

→ A QUICK GUIDE FOR SPORTS

TO WELCOME AND ENCOURAGE AUTISTIC AND
ADHD TEENS TO PARTICIPATE IN SPORT



Government of South Australia
Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing

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A Quick Guide for Sports

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SPORT IS FOR EVERYONE



Sport builds confidence, connection, and belonging. Yet many neurodivergent teenagers, including autistic and ADHD individuals, continue to face barriers that make participation harder than it needs to be.

This guide helps clubs make small, practical changes that create a big impact — opening the door for more young people to be active, connected, and valued within your sporting community.

Every sport involves moments that can be challenging — loud crowds, changes in routine, unpredictable interactions — but with the right understanding, supports and planning, everyone can navigate these moments more successfully.

Did you know? Around 1 in 8 Australians are neurodivergent. When sports are inclusive, they welcome a wider range of players, attract more volunteers, and build stronger community connections.

UNDERSTANDING

Neurodiversity in sport



NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity acknowledges that all minds are different – each person thinks, learns, and experiences the world in their own unique way. We are all part of the rich tapestry of neurodiversity. Neurodivergence refers to people whose thinking, processing, or sensory experiences differ from what is considered typical. Neurodivergent individuals – such as autistic people, or those with ADHD, dyslexia or other neurological differences – are an important part of the broader neurodivergent community.

Neuro-inclusion means intentionally designing environments that support diverse sensory needs, communication styles, and learning preferences. It's not about being an expert – it's about being willing to ask questions, listen, and keep learning.

In sport, neuro-inclusive practice could look like:

- Adjusting sensory environment (e.g., dimming bright lights, managing noise levels, reducing crowding)
- Providing visual supports, clear instructions, and predictable routines
- Creating safe spaces to retreat and regulate when needed
- Listening to neurodivergent participants and involving them in decision-making, particularly decisions that affect them.

It's not about creating new programs, it's about making your existing environment more accessible for everyone.

Support engagement by building on strengths and use strategies such as;

- Use clear and consistent communication
- Share training and game plans in advance
- Offer choice and flexibility for participation
- Understand individual communication preferences.

Learn more about neurodiversity at;

<https://autismsa.org.au/>

<https://thespectrum.org.au/>

BENEFITS FOR YOUR SPORT

Why neuro-inclusion in sport matters.

Neuro-inclusion in sport matters because neurodivergent people have the right to access, enjoy, and participate fully in their sporting communities. When clubs intentionally create inclusive environments, neurodivergent individuals and their families experience greater connection, enjoyment through movement and opportunities to thrive.

- More members and retention: Welcoming clubs attract families who stay involved longer.
- Positive reputation: Builds trust and community pride.
- Access to funding: Grants and sponsors are increasingly supporting initiatives that drive inclusion and community participation.
- Better performance: Teams that value diverse thinking are more adaptable and resilient.
- Stronger culture: Inclusion improves communication, accessibility, and teamwork for everyone.

Facts:

- Neurodivergent players can and do thrive in sport.
- Inclusion does not need expensive equipment – it starts with understanding and attitude.

DO'S AND DON'TS



Consider individual learning and coaching preferences



Assume one coaching style will work for everyone



Provide information in advance



Make last-minute changes without warning



Recognise and build strengths and interests



Focus only on 'deficits'



Say what you mean and mean what you say



Avoid expressions that could be confusing or unclear

"Clubs with inclusive practices report up to 30% higher volunteer engagement."

KEY AREAS TO TAKE ACTION



Think about the whole journey of being involved in sport — from first contact with your sport to ongoing participation and volunteering.

These are the key areas where you can take action to be more neuro-inclusive:

Club leaders

- Why it matters: Leaders set the tone and need to create opportunities to listen and learn from their community.
- Quick wins: Appoint an Inclusion Champion; make your commitment to inclusion visible.
- Level up: Embed inclusion goals in your club plan and celebrate diversity.

Environment and processes

- Quick wins: Clear, simple and consistent signage, environmental considerations including quiet spaces, lighting, sound.
- Level up: Review policies and procedures to support fair play and remove barriers to participation.

Participation pathways

- Quick wins: Offer flexible or gradual participation/trial options, highlighting social or competitive programs, pair new players with a buddy, listen to participants (and families) to learn what supports may help.
- Level up: Introduce skill development sessions.

Awareness and communication

- Quick wins: Use inclusive imagery and language e.g. Everyone Welcome.
- Level up: Provide clear, easy-to-understand information, in an accessible formats and make education resources easy to access.

Coaches and officials

- Quick wins: Provide training/game plans and expectations in advance; modified rules and drills when needed and allow sensory breaks, take the time to get to know participants.
- Level up: Undertake Neurodiversity Inclusion training and develop inclusive coaching strategies and resources.

