



CALLS FOR COACHES

Coaching to Support Inclusion of Young Athletes with Disabilities

Research suggests that participation in sports and recreation programs can improve the physical fitness, mental health and social inclusion of people with physical disabilities and intellectual and developmental disabilities.¹ Organized sports are a unique opportunity for young people to gain feelings of independence while exploring their physical and emotional boundaries and building friendships. The seven strategies outlined in Project Play's "Calls for Coaches" are equally relevant for coaching athletes with or without disabilities. Additionally, coaches may employ the following practices to help foster a more inclusive and adaptive environment that supports the social and emotional development of all youth athletes.

01 EXAMINE IMPLICIT BIASES

Reflect on your own perceptions of ability and disability

Coaches must first reflect on their own understanding of disability and consider how those perceptions, along with the behaviors they produce, may impact young athletes' experiences. Traditionally, youth athletes with disabilities have been excluded from organized sports due to misconceptions about ability, fear of injury, uncertainty of how to adapt activities, or simply an unwillingness to try.² Some coaches are also deterred by the belief that they need specialized training in order to coach this population. However, coaches who question common assumptions often realize that youth with disabilities can perform many of the same workouts, activities and games as their classmates with minor modifications.

Popular culture tends to portray athletes with disabilities in terms of tragedy, inspiration or surprise. Over time, norms and expectations are created which formally or informally exclude people with disabilities from sport.³ As a result, many programs are still characterized by engaging youth with disabilities through one-time opportunities, segregated activities or patronizing environments. For example, children with intellectual disabilities are sometimes invited to take a single, uncontested shot at the end of a game rather than participate alongside





their peers in a full season of meaningful practice and competition. The crowd may cheer, but coaches should consider how these token experiences may actually perpetuate exclusion and misconceptions about the athletic abilities of youth with disabilities. Coaches may create a variety of roles on the team — such as athlete, team manager, statistician or umpire — and provide genuine responsibilities for each position to ensure meaningful participation for all.

Practice Spotlight

- Ask yourself some questions using a strengths-based approach. Focus on what the youth athlete can bring to the activity rather than trying to “fix” or “overcome” their disability. For example:
 - What abilities does the athlete have that are valuable for this sport or skill?
 - What are they already good at?
 - What activities do they enjoy?
 - Where do they gain confidence?
 - Where can they most likely succeed?
 - What other overlapping identities, such as age, gender, race or class, may be impacting their experience?
 - How might adaptation or modification to the space, task or equipment enhance athlete safety, enjoyment and performance?

02 CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Embrace the natural variation of physical and intellectual ability

One of the primary social barriers to effective sport coaching is the use of language which signals otherness. Using respectful language when coaching youth athletes with disabilities is not just a matter of etiquette or political correctness. Language contributes heavily to a family’s first impression of the coach and is an important building block of the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches should consider using person-first language, but also pay attention to the words and phrases that people with disabilities use most often and prefer. For example, phrases such as “athlete with a disability” or “person with autism” are generally considered more appropriate than sentimental descriptions such as “challenged runner.”⁴





Supporting social and emotional development of youth athletes with disabilities requires creativity, patience and an awareness of the vast diversity within the disability spectrum. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Adaptations will be unique for each athlete and may require several attempts in order to find a successful solution. An athlete with a profound cognitive disability, or multiple disabilities, may benefit from an entirely different communication and coaching style compared to an athlete with limited physical mobility. In fact, some disabilities will not be readily apparent at all. It is likely that many adults are already coaching children with learning disabilities or other invisible impairments without even knowing it. So, it is important to keep an open mind about the wide range of both physical and intellectual disabilities and employ flexible, individualized coaching strategies which can have a long-term positive impact on the health and well-being of each child. Shifting our paradigm to see strengths and natural variations of ability can help all athletes embrace a more active lifestyle.

Practice Spotlight

- Utilize person-first language which puts the person before the diagnosis (for example, “person with autism” rather than “autistic person”) and avoid overly emotional terms such as “wheelchair-bound,” “suffering” or “confined.”
- When coaching Unified Sports, which combine athletes with and without intellectual disabilities, have an open discussion about what is/is not acceptable before or during the first practice so that teammates understand how to interact with respect.
- When working with volunteers, have an early conversation about person-first language in order to reduce or remove the barrier of communication.
- Avoid using subjective, ableist terms such as “actual”, “regular” or “normal” when comparing one version of a sport to another. Terms such as “Unified”, “modified” or “developing” are often used to represent alternative models of sport.
- Prioritize love of sport above performance in sport. Part of a coach’s job is to set the foundation to become healthy active adults. Physical activity can enhance motor and social skills as well as the overall health and well-being of people with disabilities.⁵
- Focus on foundational skills over sport-specific skills, especially at younger ages when it is important for youth athletes to learn essential motor skills and basics of gameplay.
- Emphasize to athletes and parents that participation in sports and recreation can also improve daily living skills, posture, mobility, endurance, cognitive and social skills.
- Identify participants not just by their age, but also their readiness and desire to play.
- Use sport and recreation to help athletes, coaches and parents view disability as an experience which can build resilience, ingenuity and an enhanced appreciation of life.





