



# The psychology of teaching tennis to persons with an intellectual disability.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a tennis program for persons with an intellectual disability conducted at Victoria University in Australia. Key principles associated with successfully coaching this special population of athlete are highlighted reinforcing the notion that 'coaching is coaching' irrespective of the target group. Practical suggestions for coaches working with persons with an intellectual disability are offered.

**Key words:** Coaching, Intellectual disability, Tennis.  
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## INTRODUCTION

As part of its Adapted Physical Education program, Victoria University recently trialed the introduction of tennis to a group of persons with an intellectual disability. This paper reviews this initiative including details of the program, its findings and recommendations. In doing so it is hoped the guidelines developed from the experiences of the coaches in this program may be assistance to other coaches looking to widen their horizons and target the oft-neglected persons with an intellectual disability (CAC, 2005; Mcdowell et al., 1989).

## THE PROGRAM

At the Footscray Park campus of Victoria University, a weekly multi-sport activity morning of 90 minutes was conducted for 18 (9 male and 9 female) persons with an intellectual disability (predominantly persons with Autism and Downs Syndrome). These persons ('clients') attended two local special schools and were aged between 12 and 18 years. The sessions were conducted in a large gymnasium on site at the university where clients were paired with a Third Year Victoria University student ('coach') who was enrolled in the Adapted Physical Education unit of study. Each coach was paired with one client to work together for the duration of the series of 10 sessions. Clients were attended by two carers from each school who 'doubled' as their bus drivers to and from the university.

The activities conducted during the series of sessions focused on the development of key fundamental motor skills and included such activities as shooting basketballs, playing t-ball

and cricket, skipping, throwing bean bags into buckets, dance routines and rolling balls and hoops. In response to a number of requests from the clients, their carers and coaches, it was decided to introduce tennis as one of the activities and gauge its popularity and benefits. Access to modified tennis equipment was not a concern given the university had been fortunate to secure a large number of modified racquets, multi-coloured low compression balls and portable nets from TennisVic (governing body of tennis in Victoria) for another of its adapted program (tennis for deaf children) (Young, 2007).

In brief, the weekly schedule followed a similar format each week, namely:

- 10am. Greet client. Group warm-up activity (e.g., Follow the Leader, Captain's Treasure).
- 10.15am. One-on-one session coach and client.
- 10.50am. Morning tea break (taken together with coach and client).
- 11.05am. Resumption of one-on-one session coach and client.
- 11.20am. Group warm-down activity (e.g., throwing and catching plastic balls on a large multi-coloured Parachute).
- 11.30am. Farewell to clients. Coach debriefing session.
- 11.45am. Conclusion of morning session for coaches.

To assist coaches in conducting the sessions, a weekly series (12) of lectures on adapted coaching topics were given. These topics included barriers to participation for persons with a disability, legal and ethical considerations for inclusion and planning lessons for persons with a disability.

Pairings of a coach with a client were made at the beginning of the first session in consultation with the client’s carer and took into account any special request e.g., male client worked best with male coach. These pairings then remained the same throughout the series of sessions (although sometimes changes were required if a client or coach was absent for some reason [eg., medical, family] from a particular session).



Prior to each session with the client, coaches were required to prepare a lesson plan under the guidance of a qualified tennis coach experienced in working with persons with a disability. This qualified coach supervised the sessions each week and was available to work with coaches to answer any questions prior to, during, and after the sessions. As noted above, at the conclusion of each session, all coaches attended a de-briefing session to share experiences and exchange ideas as to what worked, why it worked, what changes were required and discuss any other challenges faced in conducting the session. After each session, and at the conclusion of the series of sessions, coaches were asked to report on what they considered to be important considerations in working with persons with an intellectual disability and what insights they as coaches had gained. A series of inductive content analyses was conducted to analyse coaches’ responses.

**Key Coaching Considerations**

The analyses of data revealed a number of key themes were considered important in coaching persons with an intellectual disability. These themes and representative quotes are presented in Table 1.

