

Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Facts and Tips for Phys Ed Teachers and Coaches

The information on this sheet will help you create a positive learning environment for students on the autism spectrum while they are with you. Thanks for your willingness to learn about and support them!

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are quirky, endearing kids who struggle with a wide range of challenges in any or all of the following areas:

Anxiety: Students with ASD often have limited coping skills, which can lead to extreme anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They depend heavily on routines and structure, and may cling to certain objects or repetitive interests to help them feel safe.

- ✓ Ask the teacher to help you prepare a visual schedule to create predictability and reduce anxiety.

Rigidity: Students with ASD tend to be rigid rule followers. Rules make life more manageable and predictable. *These students very much want to follow the rules, but may not understand exactly what the rules are.* This same rigidity means these students may get extremely agitated when rules are broken or when something unexpected happens.

- ✓ Use concrete and specific language to make your expectations as clear as possible.

Communication: Many of these students express themselves in unusual ways or have a hard time making their thoughts and needs known. They may also have difficulty understanding your words.

- ✓ Remember that making conversation is a developing skill. Be patient and supportive.

Socialization: These students struggle socially. Interactions may be awkward, one-sided, or nonexistent. Be aware that social challenges make these students very vulnerable to being bullied.

- ✓ Keep a watchful and protective eye out for provocation, bullying, teasing, or other disrespectful treatment by peers.

Sensation: Most students with ASD take in far too much or far too little sensory input. Hand-flapping, rocking, and similar behaviors are related to sensory challenges.

- ✓ Adapt the sensory environment based on individual needs and teacher input. Offer options whenever possible.

Behavior: *All behavior is a form of communication.* Difficult behaviors indicate that something is wrong. Chances are, a behavioral problem is the result of one of the challenges described above.

- ✓ When students with ASD misbehave, they need help—not consequences.

Inside/Outside: Some students with ASD demonstrate obvious, *external* challenges: They may flick their fingers or talk endlessly about a single topic.

- ✓ Don't *underestimate* these students; they may have lots of clever, creative ideas going on inside.

Other students are primarily affected by internal challenges: They may appear typical.

- ✓ Don't *overestimate* these students; they may struggle intensely with many challenges that can't readily be seen.

Flip the page for specific suggestions!

Overcoming Hurdles in Phys Ed

Take One for the Team: Being part of a team is a special challenge for students on the spectrum.

Before breaking into teams, take a few minutes to conduct a whole-class lesson on teamwork. Review important skills like flexibility, patience, negotiation, compromise, tolerating mistakes, problem solving, and recognizing when and how to get help. Choose teammates kindly and mindfully. Create structure by offering positions that play to individual strengths, such as timekeeper, scorekeeper, equipment manager, efficiency expert, or sportscaster.

Run Interference: The sounds of pounding feet and skidding sneakers may be overwhelming to students on the spectrum. Look for signs of discomfort. Offer breaks or, *if necessary*, less intense ways of participating.

Par for the Course: Poor athletic performance may be due to challenges of gross motor, visual-motor, or hand-eye coordination; motor planning; focus; or auditory processing. Offer gentle guidance and optional activities that play to a student's skills.

Lay Out the Game Plan: Sit everyone down quietly to explain or review the rules of a new game. Comprehension will be up when noise and movement and other distractions are down. Also be aware that these students may not have been included in pick-up games in the neighborhood, so they may not know basic rules of common games.

Touch Base: In phys ed, adrenaline flows and aggressive instincts surge. This is a socially vulnerable time for students with ASD. You can't see or hear bullying from the pitcher's mound. Move around the field and dugout to listen and look closely for signs of trouble.

And They're Off: Some students with ASD have difficulty with balance and stability. Activities that require them to be off the ground or upside down, such as climbing, gymnastics, or yoga, may be dizzyingly disorienting. Be at the ready with extra support or alternative activities, if needed.

Foul! Students with ASD are rigid rule followers. They've been taught all their lives that it's never okay to push others or to grab a toy from someone else's hands. Suddenly, in competitive sports, *shoving*, *tackling*, and *stealing* are encouraged and celebrated. To these students, that's just WRONG. Teach them that here, in the gym, in specific games, it really is okay.

Classroom Teacher Notes: _____

For more information, touch base with the classroom teacher or principal (or browse through *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*).

Know Your Student

- Don't reinvent the wheel! Talk with the classroom teacher or case manager to find out what tends to set her off and what makes things better.
- Read the IEP to find out more about the challenges this student faces and what goals have been set.
- Attend team meetings to learn about current stressors and new strategies. If you can't get there, ask for a summary of the discussion and recommendations.