



# Coaching children with autism: Insights from Australian coaches.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews an Australian-based coaching program for children with autism. Experiences of coaches are discussed and implications for coaches interested in working with children with autism are highlighted.

**Key words:** Children with autism, Coaching.

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## INTRODUCTION

The coaches were nervous. They had just completed a coaching course for the Tennis Australia MLC Tennis Hot Shots program and had been offered the opportunity to coach a group of children with autism. Were they equipped to coach this special population of players and on what should they focus to address these players' needs? These were some of the questions raised by the coaches in response to this new challenge. In this paper the experiences of these coaches will be shared and based on these experiences, guidelines provided for other coaches who might as a result be encouraged to include children with autism in new or existing programs.

## Autism

Autism is a complex and pervasive developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects normal functioning of the brain, thus impacting development in the areas of social interaction & communication skills. There is no known cause of autism with statistics indicating that 1 in every 150 children is diagnosed with this condition (Autism Society of America, 2012).

## THE TENNIS PROGRAM

Twelve (7 female and 5 male) third year Physical Education students at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, enrolled in an Adapted Coaching Unit. In the first week of the unit, Tennis Australia (the governing body of tennis in Australia) conducted a 3 hour training session that was designed to equip

participants with the skills and knowledge required to deliver its recently launched national MLC Tennis Hot Shots program.



This program uses modified equipment (including low compression balls, short racquets and small net) and uses a small playing area. All participants were assessed as competent at the completion of the course.

A Special Secondary school for children with autism in the local community was approached to see if it would like tennis coaching delivered at its school. It was explained to the school that a group of Physical Education students had recently completed a tennis coaching course and were looking for 'work experience' as part of the requirements to complete the Adapted Coaching unit at Victoria University.

The offer to the school was quickly and gratefully accepted! Arrangements and plans were then put in place for a series of 10 lessons to be conducted over 12 weeks (with a break of 2 weeks for school holidays). The sessions were to be conducted on Wednesdays 2.15 – 3.15pm.

The format of the sessions followed a regular routine starting with a couple of group warm-up activities (e.g., 'Octopus', 'Follow the Leader', Relay games) for those keen to participate. It was not mandatory for all children to participate but all were warmly encouraged to do so. The warm-up activities were followed by a one-on-one session with a coach and an assigned child. Pairings were done in consultation with the school principal and addressed any special requests (e.g., one girl's preference to work with a female coach). In total, 12 children with autism (6 boys and 6 girls) with autism were selected by their school to participate. Their ages varied from 10-12 years of age. The children varied in terms of their communication and social skills and sporting interests.

In preparation for the sessions, coaches prepared a weekly lesson plan that was discussed with the Adapted Coaching unit co-ordinator (herself a former professional tennis player and qualified Tennis Australia Club Professional coach). At the end of each session, all coaches participated in a debriefing session in which they shared experiences of what 'worked', what challenges were faced and how these were addressed and what (if any) adaptations or modifications were made to lesson plans during the course of the lesson. At the end of the 10 sessions all coaches completed a questionnaire that asked them to reflect on their experiences.

### EXPERIENCES OF COACHES

Without exception, all coaches reported the opportunity to coach children with autism had been a most rewarding, enlightening and/ or positive one. This was not to say that the opportunity had not been uneventful, challenging or demanding at times. Yes, it had been for many of the coaches but overall they were most grateful for the experience and they felt it would 'stand them in good stead' for all future coaching roles. Coaches reported feeling more confident, and having higher self-esteem, as a result of the program.

#### Guidelines for Coaching Children with Autism

Based on their experiences, coaches in the program offered a range of suggestions for others who might be interested in coaching children with autism including:

#### Get to Know Your Player

- No two children with autism are exactly alike. Each child has his/ her unique set of interests, abilities, personality and potential. Coaches should make a conscious decision to get to know the child, and specifically, what he/she likes to do, has an

interest in and wants to learn. It is from this starting point that coaches can develop relevant, meaningful and enjoyable activities that will regularly engage the child.



- A starting point to gauge the interests, goals and abilities of a player is to communicate directly with the player. Ask him/her to tell, draw or show you what he/she likes to do. If additional information or clarification is required, then coaches can ask the child's parents, carer or support person and/or observe the child's behaviour.

#### Pay Attention to Behaviour

- Coaches should not necessarily expect a child with autism to be able to easily verbalise their feelings, thoughts and emotions. They are often demonstrated via a child's behaviour. For example, running away from an activity will often indicate a child's frustration or boredom with that activity. Coaches should look for clues in a child's behaviour to gain an understanding of that child's reaction to various activities. Often behaviour is a more reliable way of knowing what the child might be thinking than the words he/she uses.

