

# Helpful Tips and Perspectives for Creating Accessible and Inclusive Physical Activity Experiences for Autistic Youth and Adults

Content created by Strong Minds through Active Bodies: Promoting Autistic Mental Health through Physical Activity and Planning course participants, autistic adults, caregivers of autistic adults, students, and professional subject matter experts



This resource was created to share insights and outcomes gathered while developing and facilitating the online course “Strong Minds through Active Bodies: Promoting Autistic Mental Health through Physical Activity and Planning,” funded by Autism Speaks Community Grants 2021. The following insights and perspectives on the topic of creating better access to and inclusion of autistic youth and adults in physical activity programming to promote better mental health were compiled from direct consultation with 11 autistic adults, 6 care persons of autistic adults, 10 professional subject matter experts, and our many course participants.

We invite anyone with an interest or goal of creating accessible, inclusive, and impactful physical activity programming to read or share this booklet. The course curriculum and this booklet follow research and ideas shared in [The Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children, Youth, and Adults with a Disability](#), developed through the Canadian Disability Participation Project, as well as the [A Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#). This course may be accessed on the Autism Ontario website at <https://www.autismontario.com/programs-services/adults/strong-minds-through-active-bodies>

Drawing upon the research, the critical elements required to create high-value experiences for participants in physical activity programs are belonging, autonomy, mastery, challenge, engagement, and meaning. Participants in this course contributed their experiences and thoughts about different scenarios presented as discussion posts or assignments. This knowledge product is an amalgamation of many of these creative solutions. This booklet contains responses reflecting on the blueprint for building quality participation in sports and also includes important tips related to creating inclusive environments, inclusive programs, modifying existing programs, and bits of wisdom.

These are only some of the ways that we can work to create more inclusive Physical Activity programs; however, getting to know your participant is most important.



**Belonging: “Feeling part of a group, included, accepted, and/or respected by others” (CDPP, 2018).**

“It is important to make sure there is inclusion and not just integration. Integration does not involve anyone within the activity yet involves them solely in the circle. Adapting or modifying activities to meet individual needs can make them more accessible and enjoyable for individuals with autism and other neurodivergent conditions.”

“[S]tarting with some sort of introductory game to allow for participants to become more comfortable communicating and building social relations with one another can help foster a safe space for relationship building to occur before the main activity begins, and thus help further support participation and an inclusive environment.”

“It is important for all people in a group to feel involved, accepted and part of the group, in whatever [form or capacity] that may look like to them.”

“All individuals are different...When working with neurodivergent people ... it is important to remember one is not trying to integrate them into your world but instead to fit yourself into theirs.”

"Doing the program with accepting people who want me to come back."

**Autonomy: “Having independence, choice, and control,” (CDPP, 2018).**

“Allowing us input, allowing us input in terms of what we would like to see out of the class or say possibly suggesting workouts for the next class.”

“Individuals should be given choices concerning what they do and do not partake in, which provides them with a sense of control over their lives and, ultimately, a sense of independence. Each individual is their own person and deserves the right to feel valued and respected by others no matter what.”

“[P]roviding a quiet space for when participants need a moment of regulation is ... beneficial. Having a space where participants can have the choice to go without needing permission is ... a great group management strategy that will benefit neurotypical participants as well. The choice to take a break provides autonomy and is a great way to allow someone to meet their needs while not disrupting the rest of the group.”