KEY THEMES	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Ensure a safe and inclusive environment	Sometimes in their excitement they would swing the racquet around not aware of the danger of hitting someone behind them.
Make it fun • Variety of activities • Use of colour (hoops, cones, balls, balloons etc)	Participation is what’s important so it must be fun. Using colourful equipment can help to get players motivated and involved.
Adopt a player-centred approach	The lesson needs to be designed around what the client can do rather than cannot do.
Think about Communication • Take time • Keep instruction/ demonstration simple • Repeat • Provide feedback	Keep verbal instructing to a minimum using only short concise words. Lots of demonstrations of what you want your player to do. Small achievable and realistic steps are best.
Plan Lessons • Short activities • Breaks • Fundamental motor skills	Plan for plenty of breaks during the lesson as players get tired, thirsty and may need to go to the bathroom. Attention spans are generally low so activities need to be short.
Be flexible and adapt	I need to have a lot of additional activities to suggest and need to adapt my approach when my player gets frustrated, fatigued or over excited.
Ensure challenges are appropriate	Players need a sense of achievement so they want to attend the program. To see them smile when they get to a goal or complete an activity correctly is so worthwhile,
Routines and structure are helpful	Following the same routines and format each time makes the client feel comfortable and at ease.
Ask when in doubt	If a client appears to be distressed carers should be asked about medication as they know his special needs.
Take a genuine and respectful interest	They need to feel they are participating just like everyone else and that their achievements are worthy of your praise not pity.

**Key Coaching Themes and Representative Quotes.**

**CONCLUSIONS**

The program’s findings support the notion that ‘tennis is a sport for everyone’. There is no question that all who participated in the program, including clients, coaches and carers, found it to be a positive experience. But was it a different experience because the clients had an intellectual disability? In some ways it was, in other ways not. Coaches were challenged because it was a new target group for most and this specific target group required coaches to pay particular attention to

their communication and planning skills to address the generally shorter concentration spans, poor memory recall and restricted abilities to easily process information of their clients. Notwithstanding this consideration, most challenges faced by this program's coaches were similar to those faced by any coach when taking on new clients. Abilities and interests of clients needed to be determined, a safe, fun and inclusive learning environment had to be provided, lessons needed to be planned and establishing trust and rapport between coach and client was critical. So based on our experience, what are some of the practical suggestions for coaches working with persons with an intellectual disability?

### Suggestions for Coaches

1. Come to lessons with a smile, enthusiasm, open mind and keenness to learn as a coach – remember it is all about possibilities, abilities and potential rather than disabilities. Working with persons with an intellectual disability is a wonderful opportunity to improve your own coaching skills. The best teacher is 'experience' so pay attention to this opportunity to learn what needs to be done to fulfill your own coaching potential.

2. Focus on safety and fun - throw away the idea that it is all about skill development because, paradoxically, this will most likely to be achieved when clients are having fun and feeling safe and secure. This requires detailed planning by coaches of activities and the environment (i.e., court, playing areas and facilities) prior to conducting lessons.

3. Take an individual approach – just as all right handed tennis players do not play the same style of game, not all persons with an intellectual disability (or persons within a specific 'classification' such as Autistic) are the same. Treat the person as an individual and seek to understand them as a unique human being. For example, what do they know about tennis, have they played tennis before and what would they like to achieve from the lessons? The best person to answer these questions is the client him/herself but, if in doubt, you might ask the carer who generally accompanies the client.

4. Use a wall if available – hitting against a wall can be such good fun. Adopt a creative approach to not just hit directly to the wall but hit to the ground first before hitting the wall, hit to targets on the wall, hit and catch off the wall etc. There are endless fun activities that can be done around using surrounding props if court area or space is restricted!

5. Embrace colour in activities – hitting coloured balloons remains a favourite as it is engaging, fun and confidence boosting. Balloons are easier to hit than low compression tennis balls and require no net or marked playing areas. Hitting balloons, or coloured low compression tennis balls off coloured cones and through hoops also works well to motivate and encourage participation.

6. Monitor your client - change and adapt activities, game rules and equipment as required and do not be hesitant to take a break. This can be valuable time to build rapport with your client. It is not all about all about playing tennis according to the rule book but rather seeing what can be achieved both on- and off- the court. As such, achievements extend beyond fundamental motor skills and hitting tennis balls and embraces relationship and socialisation skills.

7. Take a genuine interest in your client – turn off the mobile phone and give your client your full attention! He/she is your sole focus for the lesson so look them in the eye when speaking, ask questions, check understanding and seek feedback.



In closing, it is hoped that in sharing our experience will re-enforce for coaches that adhering to good coaching principles is important across all target groups (Young, 2010). Tennis coaches do not require specialist training to work with persons with an intellectual disability. What is however important is that coaches embrace, and demonstrate, a genuine love of teaching tennis to all those interested in playing. Many times this will require coaches to move out of their comfort zone and look for groups of persons who appear to be less fortunate in life than others.

Coaching special groups of persons can be most rewarding for all as we discovered at Victoria University. Our program was a winner! And as they say, 'do not change a winning game', so we look forward to building on the insights we gained in conducting the initial program. In doing so we are reminded of advice<sup>5</sup> offered some 25 years ago,

Persons with disabilities need what every individual needs – respect, encouragement, satisfying experiences, and the opportunity to develop his or her abilities (Young & Browne, 2009)).

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