03 COACH THE PERSON AND THE IMPAIRMENT

Understand the unique values and motivations of each athlete

The disability experience is extremely diverse and cuts across every social identity group, including age, gender, race and socioeconomic status. In fact, some athletes do not consider themselves “disabled” at all. For others, physical and intellectual impairment affects numerous aspects of daily life. Coaches should resist the urge to categorize or label athletes and instead take the time to learn about each person’s unique values and motivations for participating in sport. All youth deserve the opportunity to practice the social, emotional and behavioral skills typically required in the classroom, workplace, relationships and sport. Effective coaches employ strategies which emphasize effort, autonomy and learning in addition to the mastery of sport-specific skills.

It is important to recognize that holistic, child-centered coaching cannot simply ignore aspects of disability. In fact, understanding an athlete fully often requires understanding their disability. In some cases, creating a fun and safe environment may require some adaptation or modification to typical sports. Sport adaptations are ways to change the environment, equipment and other aspects of play in order to help athletes with disabilities participate as independently as possible. Adaptations may be temporary or long term and may even change from one activity to the next. The STEP principle (see below) offers a helpful model for uncovering the right method of adaptation for each athlete.

Practice Spotlight

- Develop youth athletes as people first and foremost. A person’s disability is not the only unique thing about them, so try to learn about their strengths, skills and interests in order to build the foundation of a positive coach-athlete relationship.
- Encourage all athletes to communicate with their teammates using their first name.
- Welcome all athletes and ask them to share one thing that they have done outside of practice each week. Allow children to get to know each other during this time in order to increase teamwork during sessions.
- Provide all youth with the time and space to take the lead, demonstrate their level of interest and set their own expectations through free play and experimentation in an inclusive group setting.





- Ask athletes with disabilities if they would like help before providing guided instruction or physical manipulation. All youth athletes can find satisfaction from the persistence that it takes to learn new skills.
- Utilize the STEP principle (see below) and explain that even if a sport skill proves difficult, there are plenty of ways to adjust the space, task or equipment while reinforcing that learning happens through trial and error.
- Focus first on improving the skills that an athlete can perform. Utilize the minimal adaptations necessary and provide goal-oriented challenges like hitting a specific target.
- When an athlete has success, record any effective adaptations (such as equipment modifications or coaching cues) so that they can be easily referenced in future sessions.

ADAPTATIONS USING "STEP"

The STEP principle can be used to ensure that all activities are inclusive and meet the needs of the individual children you are coaching:

- **SPACE** – Change the space where an activity or task takes place
 - Shrink the field or court size to improve accessibility
 - Lower the basketball hoop to accommodate athlete abilities
 - Play on a hard surface or dirt to accommodate wheelchairs
 - Reduce background noise to help athletes with visual impairments
- **TASK** – Change individual tasks in order to meet the ability level of each athlete
 - Allow athletes to travel or double dribble during basketball practice
 - Slow the pace of play while learning to play soccer
 - Remove serving positions or boundary lines during badminton practice
- **EQUIPMENT** – Change the equipment used so that all athletes can participate
 - Use an inflatable beach ball for volleyball practice
 - Use a beeper ball to allow easier tracking in tennis
 - Use flotation devices or railings while learning how to swim
- **PEOPLE** – Change the number of athletes in a session or station to create a better experience.
 - Provide partners in order to lead/follow during an activity
 - Adjust team sizes to allow greater participation
 - Utilize stations based on age and ability level

Adapted from Special Olympics. (2020). *Developmental sports implementation guide: Coaching Special Olympics athletes ages 6-12*. <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/developmental-sports/Developmental-Sports-Young-Athletes.pdf>





04 CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF INCLUSION

Every environment is an adaptive environment

Supporting an inclusive environment for youth athletes with disabilities requires the management of both physical and social space. Coaches should consider the accessibility of the facility as well as how athletes will travel to the site, utilize equipment and enter the playing surface. It is equally important to recognize any potential social barriers. Unfortunately, some people with disabilities are so accustomed to exclusion that they have no expectation to be included.⁶ So, it is important for coaches to reassure young athletes and their parents that they can indeed participate and to model positive interactions which help them fit in with the group.

Several models of sport can be played across the inclusion spectrum (see below). One model — known as Unified Sports — joins youth with and without intellectual disabilities to compete on the same team. Teams are organized by age and ability, making gameplay more fun and exciting for all. Unified Sports reminds us that it is not the child's responsibility to conform to traditional athletic roles, but rather the responsibility of adults to build a more inclusive and adaptive environment.

Practice Spotlight

- Publish flyers and other materials which clearly welcome youth athletes of all abilities and showcase any relevant coaching credentials and certifications.
- Communicate clearly through a variety of mediums and consider solutions for common communication barriers, such as hand signals or visual demonstrations for athletes who are deaf. Thoughtful communication practices and Universal Design for Learning principles will ultimately benefit all children.
- Provide clear directions about your programs, including what to wear and what equipment to bring.
- Consult with teachers and parents to understand the type of inclusion that each athlete experiences in school or community settings in order to help prepare group activities.
- Create opportunities for communication among athletes before, during and after practice or competition. Cooperative games that are not related to sport can help children get to know each other better.





