



Autism Nature Trail

A Nature Trail for all at Letchworth State Park

Guide to the Autism Nature Trail

“Over every mountain there is a path, although it may not be seen from the valley” - T. Roethke

By Keirsten A. Shaffer, NYS-LMT, CPT

What is the Autism Nature Trail

The Autism Nature Trail (ANT) at Letchworth State Park will provide a safe and inclusive setting for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and related disabilities to experience the inspiring, engaging, and calming qualities of nature. The mile-long trail loop will be comprised of eight stations, three features, and several specialized elements which appeal to individual abilities and needs including cuddle swings, gliders, and “alone zones.” The significant difference between THE ANT and any other permanent, public venue is the acceptance of differences and a place where “ALL” are accepted.

It is well known that many individuals with ASD exhibit difficulty processing, organizing, and integrating sensory information in a meaningful way, making communication and social interactions difficult. Thanks to the work of nature play specialists, landscape architects and an advisory panel of academics, practitioners and family members, each station and feature is uniquely designed to captivate the interest of individuals with respect to sight, sound, touch, smell, balance, and motor skills.

The trail and its components are designed in response to the natural formation of the forest taking into consideration the existing topography. Visitors can choose to engage with or bypass any single station. Along the way, the trail’s twists and turns reveal opportunity for experiences that range from quiet engagement to exploration and adventure – all within a positive, non-threatening setting.

From the Author

*For nearly a decade, I have committed my life to teaching movement to every human being who seeks my help. I've witnessed changes in someone's mind-body connection with a single day of coaching as well as over the course of several months. Regardless of the response time, one thing remains the same: **movement is a powerful tool for healing**.*

*Many of my sessions and classes over the years have included children (and adults) with developmental and/or behavioral challenges. As part of my research for this guide, I taught a series of thirty-minute classes, one time a week, for four weeks to a group of elementary school children on the spectrum. On the first day with all of my effort, I could not get a single child to participate in any coordinated movement. By the fourth week, the majority of the class had **fundamentally shifted to higher rates of participation, self-calming behaviors, greater social interaction, increased coordination, and formations of emotional attachments**.*

*We all need a guide. A guide to show us the power of breath, of concentration, of finding stillness, or of knowing when to run like mad through the fields. Our emotional responses, our ability to connect socially, and our physical strength are all interconnected **from the mind to the body** and can be developed through simple (and fun!) movement patterns.*

*It is my wish that this guide and the Autism Nature Trail provide the tools to **explore the magic of movement**. I encourage you to use the beginning and end of the trail to see, hear, and feel the changes that occur in your child and in your own mind and body.*

How to use this Guide

The Body Movement Guide to the Autism Nature Trail provides a balance of freedom and structure for specific movement patterns. Things to consider along the trail:

- Choose body positions that fit your child's needs while keeping them safe in their environment. The body positions in this guide are only a suggestion to get you started. Explore, explore, explore.
- Set a simple intention either at the start of the trail or at each station. For example, "I'm going to focus on my breath" or "I'm going to feel taller at the end of the trail." No matter what type of movement you choose, your intention can still be put into practice.
- Consider the level of assistance needed in balance exercises. A balance exercise may require holding onto a tree, bench, or someone's hand. As the child practices, they may progress to lighter pressure (fingertips touching a tree, bench, or hand) to stay upright.
- Experiment with verbal, tactile (touch), or an *absence* of cues when helping a child with an exercise. Every person responds differently to different cues, and self-mastery is always the goal.
- Reinforce the power of repetition and practice of a movement (similar to practicing a musical piece) by continuing to practice what was learned on the trail at home.

Sensory Input

VERBAL

VISUAL

TOUCH

SMELL

MUSIC

Movement Principles

Breath

CALMING

GROUNDING

CROSSING

BALANCE

CONTROL

COORDINATING

INTEGRATING

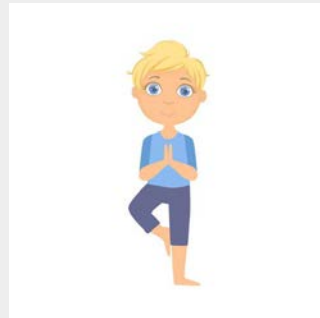


Trailhead Pavilion

Suggested Body Positions: Tree Pose

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Verbal and Visual

Suggested Movement Principles: Breathing, Calming, and Grounding.



The beginning of the trail is a great time to establish an intention for your day: *Intention:* Let's have fun!

- *Grounding (Standing):* "My feet are on the ground"
- *Grounding:* "My head is reaching toward the sky"
- *Grounding:* "The ground (earth) is holding me up"
- *Cues:* "Breathe in while I count to 3. Now blow out your breath like the wind"

Autism Nature Trail Stations

1. Sensory Station
2. Sunshine Slope
3. Music Circle
4. Reflection Knoll
5. Meadow Run and Climb
6. Design Zone
7. Playful Path
8. Celebration Station



Station 1: Sensory Station

Suggested Body Positions:

Mountain Pose-Crossing Midline



Step 1 Begin in Mountain Pose.

