



National Association for Sport and Physical Education

an association of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

NASPE Sets the Standard

1900 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191

Phone: 703-476-3410

Fax: 703-476-8316

Email: naspe@aahperd.org

Coaching Athletes with Hidden Disabilities

Characteristics of Hidden Disabilities

The term “hidden disabilities” is used to describe disabilities or disorders that are not obvious to the average observer. The most common hidden disabilities are those that affect learning, but have no or few obvious physical characteristics outside of an instructional situation. Athletes with these disabilities can experience difficulty acquiring the skills related to participating in sports, just as they can experience difficulty in school-related tasks.

Youth sport coaches are likely to work with athletes with specific learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism spectrum disorder. Therefore, the purpose of this document is to inform youth sport coaches of the characteristics of hidden disabilities that can affect learning in the athletes they coach, identify keys to successful inclusion, and offer effective tips for communicating with parents.

Specific Learning Disability

A specific learning disability (SLD) is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. This is manifested in deficits in perception, listening, thinking, speaking, reading and writing, spelling or performing mathematical calculations. Someone with an SLD is characterized as having average or above-average intelligence, but an unexpected deficit or discrepancy in one or more areas related to learning. An athlete with an SLD might have difficulty remembering newly learned information, expressing thoughts vocally; understanding information presented, following directions and routines, moving around objects or people without bumping them due to deficits in spatial awareness, and might act less socially mature than other athletes of the same age.

Speech & Language Disorders

A speech disorder involves deficits in the ability to produce speech sounds correctly or fluently. An athlete with a speech disorder might have difficulty producing particular sounds or articulating his or her speech clearly. (Stuttering is a common articulation disorder.) An athlete with a speech disorder might have difficulty communicating in a way that others can understand.

Hidden Disabilities

A language disorder involves deficits in understanding language or using language to communicate ideas, concepts or feelings effectively. An athlete with a language disorder might have difficulty following directions, interpreting figurative language or understanding subtle aspects of communication such as tone, posture or facial expressions.

Athletes with speech and language disorders also might display inappropriate social behaviors. For example, they sometimes express frustration from ineffective communication attempts through verbal or physical aggression. Also, athletes with speech or language disorders can appear shy or reluctant to communicate with others.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurological disorder in which inattention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity interferes significantly with social, academic or occupational functioning. ADHD manifests itself in deficits such as poor working memory, poor control of emotions, lack of persistence in tasks, difficulty focusing on tasks, difficulty remaining still, impatience, difficulty waiting or keeping inappropriate comments or emotions to self. An athlete with ADHD might fidget or appear to move constantly, be distracted easily by irrelevant stimuli, shift frequently from one incomplete activity to the next, or have difficulty following instructions and demonstrating appropriate social interaction.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) represents a range of developmental disabilities that affect verbal and non-verbal communication and social interaction significantly. The term “spectrum” means that people with ASD manifest a range of characteristics, from mild to severe. Youth sport coaches, though, are most likely to work with athletes with mild characteristics, which can include poor communication, inability to relate to others, repeating activities, stereotyped movements (e.g., hand flapping), resistance to environmental change and unusual responses to sensory experiences (e.g., sensitivity to noise).

An athlete with an ASD is likely to have difficulty developing “normal” social relationships, might prefer to be alone even while in a group or team atmosphere, might avoid eye contact, might have difficulty understanding or interpreting directions, and might have difficulty with unexpected change or lack of structure and predictability in routines.

The descriptions above provide a brief overview of common characteristics. For more information about each particular disability area, see the Web sites associated with national organizations listed below. Athletes with SLD, ADHD or ASD share the same need for a structured environment and explicit instruction.

Keys to Inclusion of Athletes with Hidden Disabilities

Although each athlete with hidden disabilities has individual characteristics, many of the following strategies can help to address their specific movement needs.

Set the Stage for Successful Practice Activities

- Give an athlete who benefits from a consistent routine an opportunity to acclimate to the environment by asking parents to bring the athlete to practice early.
- Enhance structure and predictability by providing an overview of practice activities, in the order in which the activities will occur.
- Provide clear transitions by signaling the end of one activity and the start of another activity.
- Establish and reinforce team-generated rules that are simple and fair.

Providing Directions

- Position yourself close to the athlete to establish eye contact with him or her while speaking.
- Ask the athlete to restate your directions to check for understanding. If necessary, repeat directions or provide clarification.
- Provide directions using multiple modalities. Use visual aids, gestures and physical prompts along with verbal directions.
- Chunk information into steps. After each chunk of information, ask the athlete to restate the step to ensure understanding before moving to the next step.
- Be explicit and consistent with the language and vocabulary you use in explanations and directions. Avoid changing terms or cue words frequently. Clarify terms that appear to confuse the athlete.
- Use familiar words to deliver clear and concise information about what the athlete should focus on to correct performance.
- Insist on immediate practice to reinforce the cues.

