

Building Rapport with an Athlete/ Participant on the Autism Spectrum

Rapport is essential for coaching success for any athlete, but may be especially important when coaching an athlete on the autism spectrum because many Autistic athletes may not be:

A) Intrinsically motivated by the activity itself

E.g., Until they learn to skate and see that it is fun, they may not be motivated by skating!

B) Extrinsically motivated to achieve a specific goal

E.g., Making a rep team or one day being in the NHL.

Great rapport with a coach might make the difference between dropping out of sport, or sticking with it long enough to experience the physical, social and mental health benefits that come along with participation.

As a coach, take the time to invest in building relationships with individual athletes.

Think back to the coaches you trained the hardest for or the teachers you worked hardest for. They were people you liked, unless you had a strong extrinsic motivator, like making a provincial team or getting into university.

Building rapport is like making a new friend: You need to invest time at the beginning (e.g., go fun places, find common interests, acknowledge/appreciate their hobbies) and you must continue to invest to keep the relationship strong (e.g., help them through difficult situations and continue to try new things together). For coaches, this means getting to know your athletes (e.g., likes, dislikes, goals, motivators), and then checking in and giving them individual attention over time (e.g., positive feedback, acknowledgment/recognition, etc.).

You do not need to spend lots of time to build effective rapport: Short check-ins of a minute at the beginning of practice, or a few seconds throughout the practice can go a long way!

The key to establishing rapport: Connect on something the athlete is interested in.

How do you know what an Autistic athlete likes?

- Ask the athlete
- Ask his/her parents
- Observe (What character/team is on their t-shirt? What activities do they like best at practice?)

Examples of ways to build rapport:

- Build the athlete's interest into your programming (e.g., themed games, stickers)
- Telling jokes, being silly
- Letting the athlete tell you about something they care about (e.g., dogs, trains, Minecraft)
- Giving high fives
- Talking about a shared interest (e.g., a sports team)
- Playing a game together
- Provide positive feedback for any attempts to interact, communicate or participate in activities