- Facial expressions, body language and/or gestures can also be an effective means of communication for a child with autism. Equally, coaches should be mindful to adopt these non-verbal means of communication rather than simply relying on verbal communication.

- Coaches should avoid specific 'triggers' (e.g., being near balloons or loud noise) that may cause anxiety or stress for a child with autism. Coaches may become aware of these in the course of their sessions, or alternatively, can consult with the child's family, carers or school staff. Avoiding or reducing troublesome 'triggers' can facilitate a productive session for a child with autism.

### Build on Routines and the Familiar

- Structured and predictable routines, activities and environment work well with children with autism. Coaches should therefore be aware of the need for 'sameness' and structure when planning and conducting sessions. For example, starting a session with a regular warm-up activity followed by a favourite game is generally conducive to positive engagement. If a break-time (for a drink, snack or rest) works well for a child, then this can become part of a regular routine to incorporate 'time-out' during a session. Ending the session with a familiar routine (game or activity) can help signal the finish of the day's tennis program.

- If any changes are anticipated (e.g., school holiday break from the tennis program) then it is best to prepare the child over several weeks leading up to changing the routine. This can be effectively achieved with the use of some visual material/cards/scripts that depict 'change' and provide a visual schedule of activities to come. Coaches can repeatedly refer to these visual items in the weeks leading to a change in the routine thereby consolidating understanding and reducing anxiety and stress for the child.

### Find Own Space and Area

- Minimising or reducing extraneous stimuli and distractions (e.g., noise, other players and direct sunlight) can be effective in gaining, and maintaining, a child's attention and interest. Finding a quiet and uncluttered area can be most conducive to engagement. For example, a coach may face a child away from others in the group or 'partition off a special area' solely for the use of that child. Given many children with autism often prefer to be alone and avoid large groups (The National Center on Physical Education and Disability, 2012), one-on-one sessions with a coach in a demarcated area away from distractions can work well.

### Show and Less Tell

- Using demonstrations and visuals is generally much more effective than using verbal instructions. Verbal instructions should be minimised or avoided as children with autism are often visual learners and greatly benefit from mimicking and following visual cues including demonstrations and cue cards. In these instances coaches should be mindful to execute their demonstrations well and use preparation time to develop cue cards, photos and pictures that effectively express 'the thousand words' they might have otherwise have said.

- At all times any verbal communication needs to be clear, concise and consistent. To this end, it is useful to provide explicit and positive direction (e.g., "you need to walk" rather than "don't run") using a calm voice and assertive tone. As noted above, appropriate gestures, facial expressions and

body language can greatly assist to communicate and reinforce one's message.

### Incorporate Restricted and Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour

- Generally children with autism have restricted and repetitive physical patterns of behaviours such as spinning, rocking and hand-flapping (The National Center on Physical Education and Disability, 2012). Coaches might endeavour to work with some of these behaviours. For example, if a child repeatedly throws objects, then involving that child in a game of throwing a ball at a target can be effective in helping to learn a service action and directional control.

### Be Your Player's Eyes and Ears

- Coaches must at all times be vigilant to potential safety risks. Providing a safe environment has to be the number one priority of any coach. Not only is it a coach's duty of care to do so but children with autism may not be aware of potential dangers or risks to themselves and others. Under these conditions, coaches must be on alert to consistently facilitate a safe and fun learning environment.

### Attend to the 2 'Ps' - Preparation and Planning

- Lessons tend to run much more smoothly when attention is devoted to thorough planning and preparation beforehand. This involves consideration of what equipment is required for the planned set of activities, how much time should be allocated to the various activities and contingency plans for the 'unexpected' (e.g., lack of engagement from the player, all planned activities are completed quickly or it starts raining). It is best to plan for the 'unexpected' as it often occurs! Coaches can effectively do this by giving thought to, or discussing with others, what range of scenarios could possibly occur during any one lesson and having a contingency plan ready.

- There is no doubt that having equipment ready and visuals and activities planned not only minimises the time a child has to wait but also reduces uncertainty and anxiety for that child. Transiting between activities (e.g., warm-up game to hitting on the court) tends to go smoothly when change is planned and timely.

### CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of the coaches described in this paper highlight a number of key coaching principles that apply when effectively coaching any person or group (Martens, 2004; Young, 2010). Coaching children with autism appears to be less about teaching technique and giving instructions and more about a coach's mindset and approach. Making a difference in someone's life is certainly a possibility when a coach embraces and relishes the opportunity to offer inclusive coaching to all,

including children with autism. Just ask the coaches in the Victoria University program. It was such good fun for everyone!

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