



# Objectives

- Introduction to autism
- Positive behavior strategies
- Strategies for adaptive tennis



# Autism Spectrum Disorder

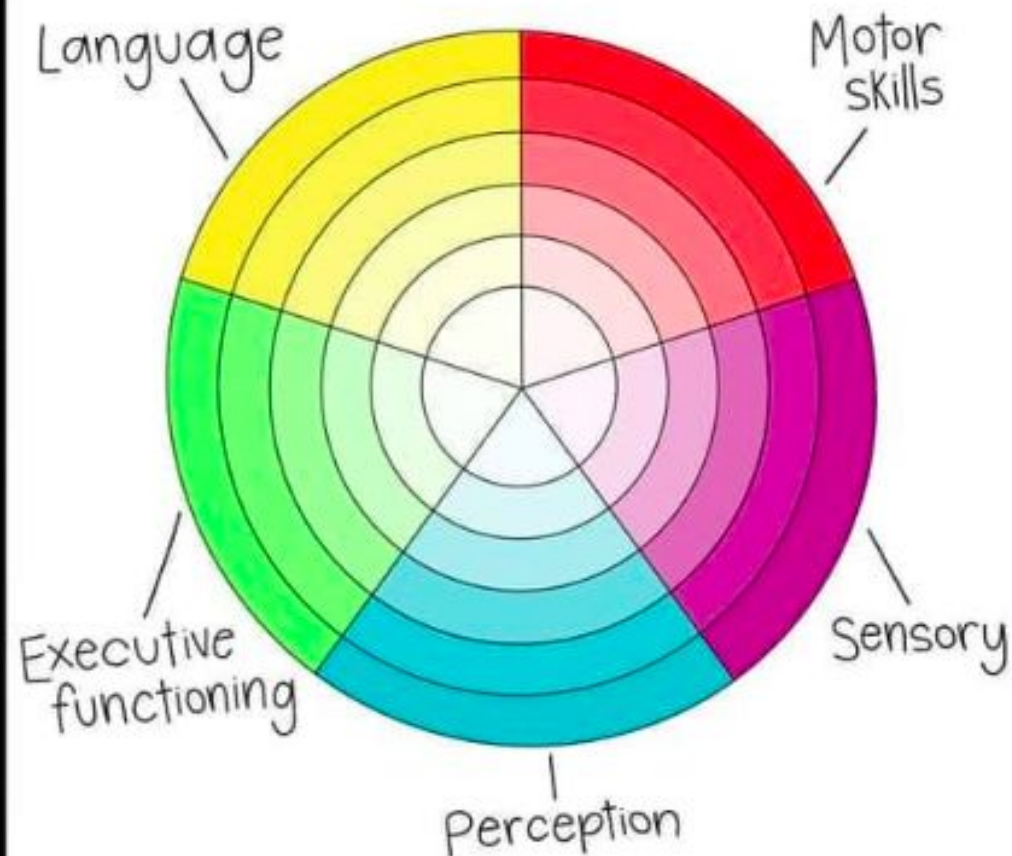
- A neurological and developmental disorder that affects social skills and communication
- Current prevalence is 1 in 44
- Common co-occurring conditions
  - Sleep/Gastrointestinal problems
  - ADHD
  - Epilepsy
  - Intellectual disability
- Every individual is unique
  - Autism is not any one defining quality, it's a combination of them across different domains



What People THINK  
the autism SPECTRUM  
LOOKS Like:



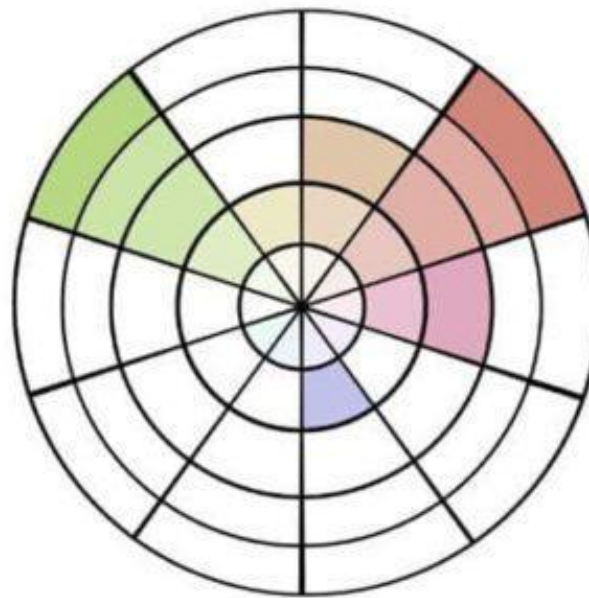
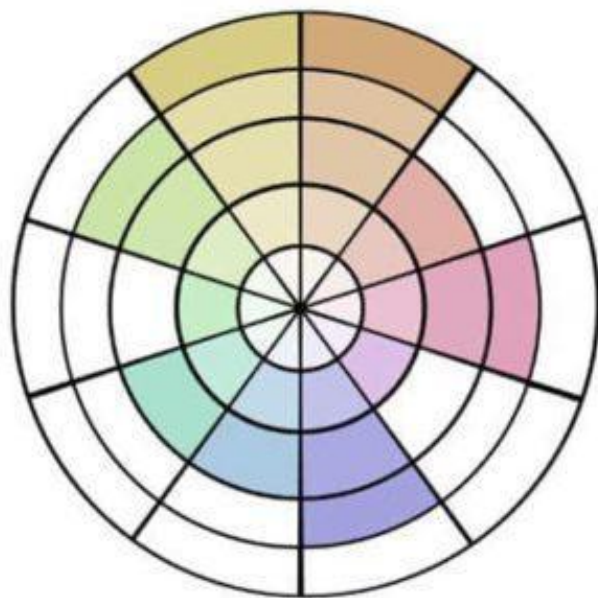
What it CAN  
actually  
LOOK Like:





