

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY IN SPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in how human brains process information, encompassing profiles such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. While sport has the power to transform lives, joining a new session can feel overwhelming for neurodivergent young people due to environmental and social barriers, such as sensory overload or unclear communication. **Neuroinclusive practice is not about trying to "fix" the person** to fit into an existing environment. Instead, it is about **removing those barriers** so that every mind is valued and supported to thrive, fostering a true sense of belonging.

2. KEY INFORMATION

Approximately **15–20% of the population is neurodivergent**, yet evidence indicates they participate in sport at roughly half the rate of the wider population. Closing this participation gap is critical because **sport is disproportionately beneficial for neurodivergent individuals**. When barriers are addressed, the transformative power of sport includes:



Mental Health and Emotional Regulation:

Physical activity actively supports attention and self-regulation in people with ADHD, and enhances emotional resilience in autistic individuals.



Social Connection:

Sport fosters peer connection, social inclusion, and improved communication skills.



Wider Life Outcomes:

Engaging in sport can provide a sense of achievement where traditional education sometimes fails, while boosting confidence, school attendance, and employment readiness.

3. HINTS AND TIPS

In this series we will delve deeper into accommodations that meet the needs of not just neurodivergent participants but all those who join a session. For coaches and sports leaders, making small, manageable adjustments can profoundly improve the experience for all participants, some examples include:



Adapt Communication:

Give instructions in multiple ways. Do not rely exclusively on talking; use clear visual aids, demonstrations, and examples.



Design Flexible, Game-Like Sessions:

Move away from rigid, repetitive drills. Focus on playful, game-like activities that allow participants to explore, make choices, and succeed in their own way.



Provide Sensory Support:

Designate quiet spaces or low stimulation zones away from the main activity. Consider offering a "sensory toolkit" equipped with items like ear defenders, sunglasses, or fidget toys to help individuals manage stress.



Implement a '5-Minute Break' Strategy:

Give all participants a simple, stigma-free way to self-regulate. For example, allow a participant to hold up five fingers to signal they need a short 3-5 minute break in a calm area, with no questions asked.



Understand Meltdowns:

Recognise that meltdowns are neurological events resulting from overwhelming sensory or emotional stress, not misbehaviour. Respond by reducing demands, providing space, and avoiding judgement.

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