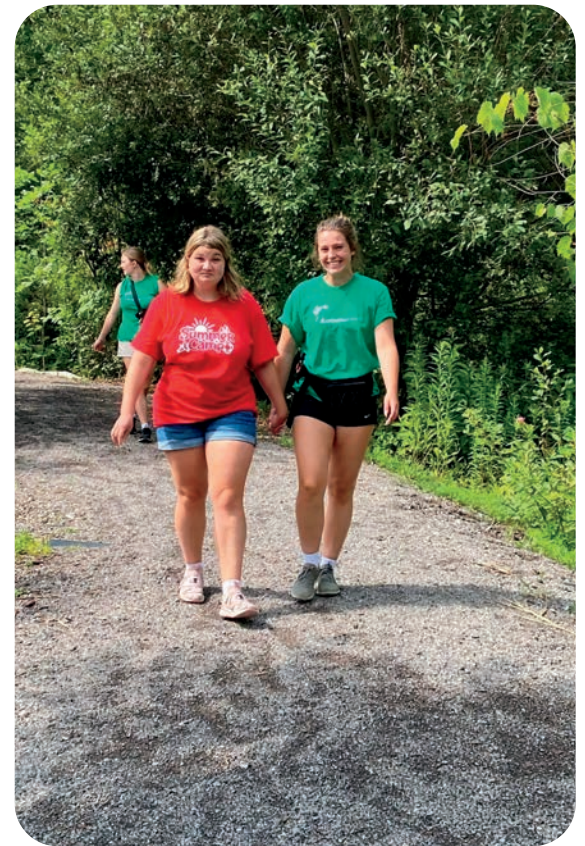
“When talking with [a participant] and their family, I would go over all the steps [in the program] and possible accommodations...be[ing] open to feedback and suggestions...It is not our place to think we know best and impose the accommodations we think that may be helpful, because, in reality, they may be harmful... No two autistic people are the same...listen and [centre] the participant...”

**Challenge: “Feeling appropriately tested” (CDPP, 2018).**

“[T]aking on tasks that match one's skill level but that have the right amount of challenge, allowing someone to take on new learning in a meaningful way and fully participate.”

“By providing a safe learning environment, clients ... feel comfortable discussing challenges and reflecting on their progress.”

“...have a patient mind, have an open mind...have a positive attitude... Some individuals, they...need a little bit more explanation. I know I do. I'm very detail oriented, so giving me a basic explanation of something my mind tends to wander, to like all the detail, that basic explanation, and it, it just gets more and more confusing. Show what [you are] doing so it gets the point across cuz for me it's a lot easier when you show it than say it.”



“Programming that meets them where they are at, therefore requiring detailed knowledge surrounding their baseline capabilities and how to build upon these capabilities, to further grow and develop in ways that are preferable to the individual.”

“Understand things that may cause them discomfort and hav[e] concrete plans in place to deal with any situations in which the individual may feel overwhelmed and unable to continue.”

**Engagement: “Feeling focused, in-the-moment, and absorbed; experiencing flow,” (CDPP, 2018).**

“When creating or facilitating programs and activities, it’s important ... to be open to feedback or to modify pre-planned steps when seeing that it is just not working for the [participant].”

“[Allow] the individual time to get used to the activity, it may be that they want to participate, but they feel intimidated too. Giving the individual time to process the environment and the activity could be what they need to ... participate[.]”



“To ensure [a participant] has a smooth and successful transition into their new program and space, the new coach [or facilitator] should first get to know them. When ... a sense of belonging [is developed] ... engagement will also increase. Getting to understand [a participant’s] likes, interests, and goals will help the new coach understand how to create a fun and engaging [experience].”

**Mastery – “Experiencing achievement, competence; having sense of accomplishment,” (CDPP, 2018).**

“[To promote] the building block of mastery ... I ensure that individuals who I am directing feel a sense of accomplishment, which gradually grows with time. One way I have done so is by using positive framing in my speech. For instance, ... if a client ... were unable to increase the number of reps they completed, this may make them feel as if they have regressed or stagnated in their progress. However, I would always be sure to comment on their improvements in form over time, as rep count is not the only way to gauge progress. Also, with my clients, I ... write down their rate of perceived exertion ... and let them know when they have progressed by simply requiring less effort to produce the same results.

“[A]utistic participants may have difficulty in doing some complex movements, so when we design our program, we should focus on simple skill building. For instant, we can break down [each] movement into smaller chunks, and explain it to the participants, so that they can repeat each skill and master it before moving on to the next one. As a facilitator, we should keep our [instructions] simple, clear, and concise by giving one direction at a time. By focusing on mastery, we can help our participants feel a sense of accomplishment ... and increases their self-efficacy.”

**Meaning – “Contributing toward obtaining a personal or socially meaningful goal; feeling a sense of responsibility to others,” (CDPP, 2018).**

"What's really successful is not only being included, but you know, you're part of something much grander and much bigger than yourself."

"...focus on creating a sense of purpose and connection for participants. This can be achieved by incorporating activities that are meaningful and relevant to the interests and abilities of the participants, as well as by creating opportunities for social connection and community building."

"...help... participants find value in their physical activity participation through setting and achieving self-derived goals and developing a sense responsibility for themselves and others around them."

