

INCLUDING AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN TACKERS

Autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects the way people communicate, socialize, interpret and engage with their environment. No two Autistic people are the same, as each Autistic person you meet has their own unique strengths and challenges.

You can find more information about autism on the Amaze website.

It's important to talk to the parents/carers about their child's individual support needs. There are some general strategies you can use to promote inclusion and make Autistic people feel welcome.

COMMUNICATION

Autistic people often require support with communication and prefer direct communication. Some Autistic people can find non-verbal communication such as body language and gestures difficult to interpret.

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR INSTRUCTORS:

- **Simplify your language.** This means keeping your communication succinct and efficient.
- **Allow for thinking time.** Autistic children often need more time to process verbal information. They may need more thinking time in busy environments.
- **Communicate one idea at a time and in order.** Some Autistic people may become overwhelmed with a long list of verbal instructions. Each idea may have two to three steps.
- **Use an even tone of voice.** When in conversation, people need to focus on the content and the way it is being said. This can be too much information, and at times an uneven tone can be misconstrued. For example, raising your voice to instruct could be interpreted as anger. By keeping an even tone when speaking, Autistic people can focus on what you are saying, not how you are saying it.
- **Use clear language.** Avoid or explain the use of sarcasm, similes, or metaphors. These types of communication mean that Autistic children must interpret the hidden meaning behind what is being said, which takes more time and can cause a breakdown in communication.
- **Speak down wind.**
- **Support verbal instructions with diagrams or a demonstration.** Ask if the children have understood the instructions, and if not, perhaps explain in a different way.
- **Model instructions and ask the group to copy.**
- **Clearly communicate the start and finish of an activity.** Pausing briefly between the instructions and the start of the activity makes this clearer. You could use a verbal prompt like 'go' and 'stop.'

TIP: Autistic people may have times where they need more time to process information. This may be when they are tired, such as at the end of a sailing lesson or after a busy week at school. This could also be if they are unwell. You may need to adjust your communication when people are at lowered capacity.

SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

Attending Tackers is a social experience. For many Autistic children this can be challenging. Some Autistic children will feel anxious about the social elements of Tackers.

Autistic children may find the following difficult:

- Turn taking.
- Waiting.
- Finding or choosing a partner for an activity.
- Meeting new people.
- Making small talk.

SOCIAL INCLUSION TIPS FOR INSTRUCTORS:

- Allocate pairs for the session. Autistic children may find choosing a partner or group challenging.
- Pairs could be for the duration of the Tackers program.
- Encourage children to put up their hand to ask a question. Autistic children can find it difficult to identify when it is their turn to speak. If all children are required to put up their hand, shy children are more likely to have their say as well. This also ensures that children don't feel anxious about being called on to answer a question unexpectedly.
- Some children may not ask questions because they are fearful of doing so in front of others. Provide children with the opportunity to ask you a question privately.
- Have a strategy, such as lining up when transitioning between spaces. This stops bottle neck occurring in busy spaces.
- Get the Tackers to decide on group rules, such as speaking nicely, including everyone, and not touching others without consent. If these are established in the first session, then all the children will know what is expected.
- Group games can be tricky for Autistic children. Consider using games that have a clear structure and rules.
- If you play an icebreaker game or activity in the first Tackers session, let Autistic children know beforehand. This gives them time to process and think about the activity or game beforehand.
- If there is downtime such as during lunch, Autistic children may feel more comfortable playing with a toy or item they have bought from home.

SOCIAL SCRIPTS

A social script is a document that uses storytelling techniques to explain new experiences and environments to Autistic people through plain language and images.

A social script will usually include very specific and illustrated information about what an Autistic person can expect when visiting a place or event - such as what it will look like, who will engage to them, what activities will occur and what they can do if they feel overwhelmed.

Social scripts should be made available to Autistic children before they attend Tackers for the first time. This will help them prepare.

Australian Sailing has two social scripts for Tackers. One is for beach launch and the other for jetty launch.

SENSORY CONSIDERATIONS

Sensory processing refers to the way the body interprets and manages information from the environment. Sensory information gives real time information about keeping our bodies safe and regulated. Many Autistic people are sensitive in one or more senses, or they require large amounts of input. People can need both.

Being mindful of Autistic children's sensory needs can make their experience at Tackers a positive one. Some sensory considerations include:

SENSORY CONSIDERATIONS	SOLUTIONS
The club rooms and shed can be crowded and busy. This may be challenging for some Autistic children.	Ensure Autistic children know where the supervised quiet spaces are.
Some yacht clubs have shared public spaces where people walk, cycle, skate and walk their dogs.	Let Autistic children know where 'the inbounds' and 'out of bounds' areas are.
Be aware of potential noise sensitivities when trying to gain students attention – loud whistles, for example, may be painful to Autistic children who are sensitive to noise.	Use gestures or another visual way to get the groups attention.
The Tackers eat together on their lunch break. Too many food odours can be overwhelming.	Some Autistic children may need to eat in a separate supervised area from the group.
Some Autistic children may struggle getting wet and sandy.	Autistic children may need to practice wearing wet clothing and shoes beforehand.
Some Autistic children may find wearing sunscreen and a hat challenging.	Wear their own hat. This can be any brimmed hat that the child is comfortable in. It may be windy on the water, so a hat with a string may be helpful.
Bright glare from lighting in the club area and off the water.	Sunglasses may minimise glare from lighting in the club area and off the water.
The texture of a life jacket may be uncomfortable for Autistic children.	Practice wearing a life jacket. If the yacht club can loan one to parents, that would be great. Autistic children may need to wear a life jacket a few times to adjust to the texture and move around in their life jacket. Make sure to ask children before helping them with their life jacket at Tackers.

At lunch time, Autistic children may need to be reminded to:

- Eat.
- Drink water.
- Use the toilet.
- Reapply sunscreen.

At the end of the session, Autistic children may need to be reminded to put on warm clothes.

COPING WITH CHANGES

Autistic children can thrive with routine and knowing what is going to happen in new environments. This can mean when unexpected changes occur, it can be challenging for Autistic children to process.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING CHANGES FOR INSTRUCTORS:

- Write up a schedule of the day's program on a whiteboard. Remember to keep it up to date!
- Where possible, send through the lesson plan to parents/carers prior to the session.
This allows Autistic children to prepare for any potential challenges and changes. Only include times when you are certain that you will be able to follow them – Autistic children may expect you to run by the times that you have stated.
- Add the names of any instructors that have changed to a whiteboard.
- Have consistent 'plan B' particularly for rainy or windy days.
- Be clear with participants about the types of weather disruptions in advance. They can then follow the weather forecast.
- Give Autistic children some warning when an activity is about to end. This could be a timer or count-down.

MANAGING OVERWHELM

It's best practice to use person-centred strategies when an Autistic child is overwhelmed.

This means:

- Speaking to parent/carers about how they avoid or respond to situations where their child may become overwhelmed.
- Discussing strategies that work at home and school. It is best to be consistent with strategies, for example, using communication cards at Tackers if the child does at school too.
- Creating a quiet or safe space at sailing where the child can take a break to self-manage/calm down. You may need to speak to your club about a way children can remain safe and still be supervised.
- When out on the water, ensuring the child has a way to get the instructor's attention to take a break and self-manage safely.
- Providing children with laminated coloured cards that they can give to an instructor when feeling overwhelmed. These cards can be used to non-verbally indicate "I need a break", or "I am feeling worried/overwhelmed". These could be used both on land and on water.

For more information about autism visit the Amaze website www.amaze.org.au or contact Amaze Autism Connect national autism helpline.