- Remind teammates that athletes are athletes and sports are sports — some athletes just use different equipment or slight rule adjustments in order to play.
- Recognize specific athletes for achievement, sportsmanship or leadership and allow other teammates to do the same.
- Consider hosting demonstration events or scrimmages and invite family and community members so that they can share the experience of inclusion.

THE INCLUSION SPECTRUM

These five models of activity may help coaches include youth athletes with a range of disabilities into a single sport program. Of course, the ultimate goal is to make all environments as inclusive as possible:

- **OPEN ACTIVITY** – Everyone in the group participates in the same activities and tasks with minimal modifications.
- **MODIFIED ACTIVITY** – Everyone in the group performs the same activity with modifications to the space, task and/or equipment to suit the needs of each individual. For example, some players are allowed an extra bounce during a tennis match.
- **PARALLEL ACTIVITY** – Everyone in the group works on the same activity. However, athletes are grouped based on ability and may perform different tasks with necessary modifications.
- **SEPARATE ACTIVITY** – Individuals and groups perform different activities often at different times and locations. For example, individuals without physical disabilities may play standing volleyball while those with physical disabilities play an adapted version such as sitting volleyball.
- **DISABILITY SPORT ACTIVITY** – Everyone in the group participates in the adapted version of a sport. For example, athletes with and without disabilities all play wheelchair basketball together. This is sometimes referred to as “reverse inclusion.”

Adapted from Cerebral Palsy Sport. (2020). *It's okay to play: Engaging people with cerebral palsy and associated physical impairments in sport and physical activity*. <http://www.cpsport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CP-Sport-Its-Okay-to-Play-A5-Leaflet-Professionals-version-Accessible.pdf>

05 LISTEN AND COLLABORATE

Include people with disabilities in all aspects of programming





Successful coaches strive to work *with* and *for* youth with disabilities to co-construct more inclusive and innovative coaching practices. One simple and effective way to ensure representation is to recruit people with disabilities to serve as coaches, mentors and administrators. Special Olympics programs, adaptive sport organizations, and centers for independent living may all be able to help identify potential partners. Athletes themselves are often the best sources of knowledge when it comes to individual disabilities and associated adaptations.

When in doubt, do not be afraid to ask questions. Talk to the athlete, their family or teachers to better understand their learning style and what coaching strategies might work best for them. Provide family members with the opportunity to express any anxieties or ask questions prior to participation and try to prepare the athlete for what they will experience. Effective adaptive sport coaches gain trust by asking questions, collaborating with athletes and offering consistent programming with clear expectations. Finally, coaches should be aware that there are numerous organizations which specialize in providing adaptive sport opportunities for youth athletes with disabilities and seek support from partner organizations whenever possible.

Practice Spotlight

- Consult and include people with disabilities in all areas of the program — from marketing to coaching — and engage experienced athletes with disabilities to serve as coaches, role models and mentors. Seeing other youth with disabilities in leadership positions can be extremely empowering for athletes and their families.
- Offer a variety of ways for participants to ask questions and provide feedback on programming, such as surveys and individual check-ins.
- Build relationships with parents, guardians, siblings and other members of the household by offering a “family and friend session” and encouraging them to play alongside the athletes.
- Host an educational session for parents with suggestions on how to advocate for their child in sports while supporting lifelong physical activity.
- Invite family members to volunteer as coaches so that they can replicate activities at home and reinforce healthy habits for fitness, nutrition, hydration and sleep.
- Recruit coaches and volunteers who have a strong background in sport, youth development and disability, including special education teachers, therapists and rehabilitation professionals.
- Strive to have at least one coach for every four athletes while recognizing that some athletes may benefit from one-on-one support.





- Establish a consistent routine with practices scheduled at the same time each day or week in order to build trust and comfort.

Calls for Coaches – Coaching to Support Inclusion of Youth Athletes with Disabilities is authored by Shawn Maloney in consultation with Special Olympics and the Aspen Institute Project Play team.

¹ Rubenstein, E., DuBois, L., Sadowsky, M., Washburn, K., Forquer, M., Stanish, H., & Shriver, T. (2020). Evaluating the potential of Special Olympics fitness models as a health intervention for adults with intellectual disabilities. *Disability and Health Journal*, 13(2), 100850.

² Martin, J. J. (2013). Benefits and barriers to physical activity for individuals with disabilities: A social-relational model of disability perspective. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 35(24), p. 2030–2037.

³ Coakley, J. J. (2015). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

⁴ Special Olympics. (2020). *Developmental sports implementation guide: Coaching Special Olympics athletes ages 6-12*. <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/developmental-sports/Developmental-Sports-Young-Athletes.pdf>

⁵ Shapiro, D. R., & Martin, J. J. (2010). Athletic identity, affect, and peer relations in youth athletes with physical disabilities. *Disability and Health Journal*, 3(2), 79–85.

⁶ Coakley, J. J. (2015). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

