

# Practical Considerations for Coaching Athletes With Learning Disabilities and Neurodevelopmental Disorders

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Learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders are the most prevalent disabilities that affect learning. This paper will provide practical recommendations and observations for coaching athletes with three common learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia) and two neurodevelopmental disorders (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder). Adapted from the literature and in conjunction with previous experiences, the authors provided a range of recommendations for coaches to consider implementing within their practices. The recommendations place an emphasis on the knowledge, strategies, and behaviors of the coach and their role in providing an inclusive, safe, and accessible space for athletes—with or without disabilities—rather than problematizing the disability or the person. Coaches are encouraged to consider their coaching environment (i.e., structure, physical elements, equipment), communication styles (i.e., language, delivery, feedback), and behaviors (e.g., frequent check-ins, review of material). Furthermore, coaches are encouraged to critically reflect on their preconceived biases, assumptions, and experiences with disability and how these play a role in influencing their coaching practices. Considering the prevalence of people with learning disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders, it is essential for coaches to have access to disability-specific information while remaining cognizant of the needs of the individual when providing an inclusive environment for all.

**Keywords:** coach, disability, inclusivity, recommendations

Learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders are the most prevalent disabilities that affect student learning (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Learning disabilities are defined as the reduced capacity of an individual to develop new academic skills and knowledge associated with expressive language (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). Typically developed in childhood, many learning disabilities persist into adulthood (Department of Health, 2001). Neurodevelopmental disorders are deficits in an individual's development which may cause limitations in learning, cognitive functions, social skills, and academic performance (APA, 2013). It must be noted that in this article, the term *impairment* refers to a problem in a person's body function or structure, or mental functioning, and *disability* refers to the interaction between an impairment and contextual factors which may limit a person's ability to perform activities and to interact with others (World Health Organization, 2001). As such, the term disability will be used throughout to refer to both learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders as this article aims to address the interaction between a person's health condition and personal and/or environmental factors (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health; World Health Organization, 2001).

Twenty percent of the American student population has identified as having either dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). In addition, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is prevalent in schools with approximately 2.5% of American children diagnosed with some form of this disability (Xu et al., 2018). As a result, diverse adaptations, recommendations, and

policies are often implemented in school settings to ensure that academic success is accessible and achievable to all, including children and adolescents with disabilities. With an understanding of the widespread nature of learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders comes the realization that such disabilities not only affect children and adolescents' ability to learn, develop, and function in the classroom, but those same challenges can be found in a variety of other settings throughout one's lifetime.

Similar to a classroom environment, learning in sports involves a process of skill development, which may be challenging for children and adults with learning disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders. In sports, learning involves developing knowledge on a technical (i.e., sport-specific skills) or tactical (i.e., understanding game plays) level. Indeed, coaches have the ability to influence the learning environment for athletes with disabilities depending on the knowledge, strategies, and behaviors they implement (Martin & Whalen, 2014). Unfortunately, little is known about how coaches can effectively work with children whose learning needs fall outside of the norm. Therefore, it is important to consider literature regarding coaching athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities.

Over the past two decades, researchers have begun to focus their attention on effective coaching strategies and behaviors in the parasport context (e.g., Alexander et al., 2020). To date, formal coach learning opportunities in parasport have been perceived as limited, inaccessible, or expensive to attend (Bentzen et al., 2021). As a result, coaches are often left feeling unprepared or lacking the confidence necessary to work with athletes of varying abilities (Townsend et al., 2018). Due to the fact that a large proportion of parasport coaches are able-bodied themselves (Douglas et al., 2018), they tend to seek out disability-specific information by learning from their athletes (McMaster et al., 2012) and having

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