

# Autism on the RUN



Connor McCann 14, Newtown, PA



Connor Feeney (12),  
Mom: Patty Feeney, Chalfont PA

Fourteen-year-old Connor bends over the elliptical trainer as his workout takes him up a steep incline. "You're doing great," his mom encourages as she counts off "clicks" on a hand held tally counter. "Only five minutes to go!" Connor presses on, knowing that eighty clicks on the counter will earn him his favorite Shania Twain DVD when he gets home.

Unusual motivation perhaps, but Connor has autism – a serious neurological disorder that impacts cognition, speech, communication skills and behavior. Autism currently impacts 1 in 110 children in the United States and 1 in 70 boys. Children with autism tend to be sedentary, but research shows that vigorous physical exercise reduces aggressive and disruptive behavior for these children. It also increases attention span and work performance.

"When we started, Connor wanted no part of a physical fitness regimen," his mother explains. "We gradually worked him up to a forty-minute workout combining the elliptical, rowing and the treadmill. The endorphins must have eventually kicked in, because now he really enjoys it and asks to go."

Many students at Connor's school, The Comprehensive Learning Center (CLC) in Southampton, enjoy fitness as part of their curriculum. The school for children with autism recently added a small gym equipped with treadmills and an elliptical trainer. "The exercise machines work well for our students because they are repetitive and predictable, and it's easy to regulate the workout," explains Education Co-Director Amanda Flavell. "Like all children, our students need regular exercise, and once they get into a routine, they really like it."

Some of the students use the treadmills to prepare for running real races, including the AJ Foundation For Children with Autism's Best "Dam" Run for Autism, which will be held at Peace Valley Park in Chalfont, Bucks County, on May 22nd this year. The race raises funds for the AJ Foundation and Comprehensive Learning Center. The school's two oldest students, AJ (20) and Danny (17) ran the 5K race last year. "It's really fun," AJ comments. "The medal I won is awesome."

Participating students run right along with the general public in the 1 mile, 5K and 10K events which circle Lake Galena. The race offers one of the few 10K runs in the area. "You couldn't ask for a more scenic route, and it raises money for a great cause," 2009 participant Kristin Stewart shares. "I run it every year."

### DO YOU WANT TO RUN FOR AUTISM?

For more information and registration for the May 22nd Best "Dam" Run for Autism, visit [www.ajfoundation.org](http://www.ajfoundation.org) or call (215) 598-8175.

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