

Supporting Me to be Active: Autism & Sport

The following personal advice has been written by Marianne in response to the question *'If you could give any advice on how to support an autistic person in sport and physical activity, what would you say?'* Marianne has a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and is a participant at Sport for Confidence in Essex.

'I would say understand that things you may not even notice might bother me or other autistic people, like how bright the lights are in a sports hall, that the noise of bouncing ball is really loud or that sports like football/netball can be really overwhelming because there is lots of people in your space.

Instructions need to be clear and give time to process, if someone doesn't understand things at first give them a minute to process then check if they understood rather than want immediate reaction.

I don't know about other autistic people but I often times really want to join in with whatever the group is doing and join in socially but am not sure how to do that and need some help to feel accepted and supported in a group. When I was at school there was so much I wanted to share with other people but was too scared to talk so just got a bit ignored.

The social aspect of sport is really good because it makes you feel less lonely and it feels nice to be accepted but you need to remember socialising is quite exhausting for autistic people, after I would go to groups the rest of day is needed to recover, not necessarily physically from the activity but mentally from being around people.

Sensory needs are different for every autistic person obviously but also more important to know is that sensory needs can change day to day, just because something didn't bother you last week doesn't mean it won't bother you this week which is important to remember.

I Like routines and things to stay the same and when things changes even small ones can be hard to cope with so some processing time with changes is always helpful.



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Sometimes when situations are too overwhelming, I can't make decisions that normally I could, so another person needs to take charge and maybe take the person out of the room to a quieter place to take a break for a while.

Autistic people often have low self-esteem so in sport maybe give lots of praise for doing something well (even if it's very small) and reassurance that it's ok if you make a mistake/aren't as good at something.

In groups it's nice to put an autistic person in the same group as someone their familiar with because then we can feel bit more confident doing the activity and feel more confident in the social group.

If you're talking to autistic person about being healthy generally e.g. food or exercise remember that there is more than one barrier to achieving these things than other people. For example, with food you are supposed to eat a varied diet for health but for some autistic people this just may not be possible due to sensory issues and pressuring to change might do more damage mentally than the physical improvement might.

The same with exercise like swimming activity is fun but using changing rooms is really hard or some people might like running but it's really hard to run where there's other people around. Or that you want to try specific exercise group but you're too scared to and feel a lot of anxiety and need more support to try it.

Some general things about autism to remember : functioning labels are really unhelpful and invalidating, autistic people think differently but that doesn't make it wrong.

Please avoid sarcasm all time when talking to me, jokes and figure of speech are ok because I can just say I don't know what you mean and ask you to explain it.

Please don't presume autistic people don't want to interact with you, you might just have to change the way you approach us because 9/10 we want to be talked to and involved and the 1/10 we don't, we can either tell you (autistic people tend to be very honest) or someone we're with will tell you because there are always signs to pick up on.

Autism is lifelong disability and saying things like it's a "different ability" or "just being socially awkward", "everyone's a bit autistic", "it must be very mild", "you don't look autistic" etc is very unhelpful.

In summary to my long ramble (very sorry it's so long), life for us autistic people is already really hard – just be a person that makes that life better and not harder, and you can do that by educating yourself, remember everyone is different so it's perfectly ok to ask questions if you're unsure and give everybody the opportunity to join in, it just might be in a slightly different way.'

Marianne.