Little Athletics NSW

Disability Fact Sheets

A resource developed by Little Athletics NSW

ATHLETES

with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

AUTISM SPECTRUM

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

"Autism Spectrum Disorder" is a broad definition used to describe the range of different types of autism that exist, including Asperger's Disorder.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability, for which there is no cure, although improvements in ability and behaviour can occur over time. Autism affects an individual's ability to understand their world and what is happening around them.

People with autism vary enormously. The effects of autism may be mild or severe and not every characteristic is evident in every person.

People with autism have what is known as the Triad of Impairments with varying degrees of severity:

1. IMPAIRMENT OF COMMUNICATION

- May use little facial expression or non-verbal gestures
- May have little or no speech, or be quite verbal. May use an unusual voice
- May have difficulty understanding long sentences or speech that is used too quickly
- May have difficulty switching on, focusing and sustaining attention; or being quiet when required
- May have difficulty following directions
- May repeat or echo words or phrases
- May inappropriately laugh or giggle
- May understand and use words literally (e.g. "Jump to it" may literally cause the individual to jump)
- May not understand jokes or irony

2. IMPAIRMENT OF SOCIAL RELATING

- May appear unresponsive to other people
- May use unusual eye contact e.g. avoidance or fixed gaze
- May seem content when left alone
- May seek social interaction in unusual ways e.g. touching, smelling. May have little sense of other people's boundaries/personal space. May be intrusive.
- May have difficulty playing turn-taking or sharing games
- May pay little attention to the needs and feelings of others
- May be sensitive to, or defensive of, physical contact initiated by others. May become irritated if bumped or touched by others
- May have difficulty coping with "being out" or losing in races/games

3. REPETITIVE AND RESTRICTED INTERESTS AND BEHAVIOURS

- May respond to objects/toys in an unusual and repetitive way (e.g. lines up cars, blocks, sports equipment, etc)
- May show an intense level of interest in one particular area or item or object (e.g. talks about Thomas the Tank Engine, watches videos of Thomas the Tank Engine, touches toys related to Thomas the Tank Engine, looks intently at pictures of Thomas the Tank Engine, etc)
- May have a need for predictability/sameness. Likes to listen to the same story, watch the same video, play their favourite game over and over again.
- May lack imagination and ability for symbolic or pretend play. E.g. "Jumping a river" in the long jump pit
- May have difficulty waiting, standing in line, transitions between activities or with any unstructured time
- May be a perfectionist and have problems with "mistakes" or being corrected
- May lack fear of real danger, but be very fearful of harmless objects or situations

People with autism often experience overwhelming anxiety, frustration and confusion when faced with the demands of everyday life. This may give rise to behaviours like repetitive movements (finger flicking, rocking, pacing), self-isoltaing behaviours and sometimes aggression towards others, themselves, or the environment.

Many people with autism also have changing sensory sensitivities. The way that they respond to noise, touch, pain, tastes and odours suggests that, at times, their senses are heightened (they over-react) and at other times their senses are dampened (they under-react).

THE LITTLE ATHLETICS ENVIRONMENT

Of importance in the context of a sporting environment is the fact that people with autism may experience awkwardness when attempting sporting skills. The athlete may exhibit clumsiness, balance problems and stiffness. They may have problems making the body do what it needs to do. They may lack strength and tire easily.

Also relevant to a Little Athletics environment, is that an athlete with an autism spectrum disorder may not cope well with crowds, noise, being surrounded by too much movement and not having enough space.

GENERAL TIPS

for officials and age managers

Note:

Many of these tips apply to all children participating in Little Athletics

- Learn as much as you can from the athlete's parents/guardians about the typical characteristics that the athlete exhibits. Allow the parent/guardian to accompany the athlete out onto the field if they see this as appropriate.
- Familiarity is very important for an athlete with autism, therefore a very thorough induction, including a tour of facilities, explanation of procedures, getting to know the age manager, officials, etc, may assist the athlete's introduction to the sport.
- As well as possible, provide a predictable weekly routine and structured environment. This may involve using visual schedules at the start of the day (maybe using a map of the facility or pictures of each event), time frames for each activity, a regular place in a queue, etc. Give warnings to the athlete about changes of routine. Provide as much information as possible.
- You may need to use simple language and be very specific. E.g. Don't say: "Hurry up John, you'll have to stop playing with that ball now because it's time to go to the long jump and we've nearly run out of time." Say: "John, game's finished: long jump" communicated with a positive tone and body language.
- Develop positively stated rules. Tell the child what you expect him/her to do rather than what you don't want. E.g. "Share, take turns, follow the leader's instructions, and keep hands and feet to self", rather than "Don't do this, don't do that…" Express the rules visually. E.g. Illustrated on a card.
- Use positive behaviour reinforcement. i.e. Praise the athlete for doing the "right" thing rather than admonish them for doing the "wrong" thing.
- Build a happy social environment for the individual and work on establishing rapport with them by showing interest in their "narrow interest area".
- Don't try to stop unusual behaviour unless it interferes with learning or threatens the well-being of others.
- Change your expectations of the child's participation. They may not be able to perform skills as well as the other children. Consider accepting approximate attempts at skills.
- Avoid physical contact with the athlete. If physical contact is required in order to teach a skill, let the athlete know ahead of time.
- Keep the child busy when they are not participating. Make them a "helper" if possible. Avoid having the athlete in a situation where they have to wait for too long.
- Don't take apparent rudeness from the athlete personally.
- Avoid confrontation. Develop a "crises management plan" in case of a major behaviour incident. i.e. Who takes what actions.
- Ensure that you enlist additional adult support for the group. Two age managers for a group involving a child with autism are recommended.
- Take steps to prevent teasing and bullying from the other children in the group. Educate the rest of the group about the typical characteristics of the child's autism. Provide guidelines for their behaviour towards the athlete.
- Be aware that a child with autism's motivation may vary from week to week. Every child can have a bad day. Don't feel at fault if things are not going well.
- Be flexible, positive, patient and understanding.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

- Be aware that an athlete with autism may attempt to run away or "escape" from the group. Also be aware that the athlete may be attracted to climbing. Combined with the fact that the athlete may be hyperactive and/or impulsive, and also lack fear of any real danger, this may create some potential risks. Positively stated rules such as "Stay with the group" are the first step in minimizing such risks. Close adult supervision, and a plan in case such incidents occur will assist in managing any risks.
- Be aware that an athlete with autism may be prone to aggression or temper tantrums. Again, positively stated rules, good supervision and a plan in case of an incident are important. Praising/rewarding appropriate behaviour can also be effective. Finding out and avoiding the "triggers' that set off such behaviour may also assist.
- Be aware that an athlete with autism may have difficulties letting someone know when they are hurt or sick. Such an athlete may not make it apparent if they have suffered an injury, or be able to provide reliable "yes" or "no" answers to questions about their well-being. This makes it vital that a parent/guardian of the athlete is present to be called upon at all times.

AUTISM SPECTRUM

Tips for participation in Little Athletics events

SPRINTS

- Athletes with autism can understand the concept of running in a lane and can participate in running races.
- They may run with an unusual style.
- Be aware that the noise of a starting gun may frighten an athlete with autism. Consider alternatives.
- Consider providing the athlete with an outside lane so that they don't feel "boxed in".
- Be aware that the athlete may have trouble with competition, i.e. winning, losing, being first. Consider ways in which the outcome of a race can be de-emphasized.
- Consider allowing a parent/trusted person to run with the athlete if required.

MIDDLE DISTANCE

- Similar to sprints.

RACE WALKING

- Similar to sprints.

LONG JUMP/TRIPLE JUMP

- Athletes with autism may use the same facilities and rules as everyone else.
- If the athlete has problems with depth perception, consider placing big, bright witches hats next to the long or triple jump to assist the athlete to assess where the take off point is.
- Consider allowing an athlete with autism who has problems with depth perception to use a 1m square take off area.
- Be aware that athletes with autism may have difficulties with getting both feet off the ground when long or triple jumping. At a Centre level, consider relaxing the rules to allow the athlete to record a measurement.

HURDLES

- An athlete with autism may have problems with getting both feet off the ground in order to clear a hurdle. They may have problems with height, depth perception (i.e. how far away a hurdle is from them) and difficulties with their body in space. They may be very anxious or phobic about running at or clearing hurdles.
- ntroduce the event with lower and/or modified foam hurdles. Allow time for practice before formal competition.

High Jump

- If necessary, use visual cues to assist the athlete with the high jumping skill. These may include markers that indicate the path to use when running in, markings of where to take off and indicators (e.g. ribbons) of where to cross the bar.
- Beginners can practice without a cross bar, then with a flexible bar until they are proficient with whatever style they intend to use. Allow time for practice before formal competition.
- An athlete with Down Syndrome may have a genetic condition called atlantoaxial instability and should be restricted from high jumping until a clearance has been received from a physician. See "Safety Considerations" for more information.

THROWS

- Athletes with autism can take part in throwing events.
- If the athlete has low muscle tone, poor motor skills or difficulties in handling an projecting implements, consider allowing them to use implements of reduced weight or even alternative equipment. e.g, bean bags or softballs (shot put); hoops or quoits (discus); Turbojavs (javelin)
- Good supervision and safety measures will be required for those athletes that have poor impulse control or who are prone to aggression or temper tantrums.

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