Demonstrations

- Explain skills, while providing meaningful demonstrations.
- Have the athlete use other modalities besides just vision and auditory cues to reinforce the skill. For example, when showing a soccer player how to pass the ball, cue the athlete to attend to the feel where the ball hits his/her instep, and then use correction cues to reinforce and improve the performance.
- As an example, ask the athlete to close his/her eyes while kicking a stationary ball to reinforce this kinesthetic experience. This can help him/her to develop motor memory for the fundamental motor skills.

Setting up Practice Activities

- Focus on establishing an environment of success when choosing activities to include in the practice session.
- Practice the skill in a whole/part/whole pattern, in which the entire skill is presented first and then broken down into parts, to be combined again as a whole. For example, show the entire corner-kick play, practice the individual movements for each player, and then practice the entire play as a whole again.
- Chain the skills to be practiced. For example, teach the basketball lay-up by practicing the dribble to the basket, the jump off one foot and the bank shot all separately, and then combined or “chained” together as each skill becomes refined.
- Offer an entry level and a challenge level for each activity to promote development and inclusion. For example, when practicing striking a baseball, allow some athletes to hit off a tee, some to hit off a toss-up and others try to hit off live pitching,

Behavior Management

- Prevent challenging behaviors before they happen. Provide an appropriate environment that is active and allows athletes to make choices.
- Implement activities in a way in which athletes will achieve a positive outcome or successful trial a high percentage of the time.
- Practice in a movement exploration environment where coaches ask all athletes to perform the skill together at their own ability levels (e.g., “dribble as fast as you can, as close to the floor as you can, from one cone to another”).
- Use proximity control by moving in the immediate area of the athlete who is exhibiting challenging behaviors.
- Provide positive reinforcement to each athlete that is doing what you asked to encourage continued on-task choices.
- Redirect inappropriate behavior by requiring a different, more appropriate behavior. For example, if an athlete continues to talk while the coach is talking, ask the athlete to help with the demonstration.

Promoting Social Acceptance

- Insist that all athletes obey the rules, take turns and practice self-control in becoming more socially aware of others.
- Allow athletes to function in various leadership roles (e.g., captain, co-captain, stretching leader).
- Reinforce appropriate and inappropriate social behavior and sportsmanship through team discussions.
- Deliver opportunities for activities that promote cooperation versus competition, such as focusing on team goals instead of individual goals.

5 Tips for Communicating with Parents

Visit any youth sport setting and you will see kids behaving in all kinds of ways. Some are engaged and excited about the activity while others are distracted or bored by the action. Their perspective can change at any time for any reason – it's just part of being a kid.

While it is not always clear why children act the way they do, it is prudent not to make assumptions about youth sport participants who may not follow verbal commands or stay on task for any length of time. Coaches may conclude their players are the product of a sugar filled diet, unrestricted access to television, or poor parenting when; in fact, some youngsters struggle because of the challenges in attention, impulse control, language processing, and motor skills associated with a hidden disability. Moreover, parents may not share key information or strategies fearing the prejudice often associated with certain labels.

Nevertheless, there may be times when the coach will need to talk to parents about their child's behavior in the sport environment. This conversation with parents may be needed, at times, for any member of the team. To this end, the tip sheet offers some basic principles and easy strategies to use when coaches and parents need to have a crucial conversation.

Tip 1: Build Relationships First

The way the coach talks about an athlete will significantly impact his/her relationship with the athlete's parents. In particular, the ability to see appealing aspects of the child's personality, such as a keen sense of humor, as well as convey optimism about the child's development, beyond athletic achievement, is important to parents. Many parents appreciate coaches who are able to focus on their child's progress as opposed to constantly using other children as a point of reference for comparison. The coach's message should be clear and consistent: Every child is a valued member of our team.

Coaches should work to establish parents as equal members of the team. The coach may collaborate with parents to determine meaningful goals for their children such as making friends, developing life skills, and improving sport performance as well as identify learning strategies that are effective in school. Coaches should not be afraid to discuss his or her inexperience or limitations especially if it contributes to better communication with parents. As the coach and parent relationship matures, coaches and parents will become more comfortable sharing observations, asking and answering questions, and providing the information necessary to adapt the sport experience to meet individual needs and expectations.

Tip 2: It's Not What You Say But How You Say It

Nonverbal communication consists of all facets of communication that are not contained in the words themselves. These facets include vocal features such as rate of speech, voice quality, pitch, loudness, hesitations, and even a yawn. Other facets of nonverbal communication include observable factors such as movements of the head, torso, limbs, facial expressions, eye gaze, touch, and physical distance between people. Although people produce nonverbal behavior more spontaneously and more unconsciously than verbal communication, it represents the major portion of the messages individuals send and receive.

