I began working with Roan when he was three years old. Like most newly diagnosed children at that age, his attention span was short and he was scripting and bouncing wall-to-wall. Giving him dumbbells was not an option, nor could I ask him to sit down and “listen to me.”

I laid out visual support cards identifying each part of the body. When I could capture his attention, I would say, “Touch your leg,” or “Show me your arms.” Independently identifying these and other body parts took time but he was making progress. And as he did, I began to challenge him more. I would say, “Touch your right leg,” or “Reach your arms to the sky.”

Body awareness aligns with an individual’s fundamental motor skills. Too often children and adults with autism don’t know their hand from their foot, or their right from left. For some reason, this fundamental lifelong skill is being skipped in their IEPs. This is unacceptable. If you, or an educator, is going to teach your child exercise, it is vital he know the parts of his body and what actions each can perform. And those actions—“Shake your hips,” “Touch your toes,” “March your legs,” and “Flap your arms like a bird”—are getting your child exercising! This may be the most important place to begin an exercise program. And if you, your child’s developmental therapist, or special education teacher is without an exercise background this is easily administered.

Each week as I returned to work with Roan his parents would share with me, “When you left, he would script, “Right arm,” “Left hand,” and “Right toes.” They said his OTs and PTs weren’t teaching him these concepts. Now, four years later, he can identify all his body parts and knows his right from his left.

Learning the difference between right and left and identifying body parts are all building blocks for a solid foundation of self awareness, taking instruction, building confidence, and exercise. Every month Roan makes progress, and there is no telling where it will lead. Right, left, or straight ahead. But never backwards!

DAVID S. GESLAK, BS, ACSM-HFS, CSCS

...Coach Dave, founder of the Exercise Connection (EC), is widely recognized for the pioneering of structured visual exercise programs, as well as his insightful and dynamic presentations. Dave has experience as a para-educator and was a Fitness Coordinator at Giant Steps, a school for children with autism. He is an author, advocate, hosts a TV Show “Coach Dave” on The Autism Channel, and trains parents and professionals across the world on his protocols. He employs individuals with autism at the EC and is developing the first employment program, incorporating exercise, within Hart Schaffner Marx, a company in Chicago. The autism community has enthusiastically embraced Dave’s message and is especially encouraged by his results.