

# Inclusion in Play and Sport

## Resource pack for families



**A guide developed by Northcott Early  
Childhood Community Capacity Building team**

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## Introduction

Northcott's Early Childhood Community Capacity Building team created this guide to help parents support their child with developmental delay or disability to participate in play activities and sport and experience the same play and sporting opportunities as their peers.



### Inclusive play

Play is the right of every child. Play is a fundamental part of a child's physical, social, and emotional wellbeing. It helps them to build social skills, independence, and emotional resilience. Play is children's work, the way they learn, make sense of themselves, their relationships with others and their world.

### What is inclusion in play?

Inclusive play is primarily about all children having equal access to and equal participation in local play, childcare and leisure opportunities.

Learning to play inclusively is crucial to a child's physical, social and emotional development.

[Supporting Inclusive Play At Home](#)

[State of Play Australia Report from Touched by Olivia Foundation](#)

"Play is not just fun and games for children; it's the foundation for their development."

[The Benefits of Inclusive Play](#)

"Studies indicate that engaging in play enhances children's skills in planning, organising, socialising, and managing emotions."

[The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children,](#)

Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., and Golinkoff, R. M., 2018

### Inclusion in sport

Every child should have the opportunity to be actively involved in whatever sport they choose; in whatever capacity they choose. Sport should be accessible, safe and fun for everyone to be part of and enjoy. Creating inclusive sports is 'the right thing to do' because, ultimately, it nurtures a society that gives everyone a sense of belonging.

Sporting organisations should be committed to being inclusive and open to all members of the Australian community regardless of age, gender, disability, cultural or religious background, sexual orientation, or other attributes that may lead to a person feeling excluded or isolated.

### Why sport is important for children with disability?

Being physically active each day is good for all children. It's vital for children's health, wellbeing and development, now and in the future. Physical activity is any activity that involves moving your body. It includes everyday activities as well as organised sports and exercise.

Sports and physical activities can:

- ✓ increase a child's balance and coordination
- ✓ support functional development
- ✓ enhance motor skills
- ✓ improve proprioception, reaction time, sensory processing and body awareness.

Strengthening and practicing large muscle movements can improve a child's outcomes at school. A child needs to learn to control their body and have the core strength to sit down with correct posture before they begin to hold a pencil and learn to colour in.

Australian guidelines say that all children need certain amounts of physical activity depending on their age:

- At 1-3 years, children should be physically active for at least 3 hours each day. This includes energetic play.
- At 3-5 years, children should be physically active for at least 3 hours each day. This includes one hour of energetic play.
- At 5-18 years, children should do at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity plus several hours of light physical activity each day. And at least 3 days a week, this should include activities that strengthen muscles and bones.

### Benefits of sport for children with disability

#### Mental and physical health

Disability can limit a child's capacity to engage in the same way as their peers. Engaging in sport helps to increase a child's feeling of confidence and independence.

Physical activity has a positive impact on emotional wellbeing, reduces stress and reduces anxiety. It boosts wellbeing and reduces children's risk of anxiety and depression.

Physical activity also boosts confidence and independence, supports healthy self-esteem and feeling of belonging.

Active exercise helps children feel relaxed and sleep well.

### Social, emotional and cognitive brain development

Exercise stimulates brain activity and improves attention, memory and problem-solving skills.

Group sport teaches communication skills. Whether a child is communicating with words, gestures, Auslan sign language, or even pictures, sport and recreation activities provide opportunities to engage in social interactions and practice social skills in a supported environment.

Organised sport and recreation create opportunities for family and community social bonding.

Exercise supports a child's emotional self-regulation by releasing endorphins, having clear rules and guidance, and supporting development of social skills.

Children involved in sport practice social skills and find it easier to make friends.

Team sports teach cooperative skills like sharing and turn taking.

#### Extra resource:

Physical activity is vital for health, wellbeing, and development in all children.

[Physical activity: kids with disability | Raising Children Network](#)

### Other physical activity options

Sport is only one of many fun ways to stay active. Try these with your family!

- Walking or bushwalking with family and friends
- Beach activities like nippers, 'boogie' boarding, collecting shells
- Youth groups – for example, Scouts or Guides
- Dancing (join a group or dancing at home), bike riding, skateboarding or scooting
- Baby and toddler activities such as the parent-child programs

#### Extra resource:

[Other physical activities](#)

# Helping your child to participate in sport

Sport is not limited by disability! Here are some strategies and tips for helping your child participate in sport.

## Choosing the activity

There are many sports activities that are well-suited for children with disability. Think of the sport you would like your child to engage with. Is it a team sport? Or is the activity focused on individual achievement?

## Be positive

Focus on the strengths! You know your child's abilities best. Studies show that children with autism spectrum disorder are better in detecting the bits of information that are 'critical' to the situation. This may work well in sports such as soccer, where players need to make a quick decision!

## Practice sport in the home, if you can

Are you being active and engaging in sport in your family? Your child will be more likely to engage if you are doing so yourself.

Here are some general tips applicable to any activity you choose!

