

Autism

This factsheet has been developed in consultation with key agencies with experience and knowledge in the specific areas. The information is provided for **guidance** only, allowing you to be more informed in your approach to being a more **inclusive** coach. No two people are the same, as such, please ensure your first step is to speak to the person – understand their **abilities** and goals and never assume.

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates and interacts with others. It also affects how a person makes sense of the world around them. Autism is much more common than many people think, '1 in 65 people in Ireland' and autism can be a hidden disability – you can't always tell if someone has autism. Some of the strong qualities a person with autism can bring to the team are loyalty, dedication, new way of thinking or seeing things from a different perspective.

What we may see when coaching with people who have autism

- A person with autism may use or take other people's things or enter their personal space
- Some people with autism may stay on their own and not join games or activities. They may watch others or remove themselves completely from the area
- Some people with autism might want to follow the rules rigidly and may get distressed if there are any changes in the routine
- A person with autism may have differences in communication and social skills to approach another person and initiate a conversation with them. A person with autism may behave in a way that is perceived to be inappropriate, such as snatching objects away from others to start a chasing game, standing beside other people but not saying anything or saying inappropriate things to get their attention
- A person with autism may become upset easily over seemingly small issues
- A person with autism may talk out of turn, longwinded, off topic, one sided conversations etc.
- A person with autism may misunderstand commonplace phrases or teasing. For example, "pull up our socks", "think on our feet", and "let's get the show on the road"
- A person with autism may misunderstand general instructions such as "let's go in"
- A person with autism may find it hard to focus on the activity and may be easily distracted
- The movements of a person with autism may be uncoordinated and appear clumsy

Social Communication:

People with autism may have difficulties with the following areas

- Not understanding or misinterpreting unwritten social rules, e.g. around friendship
- Appearing to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone is feeling
- Preferring to spend time alone
- Being aloof, distant or uninterested in others
- Not seeking comfort from other people
- Appearing to behave strangely or inappropriately, as they are not always able to express feelings, emotions or needs
- Not speaking, unusual use of language, echolalia, making up words, pronoun reversal – e.g. James looks across the pitch and says to his coach 'you scored a goal'. The ideal coach response would be: Yes James, you did score a goal, well done! James uses 'you' when he should have said 'I'
- Not understanding or misinterpreting 'jokes or sarcasm
- Not understanding or misinterpreting 'common phrases or sayings

Restricted Interest and Repetitive Behaviours:

People with autism may have difficulties with the following areas

- Being able to understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions
- Predicting what will happen next, or what could happen
- Understanding the concept of danger
- Engaging in imaginative play and activities
- Preparing for change and planning for the future
- Coping in new or unfamiliar situations

How to include people with autism in your coaching sessions:

1. **Give the person plenty of information about the activity before they come to the coaching session**

Try the following:

Provide photos of the facilities/playing area and the coaches/volunteers

Provide information about what usually happens in the session/activity and a general timetable of what happens

Provide the rules of the game and information about equipment needed/used

He/she could visit the room/facility when nobody is there/taking part

He/she could attend/observe a session without having to participate

2. **Use more visuals when coaching.**

Try the following:

Use picture cards and/or video clips and/or demonstrations when coaching skills

If coaching a new drill, let them go last so that they can watch others do the drill first

Use visual tricks, e.g. put a mark on where they are to hold a hurley

Use cones/mats/spots to show where they are to stand/sit and where to run to

Give clear and precise explanations when outlining activities, particularly the rules

3. **Have a clear agenda and if there is a need to change, prepare them for it in advance.**

