Supporting autistic pupils with PE lessons

You arrive at work and are handed a dirty, smelly physical education (PE) kit. “Get dressed and be on the field in five minutes!” You try to protest, but get shouted at. Maybe it’s rugby, rounders or hockey? It’s raining and your head’s starting to ache. You weren’t expecting this.

How would you feel? The school day can be very difficult for autistic students. Anxieties from noises, unexpected changes, smells and social pressures can all cause distress, and adding in a PE lesson may feel like we’re rubbing salt in the wound.

Just think of the obstacles that autistic learners may face in PE. In addition to overwhelming anxiety, there will be the need to put on different clothes in the environment of a changing room, which can present issues with regards to their personal space and body confidence. Throughout the lesson, they may feel a near constant uncertainty over where to stand, what to do and what’s happening next.

Then, after all that, come the PE activities themselves and all that they entail – choosing teams, the way team games can highlight a child’s lack of coordination (and if they have a tendency towards perfectionism then that can make the child feel worse) and the general lack of order.

With that in mind, here are 10 supports that can go a long way towards making PE lessons more inclusive for autistic students.

**First impressions**

Set aside specific areas for warm-up activities. Seeing a big ball to bounce on, equipment for practising balance skills or a goal for shooting baskets will mean the student can immediately see there’s something they can go and do.

Create an atmosphere where there’s clear order, and establish rules so that students know when it’s time to stop and listen. Rules and order make things feel safe.
Changing rooms

Changing for PE may trigger anxieties. Providing a set space so that personal belongings can be kept in order can make a massive difference.

Could changing be staggered to avoid the rush? A visual schedule may help prompt students on what to do next. Do they know why it’s important to change for PE? A Social Story may help explain this in a factual way.

Time

Sometimes all the autistic student needs is time to process and adjust to the environment. Allow some time at the start of the session before any demands are placed.

Be aware that they may take a little longer to process when you speak to them. Use their name to gain their attention and keep language quite simple. A visual sand timer or clock display may help those who find PE activities difficult.

Routine

The unexpected can trigger anxiety. A set routine will allow the student to know that there’s predictability and order to your session.

Start with setting out fun things to explore, then have the same warm-up, followed by an activity and a similar cool-down at the end. The more the student gets to know a pattern, the safer and happier they’ll feel.

Schedules

Providing a visual schedule to break down the stages of the session can make a huge difference. You don’t need to go cutting out pictures and laminating – try using large flipcharts or dry wipe boards and breaking the lesson down into three or four sections, with stick figures showing what students will do.

Cross things out as you go. Think about how we count down the stops on the train. Knowing helps...

Visuals

A visual can let the students to see exactly what you’re trying to explain. It’s a point of reference they can refer back to if they don’t process as quickly. Visuals reduce the need for lots of verbal instructions; it can be easier to understand instruction from a visual aid than from a teacher.
Space

When discussing this article with our PE specialist Amy Harwood, the first of her many useful suggestions was “Floor spots”.

She always carries multi-coloured rubber floor marking spots, since they help to show students exactly where they need to be, providing an instant visual for many different types of activity.

Support

Find out about the individual student. What are their motivators? What will they find challenging? Observe and set them up to succeed.

Don’t allow the choosing of teams – this is a cruel tradition which can only cause social discomfort. Why not select teams in different ways? Maybe one week do it by the benches the students have sat on; another week, number them ‘1, 2, 3, 4’ or hand out differently coloured bibs.

Breaking things down

Providing a visual breakdown can make things less overwhelming. Skills develop in stages, so before playing tennis they must first learn to throw and catch, handle the racket and hit balls served to them. Set things up so that there are opportunities for students to practice each individual skill. Without a visual breakdown the student might feel frustrated that they’re not instantly perfect and they may give up.

Praise

All students respond to praise. It’s an essential and easy way of providing positive feedback, showing that the student is on track and in turn helping to build their self-esteem. Look at what they’re achieving and show them that you appreciate their efforts and that they’re getting better all the time.

Reward charts may help some students, but not all. Keep smiling, be overly patient and be predictable. Never, ever shout!

Final thoughts

As the retired pro basketball player Michael Jordan once pointed out, “Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.”

We must set our autistic students up to succeed by pre-empting and providing the supports they may require. Most importantly, we must build their self-esteem and confidence so that they believe in themselves. Reveal their potential and praise them for having a go!
Further information

This article originally appeared in Teachwire and is an extract from Colour Coding for Learners with Autism by Adele Devine, reprinted with permission from Jessica Kingsley publishers.