

## **How to Coach a Student with Intellectual Challenges**

It is important to use assessments to determine the capabilities of a child with an intellectual challenge, handle safety issues appropriately, and avoid risky activities. These topics are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### **Use Formal and Informal Assessments**

The formal assessment of a child's capabilities will likely already have been done by educational psychologists, counselors, and classroom teachers. This information can be used to produce an individualized education program (IEP), which has specific recommendations to help support a student's learning. PE teachers can access this information to understand the learning needs of the student and techniques that can support learning. It is not realistic to expect a volunteer coach to incorporate the requirements of a child's IEP into a practice. Parents wishing to support their child's involvement in a community sports program can help the coach by sharing relevant information about their child's intellectual capabilities in a manner that is practical and not overwhelming (or discouraging).

### **Handle Safety Issues Appropriately**

There is an inherent risk in all sports activities, and no one can guarantee there will not be the odd scraped knee and occasional broken bone. Some children are natural risk takers, but they usually undertake some decision-making process to help them determine if it is safe to proceed. A child diving into a lake decides if the water is deep enough or looks for traffic while out on a distance run. Children with intellectual disabilities may require some help in determining the risks associated with an activity. Caution must be used in this approach; we don't want to instill fear in a child so that he or she fixates on safety and no longer wants to participate.

### **Avoid Activities that Increase Risk of Injury**

Some activities increase the risk of injury for children with intellectual challenges. For example, children with Down syndrome may have atlantoaxial instability, where the gap between the atlas and axis bones of the neck is larger than normal; the resultant instability places the child at risk for spinal cord compression (and even paralysis). Activities like gymnastics, heading soccer balls, or rugby must be avoided. This example is a reminder of the importance of parents sharing this information with the teacher or a coach.

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## **Use Visual Cues**

Children with intellectual disabilities benefit from learning routines that let them anticipate what is likely to happen next. Using visual teaching techniques is particularly effective in supporting these children. A visual cue that some instruction is about to be given helps this child focus. For example, the coach may raise his or her arm high in the air as the signal that directions are about to be given. The coach should tell the students what is expected, then show them (with either the coach or another athlete demonstrating), then help this young athlete.

## **Modify the Activity as Needed**

Poor coordination and difficulties with physical skills often accompany the student with intellectual challenges. This student can easily feel overwhelmed by some of the complex skills that are involved in many sports. To avoid frustration and build confidence, the sports skills should be introduced and developed in small and steady increments.

## **Change or Overlook Some of the Game Rules**

The rules of basketball require the student to move across the court only while dribbling the ball with one hand. Some students catch the basketball and start to run with it in their hands before bouncing the ball (a rule violation known as traveling). Coaches or referees can use their own judgment before calling this rule violation in order to allow the student the opportunity to participate in the game.

## **Give Students Lots of Time to Process a Request or Consider the Answer to a Question**

Students with rapid information processing are usually rewarded with acknowledgement or praise for being the person who answered a question first. Of course, this does not mean that other students did not know the answer. Students with intellectual disabilities may not have information-processing abilities that match the speed of their classmates. The lack of a prompt answer does not necessarily indicate difficulty comprehending the request; the coach should allow the student time to process information.

## **Give Students a Partner to Support Them and Clarify the Activity**

Some students have poor working memories; this means they have difficulty keeping an idea or series of instructions in mind and so are not able to effectively carry out what has been asked of them. A peer clarifier helps remind and focus this student on the assigned task.

## **Understand the Motivation of a Student with Intellectual Challenges**

The student may fail to demonstrate a skill or express no interest or clear understanding of the activity, but this does not mean that the student is not capable. An apparent lack of motivation or an external source of distraction may sidetrack a student with intellectual challenges. The risk is that the coach uses this lack of affect to create activities that are not challenging.

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