**no two autistic people are exactly alike, but we  
shouldn't be reduced to "high functioning" and  
"low functioning" stereotypes, either.**

**my autism looks like this.   my brother's probably looks  
like this.**



**we have the same "amount" of autism, just different  
symptoms.**

# Communication

- 40% diagnosed do not develop verbal language
  - Alternative communication systems
- Comprehension deficits
- Immediate and delayed echolalia
- Use of inappropriate behavior to express communicative needs

# Social

- Joint attention
- Eye contact
- Limited or no initiation of social interactions
- Difference in social cues, facial expressions



# The Power of Words

It's not *only* about using the language that is acceptable to the autism community, but ***engaging*** with the perspectives and attitudes the language represents.

- Get to know your athletes and their families as individuals
- Unsure of how to say something?
  - Ask the participants or their families.
  - People appreciate efforts to use the language that best represents their experience.



# The Power of Words

- Person-first language v. Identify-first language
  - **Person with Autism v. Autistic Person**
- High/Lower Supports v. High/Low Functioning
- Infantilizing
- Broad generalizations
  - **“People with Autism”**
- Challenging behavior v. issues

# Learning Characteristics

- Concrete learners; difficulty with abstract concepts
- Uneven learning profile
- Benefit from visual supports, routines, predictability of environment
- Difficulties attending to assigned task, unstructured time and waiting

# On The Tennis Court



# Happy Relaxed Engaged

- Rapport building
- Associate yourself with fun!
- Skill repetition
- Challenge them
- Introduce new skills



# Why Tennis?

- Primarily an individual sport allowing players to be met at their skill level
- Player-centered lessons while still having all participate in the same activity together.
- **It's very social!**
  - Leads to cooperative play opportunities, which is particularly important for children with autism.





# How Do We Make Tennis Adaptive?

- Volunteer ratio
  - Visual supports (schedule, modeling, lines, dots)
  - Accessibility
- 
- Multi-modal presentation of instruction
    - Verbal, visual, modeling, physical assistance
  - Break down skills into smaller, more manageable components
  - Accessibility
    - Start with activities inclusive to all
    - Then increase complexity and difficulty for those ready for a challenge

# What You Might See on the Court

- Slower development of motor skills
  - **Gross:** walking, how they use their arms/legs
  - **Fine:** how they hold and grasp items
- Motor planning
  - Remembering a set of movements required to complete a task

- Hand-Eye Coordination
- Balance/agility
- Differences in communication

# Communication

Some participants will be able to talk and communicate well, while others will have a few words, and others may not be able to speak at all.

- **Remember:** A child's ability to listen and understand is not always the same as their ability to talk.
- **Best Practice:** Always ask the athlete's family the following:
  - What's the best way of communication? (fully verbal, phrases, 1-2 words, device, etc.)
  - What is helpful working with them?

# Differences in Communication

Everyone has different strengths and challenges—asking about them helps you work with each person in the best way possible and bring out their positive qualities.

## Try asking:

- How can I make them feel most comfortable?
- What might they not like to do?
- How have they done in other different sports or activities?

# Behavior Strategies





# Strategies for Positive Behavior

- Individuals with autism often do better in environments that are **predictable** and **consistent**.
- Program leaders/Volunteers
  - Consistency with participants in effort to maximize clarity of expectations
- First/Then Language
  - Make expectations clear: *"First 10 volleys, then we'll run."*

# Strategies for Positive Behavior

Other strategies include but are not limited to:

- Positive reinforcement
- Providing opportunities for choices
- Use of visual supports (schedule, instruction)
- Reducing demands
- Increasing opportunities for breaks

- Adjusting language to the needs of the individual
- Anticipating the needs of the individual
- Limiting “down” time (too easy/too hard)
- Changing environmental stimulation, e.g., excessive noise, crowded room

# Barriers to Learning

- Difficulty understanding tasks
- Too difficult / not able to complete the task
- Physically uncomfortable / overstimulated



# What Can You Do?

- Provide more opportunities to make choices
- Recognize they may need more frequent breaks
- Present preferred activities with less repetitions



# Strategies for Adaptive Tennis





# Visual Supports

- Easier to process information
- Reinforce structure, predictability of environment
- Ease anxiety around transitions
- Can be used with any age
- Doesn't hurt anyone
- Easy to implement
- High social validity
  - *people like them*



# Engagement

Positively interacting with our participants is the most powerful tool. The goal is for the activity itself to be fun for them.