"Individualized interventions based on the wants, needs and desires of the participants... This assessment would involve speaking to the individual themselves (preferrable), but possibly also to those who constitute the individual's broader support network (e.g., parents, siblings, friends, extended family, support workers, teachers, coaches etc.)."



## Promoting an Inclusive Environment:

“[R]educe sensory distractions or barriers that may prevent [autistic people] from carrying out physical activity. For example, echoes in a large room or fluorescent lighting. To prevent echoes, you may use foam mats as sound absorbers. For fluorescent lighting, you can use different forms of lighting such as lamps or natural lighting through windows.”

“[C]ommunication is key to creating an inclusive environment for individuals with diverse neurological differences. [K]eep ... words simple, concise, clear, and direct ..., by using short sentences. [V]isual aids [can also] help individuals understand our instructions and information. [Verbal instructions should be given] at a slow pace to allow time for ... auditory processing. Repeat [any type of] instructions or demonstrations if needed. [Be sure to] limit the use of non-verbal communication, sarcasm, idioms, and other figures of speech[.]”

“[Even if] you have difficulty ... understanding the needs of an autistic person due to a different communication style ... [it is] important ... to still include the [person] and assume competency when communicating what you are doing and why you are doing it. For example, for a non-speaking autistic person, you should still explain why you are moving the soccer game from outside to inside in order to keep the person in the loop and provide an opportunity for them to communicate their needs using noises, non-verbal gestures or use of an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device.”



## Creating Inclusive Programs:

“[I]nvolving participants into the program ... can be done in several ways, such as hosting an open house or creating a video that introduces the program and its staff. By providing such information, participants can get an idea about what to expect and who will be supporting them throughout the program.”

"...having a plan for what the session is going to look like and then sticking to it would be helpful. Also being very positive about what's accomplished and not overly critical about any shortcomings."

“Providing regular breaks and incorporating movement opportunities such as stretching, walking, or sensory activities can help individuals with autism and other neurodivergent conditions to regulate their sensory system and maintain attention during activities[.]”

“...avoiding unnecessary physical touch, avoiding the expectation of eye contact, and [ensuring staff] pay... attention to participants' needs[.]”

“An easy starting point is providing a schedule of the day/session in verbal, written, or visual format, and even better to do all three...Additionally, for longer programs, a consistent routine is beneficial so that your participants are more comfortable knowing what to expect. Even if you are learning different skills or are playing different games each time, a routine could look like morning check-in, go over daily schedule, game, snack, skill-based learning, lunch, game, afternoon check-in, home time.”



“Knowing the benefits of physical activity in terms of mental health, easing into activities like walking and ball games at the beginning stages can help lead up to participation in dance or sports. Demonstrating an activity and highlighting positive feedback about what was done well in the game could also stimulate more people to participate.”



## Modifying Existing Programs:

“Adjusting the environment to accommodate sensory needs such as providing a quiet space, using earplugs or headphones, or adjusting lighting can help individuals...to feel more comfortable and participate more fully. Another thing that can be done is the use of a timer [(provided timers are not a source of anxiety for an individual).] [T]he use of a timer, [can create] structure to a program [,] and knowing when the activity is going to end with a signal [can allow individuals] to transition more smoothly.”

“The use of physical, peer-led and visual demonstrations of the activity can help individuals with autism, but also neurotypical participants with different learning styles, to better understand and process instruction. This simple modification to the learning environment fosters a universal design for activity instruction that is supportive and inclusive of all individuals.”

“Some other simple modifications to activities and physical activity environments can be to provide and encourage the use of designated quiet/alternative individual activity areas for individuals to go if the current environment is becoming overwhelming. Even structuring lessons to include a variation of large group, smaller group, or individual activities so that there is a natural opportunity throughout the class for time to oneself can also be helpful.”



## Bits of Wisdom:

“[[I]f something is bothering an individual do not simply ignore it (it can be minor to you but a real distraction for them)[.]”

“Inclusion and safety amongst all individuals are minimum requirements every person is entitled to.”

“Demonstrating an activity before the game and highlighting positive feedback for what the individuals did well in the game could motivate more people to participate.”

“I think it is important to be client and family centered when working with autistic individuals to hear the individual sensory needs required for successful participation in physical activity. This is particularly important for people who have different communication styles, with using the family as a resource being an important strategy.”



## References

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