Off field involvement

- Quick wins: Offer opportunities to try roles that match interests, strengths, and availability, provide flexibility on how roles and tasks are carried out.
- Level up: Celebrate contributions equally to on field achievements. Support pathways into coaching, leadership and volunteering roles.

GOOD PRACTICE



Surf Life Saving SA **Georgia Brazenall** **Head of Club & Member Development**

Surf Life Saving South Australia believes every young person can find their place in our movement. With diverse roles across the beach, water and support areas, Autistic teenagers and teenagers with ADHD can contribute in ways that celebrate their strengths. We focus on understanding each individual, offering flexible participation and sensory-aware environments so they feel safe, valued and confident. Everyone can make a meaningful contribution and shine in a role that suits who they are.

Across South Australia, sporting clubs are taking simple steps to make sport more welcoming for teenagers with Autism and ADHD. By adjusting coaching styles, offering flexible roles, and showing empathy, these clubs prove that small changes can make a big difference in helping every young person feel they belong and thrive in their chosen sport.

Anonymous Netball Player

When coaches are running training sessions if they can use methods to put participants in groups or partners, rather than asking us to find a partner, this really helps me fit in.

Anonymous Football Player

I find competitions and game day really stressful, after talking to my coach we agreed I only attend training sessions and now I'm finding it so much more enjoyable.

Anonymous Cricket Player

My coach got an exemption so I can play in a different age group and now I am in a team with people of the same ability as me.

Remember: Inclusion is a journey, not a once-off project.
Every small step makes your club stronger.

Is our sport neuro-inclusive?

CHECKLIST

TICK WHAT ARE YOUR ALREADY DOING?



COMMUNICATION

- We share training schedules, expectations and changes in advance.
- We use plain, clear and consistent language and visuals supports where possible.
- We clearly distinguish between Social or Competitive programs.
- We ask and seek to use individual communication and accommodate sensory preferences.



ENVIRONMENT

- We have a sensory friendly, quiet or outside space available.
- We consider sensory preferences and adjust the lighting, sound and crowding.
- We strive to maintain a predictable training environment and help prepare participants for the differences between training and game day.



PEOPLE

- Coaches and leaders have opportunities to undertake training about neurodiversity.
- We have an Inclusion Champion or contact person.
- We celebrate the contributions and achievements by all.
- Leadership development opportunities are offered for neurodivergent members.
- Create opportunities for involvement by all on and off the field.



PROGRAMS

- We offer flexibility in trials and participation.
- We adapt training or games as needed to support participation.
- We offer introductory or non-competitive social sport opportunities.
- Our club actively welcomes the neurodivergent community.

WHAT PRIORITY ACTIONS DID YOU IDENTIFY?

FURTHER RESOURCES

SA Sports Medicine Association

Online education module and resources on neuro-inclusive practices in sports

<https://www.sasma.com.au>

Australian Sports Commission – Community Coaching

Resources to support the development, education and training of coaches, to provide safe, fun and inclusive environments that focus on the needs and motivations of participants.

<https://www.ausport.gov.au/coaching/community>

Disability Sports Australia

Tools and resources that build confidence for sporting professionals to make it easier for people with disability to participate in sport.

<https://sports.org.au/>

Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing

Find places to get active and information on all the state sporting organisations

<https://www.orsr.sa.gov.au/>

Special Olympics

Resources to build a more inclusive sporting sector for athletes with intellectual disability and/or autism

<https://www.specialolympics.com.au/>

Sport Inclusion Australia

Learn more about Sport Eligibility for Athletes with an Intellectual Impairment at <https://sportinclusionaustralia.org.au/>

Volunteering SA

Resources to assist with best practice in volunteer management, recruitment and training of volunteers

<https://vsant.org.au/resources-hub/>

Easy Read Resources

User-friendly ways to share information

<https://www.digital.nsw.gov.au/delivery/accessibility-and-inclusivity-toolkit/communication/easy-read>

NEXT STEPS

Start small. Pick one or two actions your club can implement immediately.

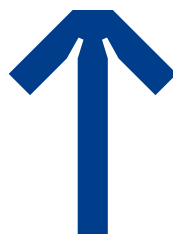
1. Ask your members what would help them feel more included. Have a dedicated officer to coordinate input.
2. Engage leadership. Make inclusion a standing agenda item at meetings.
3. Educate your community. Utilise the SASMA Neuro-Inclusive Sport resources.
4. Welcome involvement by members at all levels of your club/sport on and off the field.
4. Share your story. Inspire others by showcasing your club's progress by utilising a range of communication channels.

Inclusion is not an end goal — it's an ongoing commitment that strengthens your club and community.





OUR
PARTNERS





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