

What is Autism?

Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a lifelong disorder for which there is no cure. It can affect the individual's social and/or communicative development and can also result in restricted and repetitive interests and activities. People with an ASD often have difficulty making sense of the world around them and they may find it a confusing place. Sometimes their behaviour can become extreme, which is their way of telling us how anxious they are feeling. They often need help to interact with others and to understand what to do.

Autism Spectrum Disorders and Sport

Individuals with an ASD often have the ability and energy to join in a sport as long as they have an understanding teacher or coach who can give them the right assistance. In the same way that a teacher or coach gets to know which learning style works best with each student, this can be extended to understanding the specific needs of an individual with an ASD and working out what techniques work best.

5 Great Techniques

Here are 5 techniques that you can try:

1. "I, I, You You"

This is a very simple but effective technique to find out the student's learning style:

- I (instructor) give the instruction and I do the demonstration
- I give the instruction and you (student) do the demonstration.
- You give the instruction and I do the demonstration.
- You give the instruction while you do the demonstration.

There are 3 main learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Some of us learn best in a hands-on environment (kinesthetic), some learn best by seeing something done (visual) and others like detailed instructions on how and why to do something (auditory). When you know the learner's style then you can adapt the teaching and instructions to suit that person best. By having the student watch, listen (to you first, then to themselves) and verbalize about what they are about to engage in, it ensures that visual, verbal/auditory and kinesthetic learning abilities have all been addressed. As it is difficult to know an individual's learning style this technique will cover all learning types and will help you to work out their preferred learning style. This is not an Autism only strategy, this is something I would encourage for every athlete.

2. Give Specific Instructions

Make your questions, demands, pointers and instructions short and specific. Some individuals with an ASD can have difficulty interpreting complex instructions and may struggle with humor. They are often very literal. Also individuals with ASD may require longer amounts of time to process information.

For example, if you say, "Now does everyone want to pick up a ball and come over here?" an individual with an ASD may not understand what is expected of them.

Instead, try saying and doing;

"Everyone please pick up a ball (also hold up the ball) and stand on the baseline (wave towards yourself, point or direct athletes to where you would like them to meet)." This is short and cannot be misinterpreted. Asking to meet on the baseline is much more concrete than asking someone to meet "here". As you have read this perhaps you have painted a more accurate picture in your mind from

the second sentence compared to the first. Painting a picture using verbs, adjectives and nouns will help paint the most accurate picture for the child.

Use short direct demands when you want a response. If something is a question than make it a question but you may have to keep it short, or support it with a visual. When you make a statement then it is a good time to expose the person to new terminology.

Ex. Talking about the follow through of their arm movement. Try to make statements at the moment the behavior happens so they can pair the statement with the movement itself.

It is important to note that short and direct does not mean rude. Sentence length and words do not determine level of politeness. Your smile, tone of voice, and eyes go much further than sentence length in being polite.

3. Positive Instruction

Another simple technique is to phrase feedback in the positive: as a rule, try to use 4 positive comments for every one corrective statement.

For example, tell the learner what you would like to see more of:

“Keep your elbow up (while demonstrating on themselves or yourself),”

This is a lot more positive and powerful than:

“Don’t drop your elbow (while giving attention to the behavior you don’t want to see).”

In the negative language case they may only hear “drop your elbow”, which may reinforce the unwanted action. Support the athlete with a visual support and example to pair with the verbal instruction as often as possible in the beginning. Over time you do want to fade your verbal support so the athlete’s self talk begins to replace the coach’s instruction. This also underlines the importance of positive instruction as the athlete will begin to internalize the direction and instruction into self talk.

If the learner is someone who likes to know the “why” behind the action, explain how the power really comes from the hips and elbow beginning with the way they plant their feet. Explain how the elbow works as the fulcrum and how important it is to transfer the energy while remaining in control. For a visual learner painting this picture can be extremely useful. **Sometimes we do have to address a flaw we would like to disappear but it is extremely important that we focus eighty percent more on the techniques that can overcome the flaw.**

By phrasing things as much in the positive as possible, this also goes a long way in ensuring that the language we use is actually listened to. There is no guarantee that everything we say is actually heard and so to tip the balance in our favor we have to use fewer, more positive words. To give yourself an advantage back up what you say with body language. This way the athlete may not hear what you say, but they may hear what they see.

Another positive spin off of using visual supports from the coach is that some children with Autism don’t make the best eye contact but when a student learns that looking gets them as much information as listening does they will be more motivated to look as well as listen.

In some situation you might want to ensure that you have the athlete’s attention first by giving them something visual before you give them something verbal. Touch your elbow and if the athlete follows with their eyes then begin your verbal instruction (start with physical (point to elbow), middle is verbal (keep your elbow up) and finish with the physical (point or tap elbow)).

4. Dealing with Frustration

If a student becomes frustrated, reassure them that it is hard to pick up the skill straightaway and give them heaps of positive encouragement to keep trying: it requires time and practice to acquire a skill.

Provide analogies of persistence leading to success – eg Roger Federer didn't get to the top without a lot of practice and hard work.

5. Familiarization with the Venue

A student with an ASD will feel more comfortable once they are familiar with the venue. You can help them with by providing photos of the club, the front entrance, the court where the lessons take place, the coach, the equipment and a typical lesson with other students of the same ages. This is often called a "Social Story".

If the venue has a park adjacent to the club as in the case of the ATCC site spend some time in the park playing the individuals favorite games and of course following up the hard work of lessons with a special favorite meal can't hurt either. Other clubs may have restaurants and parks adjacent as well. The same as an Olympic athlete skates in an empty arena before the games young athletes need to be familiar and confident in new venues as well. **Visiting sports clubs (schools too) with instruction free time is crucial in the success of the endeavors before and during the time of lessons.**

The above strategies are not only for people with Autism. Some of the best strategies are ones that are already in use by professional athletes around the globe.

For further information about Autism Spectrum Disorders, visit www.autismvictoria.org.au