

Autism fitness specialist champions job training

By JANICE A. YOUNGWITH

“Champions are those individuals who overcome challenges to be the best they can be.”

That’s how David Geslak, a noted autism fitness specialist and president of The Exercise Connection, describes the special champions who team with him in his mission to design fitness programs, products and tools for children with autism spectrum disorders.

According to Geslak, Exercise Connection champions are all employees who are part of a unique hands-on job training program for teens and young adults with an autism spectrum diagnosis.

Each champion is a former Exercise Connection client, who is trained to prepare and package innovative visual exercise systems marketed to special needs groups, schools and agencies around the world.

Developed during the past year in conjunction with a \$12,000 grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield for Community Support Systems in Brookfield, the job training program initially included preparation of 20 visual exercise support systems.

Geslak drew and designed visual prompts, in addition to preparing a color coded training system for his initial champion, Derek Withers, 29, whose ongoing role involves completing daily office responsibilities and building visual exercise supports. Two 16-year-old Exercise Connection champions currently are in training and paid on a piecemeal project completion basis to assist at home.

“Breaking down components into the smallest manageable task is key,” Geslak says; he focuses on capabilities rather than disability. “As with the systems we build, visual prompts, support and the ability to find success are critical factors for training Exercise Connection champions.”

In addition to individual job roles, Exercise Connection champions occasionally are featured in various instruction and demonstration materials, helping to visually explain different exercises and show versions of activities that can be completed at home, in school and the community.

They also could become part of a new Coach Dave television show designed to help parents and teachers aiding students with autism spectrum disorders as they seek to achieve healthier lifestyles. The show will begin airing this year on Roku Devices for the TV.



David Geslak, left, president of the The Exercise Connection, works with Derek Withers, 29, on a unique hands-on job training program for teens and young adults with an autism spectrum diagnosis.

Geslak, who says exercise has important health benefits for everyone - especially for those with autism, is the author of the Autism Fitness Handbook I and II, and Exercise Connection DVD, featuring exercises and techniques for children and students from age four to adulthood.

“Understanding the five components of body image, posture, motor coordination, muscular fitness and cardiovascular fitness is vital for physical fitness for children with autism spectrum disorders,” notes Geslak, who says physically active lifestyles should be defined by balance, posture, body awareness, eye-hand, foot-eye coordination, laterality and proprioception or the sense of one’s limbs in space.

“Implementing these powerful concepts can build healthier minds and bodies, is vital to growth and development, and can help reduce the progression of some special needs by strengthening neurologic connections or improving trunk stability, balance and coordination,” explains the fitness enthusiast who currently serves as a member of the board of directors of the Autism Society of Illinois.

For information on Exercise Connection Corporation programs and services, visit www.ecautism.com or call (773) 575-5100.

Autism in the workforce

Like many with autism spectrum disorders, David Geslak, founder and owner of The Exercise Connection, says his young adult champion employees and their peers with autism spectrum disorders face a daunting set of obstacles in an already difficult job market.

“Job prospects for adults with autism in the U.S. are bleak, with an employment situation owing much to the basic nature of autism spectrum disorders,” he says.

Leading experts indicate autism spectrum disorders are a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person’s ability to communicate and interact with others. It is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a spectrum disorder that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees.

Many children on the autism spectrum develop a neurological architecture which creates a black and white way of thinking and processing information. Because of this, they often suffer in areas like social interaction and communication. They also may develop many rituals and routines.

According to the Autism Society of Illinois, the biggest challenges often involve social interaction. The developmental disability also can impair communication skills, speech, fine motor skills and behavior.

“The growing numbers of children and adults living with autism is astronomical and the impact for families and society huge,” says Mary Kay Betz, Autism Society of Illinois president.

With a one in every 88 children receiving an autism diagnosis, it is anticipated that this year more than 500,000 young people with ASDs also will turn 18 with hopes of entering the workforce.

To learn more or for support, information and resources, contact the Autism Society of Illinois, 2200 S. Main St., Suite 205, Lombard at (630) 691-1270 or email info@autismillinois.org.



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