with milder forms of autism who think they are superior to those who need more supports. I was blown away by the sheer depth and breadth of material and the willingness to put forth newer and somewhat more controversial ideas in the face of a still, recalcitrant society.

Traditionally, ASM’s quarterly Horizons newsletter was only shared with our members. Recently, we have included others that are not members. If you are enjoying receiving our newsletter, please consider becoming an ASM member at:

https://www.autism-mi.org/membership/

*Your membership helps us continue to provide information & referral to families throughout the state of Michigan.
Special Thanks To:

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Thank you for your continued support!

Warm Winter Wishes!!!