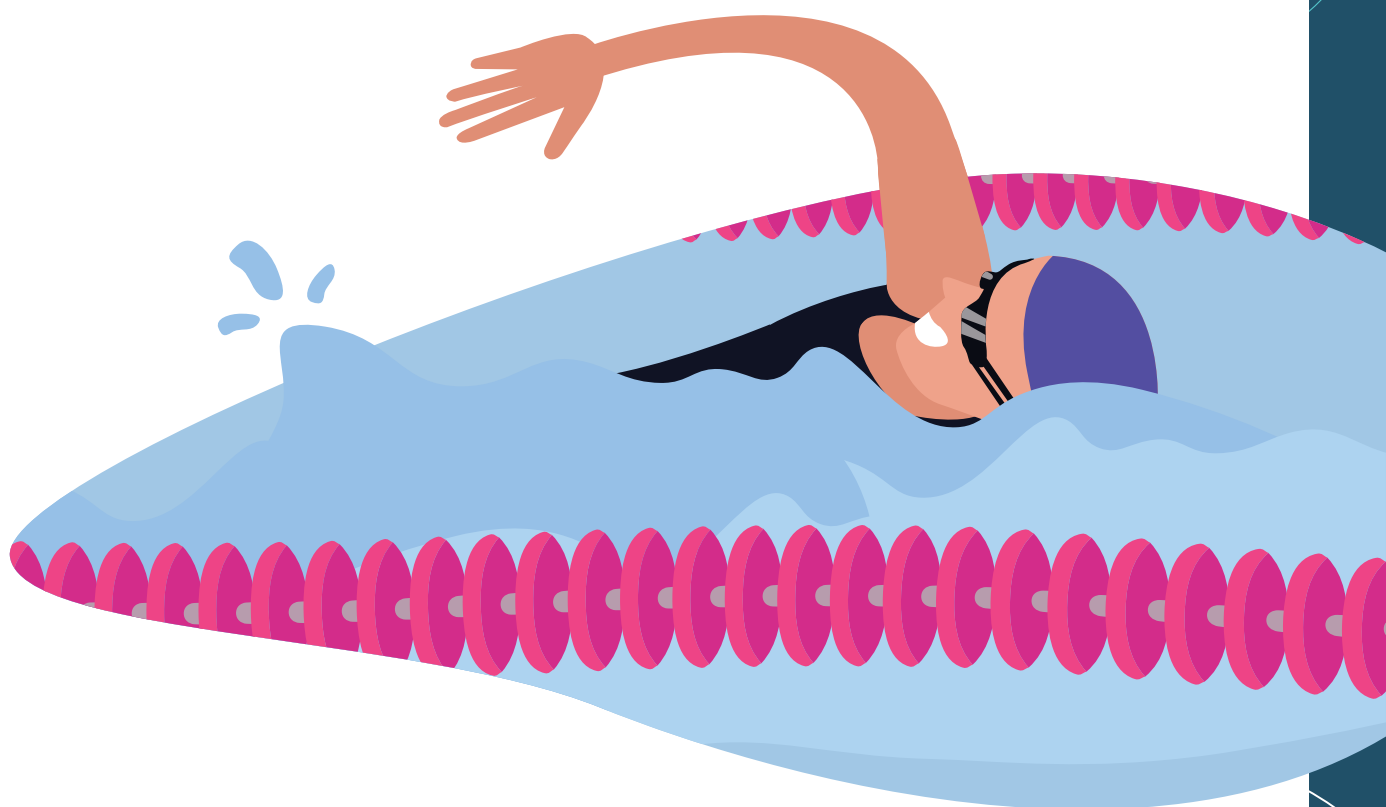
Try the following:

Have a general agenda to a session – e.g. warm up, drills, practice game, cool down

Write up the agenda for the session – e.g. list of drills, exercises etc. so they know what to expect and are less anxious. You can use a notepad or notebook to do so if you are training outside

Let them know and prepare for changes - e.g. coach is away next week but Mary will take the session and will write down what will happen

4. **Clearly communicate the rules of the session, write them down and have them available if needed.**
Try the following:
 - Be clear about the rules of the sport
 - Be clear about safety rules and why these are important
 - If incidents do occur, take time with the person to explain why it was unsafe
5. **Provide a safe place that he/she can go to have a time out if stressed or overwhelmed.**
 - It is important that they have somewhere they can go if they do feel overwhelmed to regulate themselves so that they can continue with the group if possible
 - This might be a bench at the side of the pitch, the hallway, a corner in a room etc.
 - You may want to have “calming equipment” that they can use to regulate themselves - e.g. fidgets, something I can hold/squeeze in my hand such as a stress ball, water bottle, bean bag, or an exercise ball for them to sit on



For further information and support, please visit:

www.asiam.ie

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