

MAYA'S NEUROINCLUSIVE JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF REMOVING BARRIERS

Sport has the power to transform lives, but joining a new session can feel incredibly overwhelming for neurodivergent young people due to environmental and social barriers. Neuroinclusive practice is not about trying to "fix" the person, but about proactively removing these barriers so that every mind is valued and supported to thrive. Maya, a 13 year old autistic girl who can easily feel overwhelmed by noise and new situations, provides a perfect example of how small, intentional adaptations can create a genuinely positive first experience in sport.

SEEKING INFORMATION & SIGNING UP

**1**

Maya's journey begins at home, where she finds a club website featuring a clear neuroinclusive statement: "Everyone belongs here". The website provides a clear visual schedule, photos of the venue, and a short, welcoming video from the coach, which instantly reduces her anxiety. During sign-up, the club uses an inclusive form that encourages Maya and her mum to share her access needs and submit her personal "Communication Card," ensuring the club knows exactly how to support her before she even arrives.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE BEFORE THE FIRST DAY

**2**

Once Maya is signed up, Coach Sam proactively emails her a "social story", a simple PDF with photos of the entrance, the coaching team, and a brief outline of what to expect. To further build her confidence, Sam offers an optional quiet visit to the venue before the first session. During this visit, Sam introduces Maya to the stigma-free "5 minute break" signal and pairs her with a friendly peer buddy to help her navigate the first day.

A WELCOMING FIRST SESSION

3

On the day of the session, Maya arrives to a clearly signposted, uncluttered sports hall that features a designated quiet corner equipped with a "sensory toolkit". Coach Sam prioritises connection over coaching by chatting with Maya about her favourite football player, making her feel seen as an individual. Rather than using loud, rigid drills, the session is designed around flexible, small-sided games with short instructions and peer demonstrations, allowing Maya to participate and make choices at her own pace.

4

Support in Action and a Positive Outcome

Halfway through the session, the hall becomes noisy and Maya begins to feel overloaded. Empowered by her pre-visit, she holds up five fingers to signal she needs a break. Sam simply nods, and Maya retreats to the quiet corner to regulate using ear defenders from the sensory toolkit. After a few minutes, she rejoins the game with no fuss or penalty. Because the environment, communication, and session design were adapted to support her, Maya doesn't just survive her first session, she leaves feeling trusted, successful, and excited to return.

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