

## Best Sports for Children with ADHD & ASD



It goes without saying that exercise is great for all kids. But for kids with ADD/ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) such as Asperger's, sports can provide much more than a physical outlet for a group of youngsters who often find it difficult to fit it in at home, school and in social circles. ADHD and ASD affect everything from school work and attention to memory and collaboration with others. School can be challenging because classrooms are typically designed with a certain type of child in-mind. Children with ADD/ADHD or ASD do not easily fit the model. But with sports things can be different.

Sports and exercise do the following for children with ADD/ADHD or ASD:

- Increase production of dopamine to improve focus
- Produce endorphins that allow children to feel better and control anxiety
- Relieve stress
- Focus excess energy and restlessness
- Boost self-esteem
- Redirect focus
- Provide a regimen, schedule, and rewards crucial for having successful days.

These kids often feel isolated from their classmates. Sports are a great way to get them involved, says Jay Salpekar, a child psychiatrist with the ADHD Clinic at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., "Sports offer lots of social interaction in addition to physical fitness," Salpekar says. This helps kids with ADHD bond with their peers, "and it helps get them out of their shell." Child psychiatrist James McGough, MD, of UCLA's ADHD Clinic, agrees. "A common issue with ADHD kids is to find something to help them gain confidence and self-esteem," he says. "They can use sports as a vehicle for making and having friends. And healthy activities like sports are better than sitting alone or in front of the television [or videogame console]." The same benefits of sports can be said for kids on the autism spectrum as *60 Minutes Sports* recently discovered (video above right).



### How to Choose a Sport

How do you know what sport will be best for your child with ADD/ADHD or ASD? Ask him/her what they want to do. Experts suggest that parents should be focused more on what their kids can do rather than what they can't do given a diagnosis of ADD/ADHD or ASD. The sport should be one that will hold your child's interest. McGough says baseball involves a lot of time standing in the outfield, and that invites distraction. Soccer, on the other hand, keeps a child moving. McGough also says some reports -- but little research -- suggest that solo sports like tennis,

swimming, and running may better suit kids with attention problems. Team sports like football or basketball require kids to coordinate their action -- pay constant attention to other players, strategies, and plays. That will be tough for a child with ADHD or ASD. "But if your child really wants to try a team sport, you should encourage it", McGough says.



Both McGough and Salpekar say martial arts, particularly karate, tae kwon do, and others that emphasize form, are popular with kids who have ADHD and ASD. "In classes, the kids line up to do the same moves, and that reinforces timing and focus," Salpekar says. "Kids with ADHD really take to that."

*ADDitude* magazine considers these to be the top sports for children with ADD/ADHD:

- **Swimming** - Swimming gives your child a sense of community, as well as his/her own sense of independence. Swimming is disciplined yet social. If your child cannot sit still or stay focused on a single task, swimming is great because it is a high-participation sport. There is rarely any sitting on the bench. Famous Olympian swimmer, Michael Phelps, has ADD/ADHD. He says swimming was a great tool to help him manage his symptoms and to stay focused.
- **Track/ Cross-Country** - Running is an excellent sport for all children. Children build endurance while working on a team with others. Running has no physical contact with other children, and there is little to no downtime.
- **Baseball** - Baseball is another no-contact sport. Baseball has drills, constant motion and alternating positions. A large percentage of major league baseball players have been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD.
- **Martial Arts** - While it seems Martial Arts may promote some of the symptoms, it does not for many children. Why? Martial Arts is disciplined. Children with ADD/ADHD need a regimen and non-violent discipline. Martial Arts allows children to manage their symptoms with various techniques.

### **No Magic Bullet**

Despite the benefits of playing sports, parents should realize that it won't affect or improve the disorder itself. "Playing sports does not impact the core features of ADHD," McGough says. "You can't, for example, expect that your child will run off all of their energy." Again, McGough says, the real impact of sports will be on your child's self-esteem, confidence, and social life, all of which are crucial to build up as early as possible.



Bottom line, if your child/teen with ADHD or ASD wants to try a sport, go ahead and support them. Communicate with the coach. Be open about your child's ADD/ADHD or ASD and observe the interactions. Watch how the coach treats your child and the other players. ALL kids, but especially kids with differing abilities, need a coach who is a motivator, not a bully. If things don't work out with a given sport or team environment, skip the "I told you so" and praise your child for giving it all, hanging in there, and learning more about what really interests them. And if it does work, start polishing off your best sport parent skills, grab a seat in the stands, and enjoy watching your kids reap the multiple benefits of youth sports done the right way.

For more reading and resources on ADHD, ASD and other learning challenges [click here](#).

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