

## **“Gymnastics: Not Your Typical Speech/Language Therapy-The Benefits It Provides for Children With Special Needs”**

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Gymnastics is a sport that encompasses many different skills that aid in developing each gymnast as a whole. A child with special needs grows up in a community that sometimes does not provide all of the necessary tools in one location. In turn, this leaves the child having to piece together each skill from different settings. Gymnastics offers a network filled with opportunities to foster a child with special needs' cognition, motor skills, self-esteem, and social skills.

Gymnastics is a hands-on sport which is beneficial for children with special needs. As a result, the sport allows children to improve cognition by uncovering strengths that cannot necessarily be addressed in a classroom setting. Gymnastics is a structured sport which has a framework that entails rules, independent thinking, decision making skills, self-monitoring, organization, rules, and commitment. This framework creates an atmosphere that stimulates the brain to continue to absorb new information and organize information accordingly.

Motor skills (gross and fine) create the foundation in the sport of gymnastics. Gross motor skills (i.e. walking, running) and fine motor skills (i.e. stringing beads) are developed through gymnastics skills such as walking across the balance beam, holding a rope while swinging on the bar, jumping over the vault, and other similar activities. According to Murphy, Carbone & Council on Children with Disabilities (2008), “A strength-training program for young patients with Cerebral Palsy demonstrated increased strength, improved mental wellbeing, and better overall function.” Another example is that of children with Down syndrome; although they have less muscle strength than typical children, they show increased exercise endurance and

work capacity after participation in a specialized aerobic training program (Murphy, Carbone, & Council on Children with Disabilities, 2008).”

Gymnastics promotes an environment where self-esteem can be developed through team building and positive social interactions. Through interactions with individuals within his/her social network, children learn vital skills of reciprocal exchanges and/or the ability to offer support as well as to receive it (Richardson, 2002). Team building is used in gymnastics as the foundation for gymnasts, in order to facilitate a support network among teammates. Positive social interactions among gymnasts and coaches are displayed through various approaches such as positive reinforcement, participating equally, resolving conflicts, sharing techniques for a familiar skill, and celebrating success. According to Richardson (2002), the positive components of social networks for children with physical disabilities have been documented. For example, “children who were able to develop early relationships with peers had higher self-esteem, better mental health, greater levels of independence, and better employment records as adults” (Richardson, 2002).

“Children with physical disabilities have been found to have a variety of social deficits, including limited participation in active and social play and increased dependence on others to make social arrangements, poor social skills, limited intrinsic motivation, lack of drive, and decreased concentration” (Richardson, 2002). For that reason, it is beneficial to note that social skills are fostered in the sport of gymnastics through development of the following skills: self-expression, problem solving, and self-esteem. Self-expression is a skill that is developed by a child learning to understand his/her own feelings and others, through dance movements, skills performed on various apparatuses and through social experiences with other children. Problem

solving plays an integral part in a gymnastics routine, because gymnasts are routinely challenged by different obstacles (i.e. balancing on the beam, choreography of a floor routine). Gymnastics is a sport that encourages physical activity (i.e. bars develop focus and higher level of concentration), which over a period of time develops flexibility and co-ordination in the body, and ultimately leads to higher self-esteem for children with special needs.

“Properly designed and implemented programs of sports and physical activities for children with disabilities should target cardiovascular endurance, flexibility, balance, agility, and muscular strength and accessibility, safety, and enjoyment (Murphy, Carbone, & Council on Children With Disabilities, 2008).” Gymnastics is an active sport that promotes all of the above targets and can be dangerous if safety precautions are not in place. Therefore, proper strategies should be implemented prior to participation to reduce the risks of injuries to children with special needs (Murphy, Carbone, & Council on Children with Disabilities, 2008). Gymnastics provides a rich environment full of opportunities for children with special needs, to flourish in a setting that targets developmental skills and educational goals in a fun and engaging environment.

## References

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## About the Author:

Jourdan Saunders, M.S, CF-SLP, received her Master's degree at Loyola University in Maryland. She is currently completing her Clinical Fellowship year in the Miami Dade County Public School System in Florida. She is the creator of the website, [Futureslps.com](http://Futureslps.com) and has a blog that is linked to her website. She created the website to provide resources, inspiration and motivation for individuals who have chosen to major in the field of Speech Language Pathology. [Futureslps.com](http://Futureslps.com) is directed towards students, but anyone can benefit from the resources provided on the site. Jourdan believes that speech creates a link to connect each individual in some unique way, yet our use of language is a major factor in defining us all as individuals. When interconnecting the two it creates a powerful force that can influence others in ways unimaginable. Her passion to help others is strong because speech and language are used everyday and she enjoys helping others achieve various goals to help them feel better about themselves or to help them excel in life. Jourdan has a gymnastics background of 23 years, she is looking forward to developing gymnastics programs for children with special needs in the future.