

A Sporting Chance Program

“An inclusive sport and physical education programme aimed specifically at young individuals who have an ASD”.



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Rationale:

'A Sporting Chance Program' aims to give individuals' with an ASD a fair opportunity to achieve success in a sporting environment which can lead to favourable outcomes in everyday life.

Introduction:

Students with permanent or temporary mental, physical, social or emotional conditions, who are unable to have all their educational needs met in a regular physical education class during the school day or to be adequately educated in the classroom, are often identified as 'children with special needs'. As such these students need special consideration in the planning and implementation of the physical or sport education program being provided to them. If not, they will not be able to participate safely and / or successfully. This can lead to some students not gaining the physical, social, and psychological benefits that a quality physical education program can offer. In Australian schools, there are an increasing number of students who have been diagnosed as having an 'ASD'.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

According to Gebel, Olberding, Griffin and Appel (2008) Autism is a spectrum disorder, and although it is defined by a certain set of behaviours, children and adults with autism can exhibit any combination of these behaviours in any degree of severity. Two children, both with the same diagnosis, can behave uniquely to one another and have varying capabilities.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). Pervasive Developmental Disorders are life-long disabilities that significantly impact several different areas of development. Pervasive Developmental Disorders include:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Asperger's Syndrome
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)
- Rett's Syndrome
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

Autism is four times more prevalent in boys than it is in girls and sometimes pupils with autism have additional difficulties which may include hearing, vision loss or poor motor co-ordination which may also affect their educational needs and access to physical education and school sport.

Asperger's Syndrome is a form of autism and this term is often used to describe higher functioning individuals in the autistic spectrum. This document will use the term autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) as a blanket term when referring to these pupils.

In terms of PE and Sport Stevensen (2008) identified the following key issues which may inhibit pupils with Autism fully accessing the learning environment:

Communication: Interpretation of verbal messages and increased length of time to process instructions. Lack of understanding of abstract concepts

Environment: Difficulties in defining space leading to unpredictable movement within the space (this includes changing rooms as well as the teaching and learning space)

Sensory issues: Noise, touch, smell, light may affect the pupils ability to process information and affect behaviour.

Speed of skill acquisition: Increased time required for the processing and retention of skills and information

Difficulties with Generalisation: Different activities may require skill to be re-learnt as skill transfer and application may be limited.

Gross motor difficulties: Imitation may be difficult when completing complex tasks

Social difficulties: Co-operation, turn taking, sharing, negotiation, understanding rules.

In addition, Smith, Pattison & Kasari (2012) suggest that through taking part in a comprehensive and inclusive sports and physical activity program, many children enjoy the positive physical and mental health benefits that are as a direct result of participation and inclusion. However, sport is not just an amusement of childhood, it is far deeper. It also provides the context for us to learn about how the world works and allows us to understand more about ourselves and others. Sport can give people the confidence to take risks and participate in many new and challenging opportunities in life. Unfortunately for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) such activities are avoided due to a number of reasons including:

- Intensive therapy treatments
- Noisy, unpredictable and chaotic environments
- Lack of physical and motor skill development
- Lack of coaches/teachers with the required skill set to teach them
- Confusion surrounding the lack of a “blanket approach” to the rules applied to individual sports.

As a result, families that have child/children with an ASD may find it more trouble than it's worth enrolling their child into a sport. Participation in organised sport may be seen as a risk rather than an opportunity due to the many challenges that are associated with an ASD. Therefore it is imperative that we find ways to engage children with an ASD and their families with meaningful and quality sporting programs so they too can reap the benefits of what they have to offer.

Benefits of Sports for Children with an ASD

Smith, Pattison & Kasari (2012) suggest children with an ASD tend to play alone or participate in sedentary activities like playing video games or reading. As a result, they have an increased risk of being overweight or obese leading to other more

serious health consequences such as Type 2 Diabetes and heart disease. Beyond the obvious benefits of sport involvement to physical health and well-being, children gain immense social benefits both with family and peers. Organised sport enables one to gain 'physical literacy' and confidence which will provide a child with an ASD the motivation to engage in activities with other children and increase their likelihood of developing friendships. Studies and literature also suggest the following benefits:

- Children with an ASD can learn new sport related skills.
- Physical Activity helps reduce rates of depression and anxiety that is prevalent with ASD.
- Children and families feel part of their community.
- Therapy goals such as communication, socialisation and independence are realised on the sporting field.
- Opportunities for independence are expanded.
- More people in the community will be educated and learn about ASDs.

How does it work?

With all of the above information and research in mind, the 'A Sporting Chance Program' operates on a number of different levels aimed at a number of 'user groups':

1. Girton Grammar School Community

- a) **Student body:** the program is open to students aged from 5 – 16 who may have an ASD or other similar conditions whereby an 'extension' to their normal physical education program may be of benefit to them. Students can be nominated by classroom teachers, referral through the LRC or by interested parents via a letter home. The program is offered as a co-curricular activity for them.
- b) **Student Coaches/Mentors:** Senior School students are offered the opportunity to participate as coaches/mentors for the participants of the program. This is offered as a co-curricular activity for them. All students are expected to offer their time 2 x afternoons per week for approximately 1.5 hours each, equalling a total weekly commitment of 3 hours. Each student coach is mentored by John Doherty (PE Teacher) and other members of specialist staff. One session per week is dedicated to the theoretical and practical aspects of inclusive PE teaching and the second session is at 'the coal face' teaching the student athletes. On average, the ratio of coaches to participants is 1:2. Student coaches have to submit a written letter of application and go through an interview process to assess their suitability.

2. Wider Bendigo Community through the BAAG & Local School Contacts:

Contact has been made to a number of 'user groups' including the Bendigo Autism and Asperger's Group, DHS Bendigo as well as the Sports Co-ordinators / School Welfare Officers at local Bendigo Primary, Secondary and Specialist Schools. During terms 1 & 2, the Program has been utilised by over 40 children who have an ASD.

Logistics:

A Sporting Chance Program is an inclusive Sport and Physical Education program aimed specifically at young individuals **aged 5-16** who have an ASD. The program aims to give individuals' with an ASD a fair opportunity to achieve success in a sporting environment which can lead to favourable outcomes in everyday life.

Each term there will be a focus on a new sport. The concept is to help the students learn the basic skills, rules and language of a variety of common sports played in Australian schools. Each session will comprise of general fitness based activities followed by 'sport specific' skills activities and games. Student athletes will have the opportunity to socialise with their peers in a fun but stable and consistent environment whilst learning new skills, improving their fitness and developing their social awareness and communication skills.

Sequence:

Term 1: Fun, fitness and movement (Perceptual Motor & Movement Skills)

Term 2: Athletics, Netball and Basketball

Term 3: Soccer, Aussie Rules & Minor Games

Term 4: Cricket & T-Ball

Venue:

Girton Grammar School: Junior School Oval, Vine Street Entrance.

Times:

Thursdays: 4.15 – 5.15

Cost:

Free!!

Contact:

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References

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3. Stevenson, P. (2008). *High Quality Physical Education for Pupils with Autism*. Leicestershire: Youth Sports Trust.