

Motivation Strategies for Athletes on the Autism Spectrum

Many athletes on the autism spectrum 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.

An Autistic athlete may be disengaged because they aren't interested in the sport itself yet. One of the biggest mistakes that can happen for athletes on the autism spectrum is when coaches or parents assume that the athlete isn't ever going to like the activity just because they don't like it on the first day. Motivation strategies are often useful to help participants stay engaged until they learn to love the activity itself and build social relationships with teammates that will keep them coming back.

Here are some ideas for building athlete motivation:

1. Build a relationship with the athlete (see [Building Rapport tip sheet](#))
2. Make sure the activities are fun from the athlete's perspective. Consider how you could incorporate the athlete's interest into the activity (e.g., give your athletes who enjoy video games the chance to 'level up' as they complete each round of the circuit.)
3. Use a schedule to show athletes the activities in your practice. This builds predictability and lets the athlete see when 'fun' activities are coming up (e.g., games). Predictability is also important to reduce anxiety for athletes on the spectrum who may struggle when they are in new/unfamiliar environments.
4. Remind the group that 'hard' activities will be followed by 'fun' activities by using lots of **First-Then statements** (e.g., "**First** we'll finish 15 sit-ups, **then** we're going to play a game.")
5. Provide frequent reminders about how many/how long: e.g., "Two more laps then we will practice passing with a friend." Transitions will be smoother and it will be easier for athletes to persevere when the length of the task is predictable.
6. Provide choices whenever possible. Giving the athlete some control over activities, equipment, and/or partners can be very engaging.
7. Remember to celebrate small successes. For some athletes, it might be a big deal to listen well with the group and try the skill. In that case, focusing, listening and attempting should be acknowledged.
8. Consider using a point system to encourage comradery and motivate the group. E.g., "Ok everyone, let's play a team passing game. The group gets one point per pass and you can't pass to the same teammate twice. When you get 10 points, we will play 'favourite game.'"