Hidden Disabilities

Nonverbal behaviors vary a great deal among people so coaches and parents often rely on the context in order to interpret the message. Coaches should be aware of his/her habits and mannerisms related to body position, expressions, gaze, touch, and proximity. Coaches should look for what parents do and do not do with their body language and mannerisms (non-verbal behavior) because these actions or the lack thereof tell a great deal. Keep in mind – it is mostly through nonverbal behaviors that a coach's compassion and humanity is conveyed to parents. This is especially important to parents who have children with hidden or misunderstood disabilities.

Tip 3: The Art of Listening

Communication is an ongoing voyage of discovery between people. The challenge in communication arises when participants do not watch and hear what the other is saying. High-quality listening involves attention, energy, and skill to grasp both facts and feelings in order to understand the true meaning of a message.

Improving observational skills and listening skills will allow the coach to better assess the parents' concerns and expectations and, at the same time, allow the coach to obtain valuable information. Moreover, the coach should listen for the words, tones, and pauses because each will tell something. Don't rush – take time, make time, to welcome the message.

Tip 4: Real Attitudes Show

The coach should not try to fake his or her attitude. The coach's communication style – language choices and nonverbal actions – largely determines whether he or she will be perceived as supportive or not supportive. It is not a matter of courtesy or politeness, but creating a sincere connection with parents.

If a coach cannot interact with the parent (or vice versa) in a genuinely friendly, even-tempered way, then it is time for a change. The forced smile is transparent and serves no purpose. Ultimately, the parent will feel a sense of uneasiness, perhaps suspicion, and a certain dislike for the coach that can undermine the ability to achieve desired outcomes in the sport setting.

Tip 5: Establish Time & Mechanisms to Communicate

The most effective way to deal with problems is to prevent them from happening. The following list of proactive strategies may assist in minimizing the severity and frequency of problems throughout the season. These include:

Explain team communication policies: Provide parents with a written copy of team rules at the beginning of the season. In this document, specify the preferred manner and frequency of receiving communication from parents. Also, let parents know the manner and timeframe to expect a response (i.e., face to face, telephone call, email, text, other?) and frequency of receiving communication from parents. Also, let parents know the manner. Provide enough information so the parents do not have to guess.

Balance large-scale meetings with intermittent huddles: Depending on the length of the season, coaches should plan 3 parents' meetings: preseason, mid-season, and post season. This is an opportunity to share team policies, discuss issues or problems, and celebrate

Hidden Disabilities

participation on the team. Huddles are quick (<5 minute) group conversations for the coach to communicate any plan changes. Parents can give the coach updates on the child's ability to participate in scheduled activities.

Establish procedures for unexpected events: Flexibility and adaptability are key tools in the coach's repertoire because the sport setting is a place of constant change. However, there may be instances when a youngster's behavior will push the coach to the limit. The CUS technique should be used during these trying times because it provides a framework for problem solving using signal words and can be used by both coaches and parents. Here is how the CUS technique works. First, state the *concern*. This is the behavior or issue at hand causing a stressful situation for the coach or the team as a whole. Next, describe why this is *uncomfortable*. Be sure to use appropriate "I" messages that distinctly identify what about the concern is difficult to handle. Finally, explain why this is a *safety* issue. Be sure to consider the individual athlete as well as the team as a whole and the impact that the specific concern is having on the athlete or team. Once the issue has been expressed, the coach and parents can brainstorm appropriate solutions.

Prepare for the listening event: Always set aside a few minutes before and after practices and games to speak individually with parents who may wish to speak with the coach. Give parents the gift of undivided attention no matter how harried the day. Avoid interrupting or anticipating the direction of the conversation. Try to make the parent feel comfortable by reacting to what is being said with either a smile or nod, check to confirm understanding by paraphrasing key points of the conversation, and ask questions when necessary.

Starting a conversation: When the coach has a specific purpose for a meeting with parents, it is best to focus on a primary fact with supporting examples or evidence. The message should be easy to understand and include negotiable strategies to solve the problem. During the conversation, the coach should stay calm, supportive, and flexible.

In summary, excellent communication skills make people feel welcome, understood, and important. This is the cornerstone of a successful relationship between coaches and parents. While communication is hazardous activity – prone to mistakes, distortions, and misunderstandings – parents often refer to "good coaches" as those to whom they can easily talk. To this end, every coach should strive to improve his or her communication skills and consider the above strategies when discussing a child's behavior in the sport environment. For example, suppose an athlete consistently does not bring a helmet to practice. The coach should bring this to the parents' attention. For example, the coach could say "Bobby did not bring his helmet to practice 4 times during the last 2 weeks. This is a problem because the team does not own extra helmets". The coach and parent would then try to identify the cause of the problem and brainstorm strategies so Bobby consistently brings a helmet to practice.

Resources

For more information, visit:

- **Hidden Disabilities in Sport:** www.hidden-disabilities-in-sport.org

Hidden Disabilities

- **Council for Exceptional Children:** www.cec.sped.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NewsIssues/TeachingLearningCenter/ExceptionalityArea/default.htm
- **National Autism Center:** www.nationalautismcenter.org/
- **Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder:** <http://chadd.org/>