

Autism - Support card

No two autistic people are the same. Autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways. Get to know the person to understand their motivations, how the condition affects them and what support they might need.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.

Football pathways

There is not an autism specific format of football however players with autism play across all formats of football including mainstream, pan disability and impairment specific football.

General characteristics

Autism is not a learning disability, but research suggests that around half of people with autism may also have a learning disability, which will affect the level of support they need in their life.

Autistic people have differences in four main areas compared to non-autistic people

1. Communication differences can include:

- difficulties with speech including sometimes limited or no speech
- very articulate but may show difficulties in comprehension such as literal interpretation and processing delays
- Difficulties in maintaining eye contact and a struggle to understand nonverbal communication such as gestures, sarcasm or tone of voice.

2. Social interaction differences can include:

- preference to spend time alone rather than seek company of others
- difficulties in considering other people views or emotions and therefore seeming insensitive
- difficulties in judging physical space and proximity
- struggling to join in with small talk, which can be misinterpreted as being rude or disinterested.

3. Sensory processing differences can include over or under sensitivity in one or more of the seven sensory systems: touch, sight, sound, taste, smell, body awareness, and balance.

4. Routine differences can include repetitive and restrictive behavior, highly focused interests or hobbies, which mean some autistic people find it hard to:

- prepare for change and cope in new or unfamiliar situations
- understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions
- predict what will or what could happen next.
- Other differences can include extreme anxiety, meltdowns and shutdowns.
- Differences can lead to many strengths including strong visual skills, good factual memory, ability to concentrate on detail, and a tendency for special interests to lead to the development of talents and expertise.
- Autistic people may not see the consequences of their actions and may have a limited sense of danger.
- Also, be vigilant in checking for injuries, as some autistic people may carry on participating, unaware that they have sustained an injury.

Coaching considerations

- Be patient – players may take time to adjust to any change such as a new session, a new coach or a new venue.
- Consider your venue choice and any potential distractions. This may include checking the lighting, smells and noise levels.
- Try to reduce distractions to aid concentration. For example, only get out the equipment that will be used.
- Try to maximise space between your session and other groups using the same facility.
- Keep the venue familiar – send videos or pictures to parents or carers about any changes or for new players.
- Avoid common football phrases that can be interpreted literally, for example 'check your shoulder and keep your head up'.
- Use a variety of behaviour and emotional regulation support resources such as flashcards, structure boards, and first and then prompts to provide a clear structure and to prepare players for when a change in activity is about to happen.
- Provide a safe space and/or person the participant can go to when a situation becomes too much, and they need to regulate their emotions.
- To reduce danger, have clear physical boundaries and explain and check understanding of safety rules



Don't forget the golden nugget – Make sure your environment is always a safe and welcoming place to be!

How do I use STEP to adapt my session to include autistic players?



Space – Keep the playing area familiar by using existing pitch markings. Don't use too many cones that may confuse players. Provide a safe space for players where they can go if they need to regulate their emotions.



Task – Be clear, concise and direct with tasks, giving time for instructions to be processed. Whiteboards and demonstrations can be useful.



Equipment – Use fidget toys within a safe space to help regulate emotions. Use flashcards for a visual timeline for the session. Allow the use of ear defenders to limit auditory overload.



Players – Buddy systems can help new players feel comfortable.

Step top tip:

Remember: STEP is a tool to help you coach; NOT a list of things you have to do. In order to use STEP effectively, it's essential you get to know your players so you can use the right modification at the right time to aid their development.

Additional resources

- England Football Website: Disability Section
- Disability Football Introduction Course
- National Autistic Society Website
- UK Coaching: Coaching People with Autism Guidance
- Autism, sport and physical activity e-module
- A guide for sport coaches and clubs