

JOINING A SPORTS SESSION

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting a new sports session can be highly anxiety inducing for neurodivergent young people, as uncertainty about the venue, the people, and expectations can feel overwhelming. Navigating these unknowns requires heavy executive functioning, such as planning and shifting between tasks, which can turn simple steps into exhausting mental loads. Ensuring a positive first experience is critical; it builds trust, signals that you value neurodivergent participation, and lays the foundation for a lasting sense of belonging and long-term engagement in sport.

2. KEY INFORMATION

Creating a positive, neuroinclusive joining journey can be broken down into three key stages:



Seeking information:

Before deciding to join, participants need clear, freely accessible information to reduce anxiety. This includes visual guides of the facility, photos of coaches, and an updated sign-up form that explicitly invites participants to share their access, support, or communication needs.



Once signed up:

After committing, uncertainty remains. You can build confidence prior to the first session by providing "social stories" (simple visual guides of what to expect), offering opportunities to visit the venue to observe, or setting up a buddy scheme.



Attending a first session:

The first day is crucial for setting the tone. Prioritise forming positive relationships and building trust before placing any performance or instruction demands on the participant. Keep the session relaxed, low demand, and focused on making them feel safe and empowered.

3. HIGH LEVEL HINTS AND TIPS



Make inclusivity visible: Feature a clear neuroinclusive statement on your website or social media declaring that all minds and ways of communicating are valued.



Audit your communications: Ensure your website and emails use clear, sans-serif fonts, soft pastel colours, and visual hierarchies (like bullet points) to reduce visual stress and cognitive load.



Create visual resources: Use free tools like Canva to create short videos or picture guides showing what to wear, where to meet, and how the session will run.



Collaborate with support networks: Ask parents, caregivers, or trusted adults simple questions before the session, such as “What helps them feel comfortable?” to anticipate needs and reduce anxiety.



Connect before you coach: Start initial conversations with informal, respectful chats about the young person's interests (like their favourite team) to help them feel seen as a person rather than assessed as a participant.

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