



◀ *Matthew at the gym*
Photo credit: Monica Richardson

Exercise for Everyone!

ALL OF US NEED A LITTLE HELP NOW AND THEN

by Monica Richardson

WE ALL KNOW THE BENEFITS of physical activity. It keeps us healthy, both our bodies and our minds. It is important for all of us – at all ages – to start on a physical regime. But what if you are severely affected by autism, are non-verbal, have difficulty staying engaged in activities for long periods of time, or have inconsistency in staying focused? How do you get involved in exercise on a regular basis?

This is our story. Our son Matthew is now 23. As a family we have always been active – swimming, skiing, cycling and going to the gym. And we’ve always tried to find ways and people to teach Matthew. Yes, it took us almost eight years to teach Matthew to swim, but now he can. We found Track 3 and Matthew learned to ski –not independently – but with the right supports he skis and he loves it. We continue to take Matthew to Caledon each year to enjoy the outdoors and do an activity he loves, particularly the chairlift.

But getting him into a gym? That was a challenge and we actually never thought we’d see our son lifting weights, getting on a stationary bike, doing step-

ups. So you can only imagine our joy when we found a trainer in our neighbourhood who had opened a facility, specifically to work with individuals with special needs – and he is a trained ABA behaviour therapist so completely “gets autism.”

Sessions at Level Up Fitness Academy in Etobicoke working with Daniel Roth are now a weekly activity. Since February of this year Matthew has been spending an hour with Daniel each Friday, and the progress he has made is truly remarkable. It brought tears to my eyes when I went and observed him. Daniel incorporates regular breaks with rewards, and a visual schedule to help Matthew know what he has accomplished and what is left to do.

As our children with ASD become teens, then adults, it can become more difficult to find ways to keep them engaged and learning additional life skills. Level Up Fitness Academy has demonstrated to us that when you find people with the right attitude, training and a willingness to adapt to each person’s uniqueness, there can be many meaningful activities for adults. And it is good to know that now Matthew too can have a regular exercise regime to help keep him healthy.

Level Up Fitness Academy is located at 16-27 Coronet Rd., Toronto, ON M8Z 2L8 • levelupfitness.ca ■