- **Choose the safe option:** Some sports may be quite competitive and intense. Think of your child's personality and think about attending a 'come and try' day.
- **Get to know your coach:** Ensure you communicate openly with the coach, and that you are ready to collaborate. Sharing information and resources will help both of you stay on the same page. Communicate openly with your coaches.
- **Connect with parents of children attending the same activity:** This will help to create a supportive and welcoming environment.
- **Equipment and environment:** With the coach, discuss the ways the equipment and environment may be modified to meet your child's sensory, mobility and communication needs.
- **Join your child in the activity:** You may not always need to do this, but it may boost your child's confidence and bring excitement at the beginning.
- **Practice sport at home and playgrounds:** Transferring and practicing the activities in different environments will increase engagement and ongoing commitment.
- **Rules:** If your child needs more flexibility around rules – ensure your coach is aware of that and allows extra time to process the instructions.

## Be realistic about obstacles

Some things may be a little more challenging – from physical landscape and light, noise, clothing, following directions and communication difficulties. Consider a visit to the club/organisation to decide if this could be a barrier to participation.

## Let your child enjoy this space in their own way

Sport is all about enjoying the activity, rather than meeting the expectations.

- **Find a role model:** No doubt you are the most influential role model in your child's life! But there are also athletes with an inspirational story of overcoming their barriers.
- **Do not focus on results:** Praise your child for effort and improvement. This will help build confidence and encourage continued participation.
- **Use social stories:** These help children learn about new environments and what to expect in a new situation. Using a social story will help your child prepare for their sport/recreational activity. Ask your club/organisation if they have a social story you can give to your child.  
[Example of a Social Story](#)
- **Build a routine:** Establish a predictable routine before, during and after sports activities. This can help your child feel more comfortable and confident.
- **Take a break:** Ensure your child takes sensory breaks, such as jumping jacks, stretching, or deep breathing exercises to help regulate sensory input and stay focused.

**Extra resource:** [Some things that may be a little more challenging for a child](#)

## Useful resources

There are many resources, here are a few we recommend based on the feedback we received.

### Play For All Australia

[Play For All Australia](#) is a for-purpose social enterprise.

Its aim is to provide every child in all communities across Australia, the opportunity to equally participate and enjoy the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that only play can bring.

### Livvi's Places - Touched by Olivia

[Livvi's Place](#) is an inclusive play space where all can play together.

Livvi's Place play spaces lead the way in promoting inclusive play and ensure all children, their families, friends, and the wider community can play, learn and live together.

Check out the Livvi's places in NSW on their website.

To access the full listing, click the QR code.



### Sports Australia

[Sports Australia](#) helps build the capacity and capability of sport to provide safe, ethical, and inclusive sporting environments for everyone to participate in sports.

### Play by the Rules

[Play by the Rules](#) provides information, resources, tools, and free online training to increase the capacity and capability of administrators, coaches, officials, players, parents, and spectators to assist them in preventing and dealing with discrimination, harassment, child safety, inclusion and integrity issues in sport.

### Spectating children's sport

Being a spectator and understanding your role as a parent on the sidelines can benefit your child's development and participation in their chosen sport. The number one rule is Let kids be kids! Your child is learning and developing in a sport that may be new to them and possibly with other children that are new to them. Reinforcing positive behaviour on the sidelines creates a safe environment for all children.

[Let Kids Be Kids](#) is a national campaign by Play by the Rules about appropriate sideline behaviour.

The [Sydney Children's Hospitals Network](#) has some good tips on appropriate behaviour by parents.

### All Play

[All Play](#) helps services, and their professional adapt their programs for all children.

### Disability Supports Australia (DSA)

DSA has free learning modules called [The Accessibility Champion](#) course that helps sporting clubs start their accessibility journey.

### The Adaptative Movement

[The Adaptive Movement](#) is a one-stop shop to find adaptative sports and recreation options in your local area.

## Advocacy supports

### Raising Children Network

[Raising Children Network](#) has resources on parents being advocates for their child and why it's important for families to be their child's advocate.

[Being a disability advocate for children | Raising Children Network](#)

[Advocating for children with disability | Raising Children Network](#)

### Advocacy services in NSW

The following services may help you to advocate for your child's right to be included.

[Advocacy | Disability Gateway](#)

[Disability Advocacy NSW](#)

[Disability Advocacy Finder | Ask Izzy](#)

[People with Disability Australia](#)

[Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW](#)

[First Peoples Disability Network \(Australia\) Ltd](#)



### About Northcott NDIS Early Childhood Services

Northcott is an NDIS early childhood partner. We work closely with families and carers of children aged 0-9 years of age to develop the skills children need to take part in daily activities and achieve the best possible outcomes throughout their lives.

For more information visit:

 [northcott.com.au/services/ndis-early-childhood-approach/](https://northcott.com.au/services/ndis-early-childhood-approach/)

 [northcott@ndis.gov.au](mailto:northcott@ndis.gov.au)

 1800 118 481

#### We want your help!

Did you find this resource helpful? Your feedback would be greatly appreciated.

Please click on the link below or use the QR code to complete our short survey.