Step 2 Bend your arms, lift one leg, and bring your opposite elbow to touch your knee.

Step 3 Lower your foot, and repeat with the opposite side.

Step 4 Repeat a few times.



Station 2: Sunshine Slope

Suggested Body Positions: Standing on both feet

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Visual and Verbal

Suggested Movement Principles: Stretching and Calming



Pose Instructions

- Breathe in and reach up high with an outstretched hand.
- Pretend that you are grabbing a piece of sunshine and pull the power into your stomach.
- Exhale Repeat with your other arm, alternating the reach with the left and right arms. Feel the power of the sun light you up inside and shine for the rest of the day!



Station 3: Music Circle

Suggested Body Positions: Playing Instruments and Dancing

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Touch and Music



Suggested Movement Principles: Crossing the Midline, Control, and Coordinating

- When using instruments, try using one hand to beat the drums or play crossing the midline.
- Dance, encourage full body movement (e.g., swinging arms or marching) with control.



Station 4: Reflection Knoll

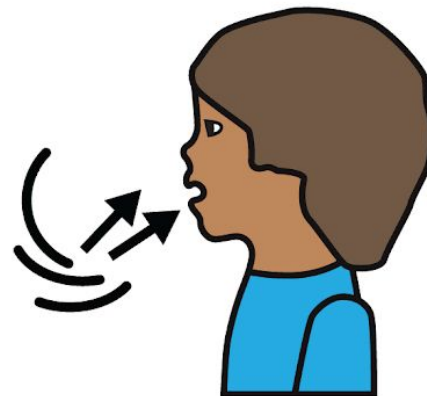
Suggested Body Positions: Seated

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Visual and Smell

Suggested Movement Principles: Breathing, Calming, and Grounding

- “The ferns are so soft and green”
- “The earth is under you. The sky is above you.”
- “Look around and take in some deep breaths”
- ”Breathe through your nose”

Take deep breath



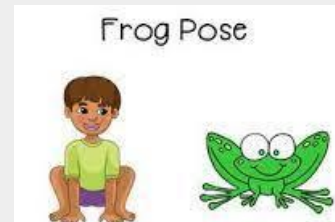


Station 5: Meadow Run & Climb

Suggested Body Positions: Any

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Verbal, Visual, and Touch

Suggested Movement Principles: Integrating



- Encourage playful, free movements that mimic animals that can make exercise more playful.
- Encourage full body movement that is less structured from previous exercises. This allows the mind and body to create new connections.
- Try some nature poses and practice breathing



Station 6: Design Zone

Suggested Body Positions: Standing, Squatting

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Touch, Verbal

Suggested Movement Principles: Control

- Safely lift materials/objects off of the ground or
- Carry materials to the work bench with one hand, or two hands.
- Share common areas with others and understand how to give others space for their work.





Station 7: Playful Path

Suggested Body Positions: running and jumping

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Verbal, Touch

Suggested Movement Principles: Balance, Control



Explore how textures will **challenge movement and balance:**

- Stand still
- Hold a pose
- Run
- Hop
- Skip





Suggested Body Positions: Seated or Standing.

Suggested Sensory Inputs: Verbal and Visual

Suggested Movement Principles: Breathing, Calming, and Grounding.

Revisit your original intention and use the board to write down any words that relate to your experience. Here are some suggested questions to facilitate this:

- “Remember how you felt (or what you thought) at the beginning of this trail?”
- “How do you feel (what do you think) now?”
- “What was your favorite station?”

Station 8: Celebration Station



About the Author

Keirsten Shaffer, LMT, CPT is a New York State Licensed Massage Therapist and a Comprehensively Certified Pilates Teacher through Balanced Body and Polestar International. She completed her 200-hour yoga training with Jasmine Chehrazi at The Yoga District, one of the top rated yoga studios in Washington, DC and is certified as a Golf Fitness Instructor through Hole in One Fitness™ under Deanna Zenger.

Keirsten's love for mind-body movement started at an early age as a gymnast. In her late 20's, a battle with Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia (APL) challenged her mind-body connection, and she found Pilates, Yoga, and Massage Therapy to be very powerful healing methods for reconnecting to her life and her movement again.

She uses her past experiences to assist others with their health and wellness goals. She works with anyone at any age, whether they have limited mobility or athletic ability. Keirsten has taught Pilates and yoga in hospitals, schools, and corporations.

Keirsten graduated from SUNY Geneseo with a BA in Communication and attended The George Washington University for Healthcare Administration and Leadership. She is also a co-founder of the Perry Farmers' Market and works as a healthcare marketing consultant.



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