## Why?

Keeping them engaged may prevent boredom or frustration, which could lead to challenging behaviors. Find the sweet spot between challenging them while maintaining a happy, relaxed, and engaged environment.



# Choices

## Why are choices important?

- We all make hundreds of choices every day
- Allows a sense of control
- Promotes independence
- Allows participants to think for themselves

## How can we give choices?

- Within activities
  - How many balls they want to hit?
- Between activities
  - Choice of helping lead an activity, choosing the activity, breaks, etc.

# Positive Language

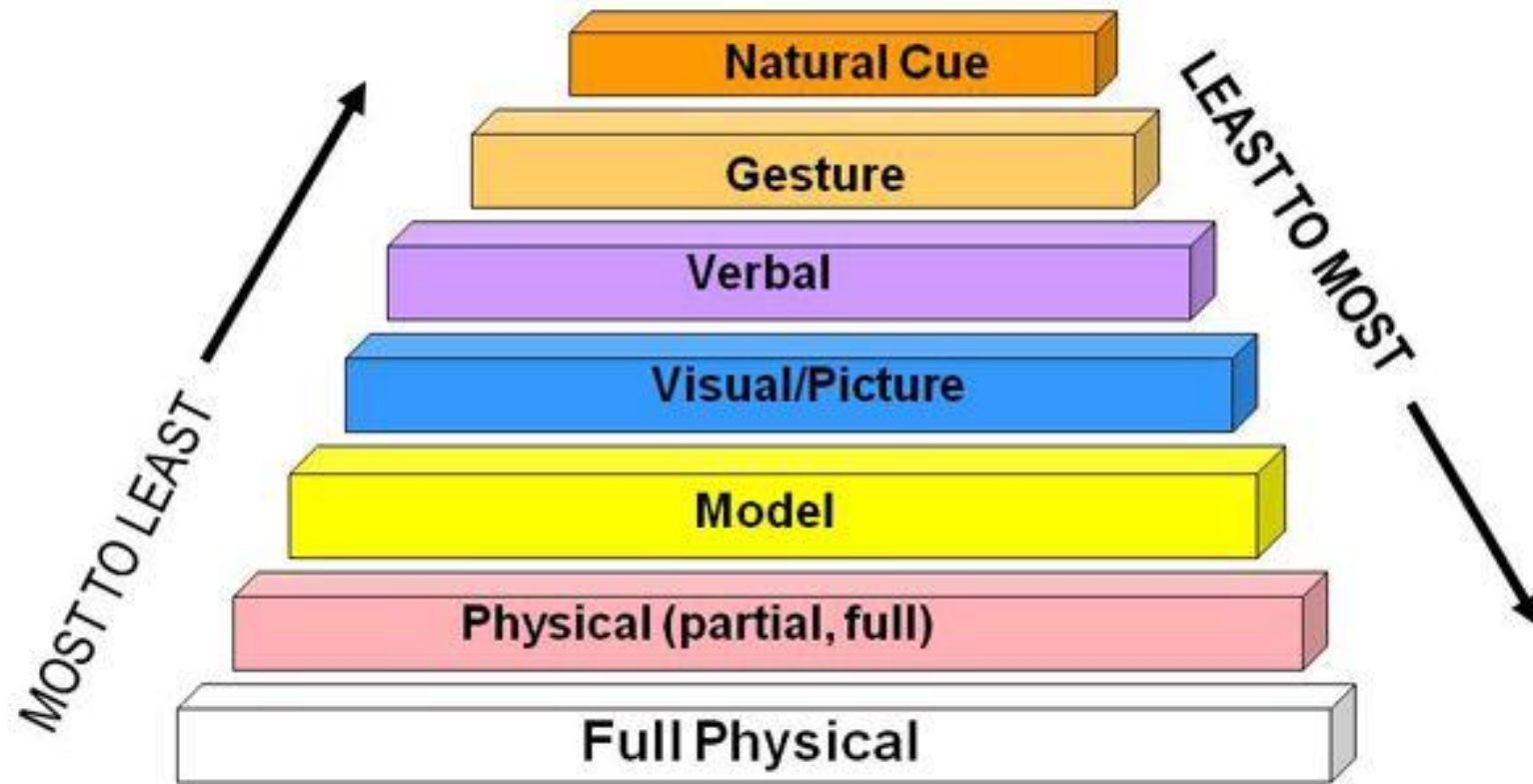
Use statements that tell someone what TO DO, rather than what NOT to do.

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How can we rephrase to make these positive statements?

- Don't throw the tennis balls!
- Stop running!
- Don't eat so fast!
- Don't get off your spot!

# Assistance & Fading Out





# Be Proactive

1. Review the registration paperwork
2. Speak to parents/guardians prior to each clinic
3. Be strategic with volunteer pairings
  - Stronger/experienced volunteers with participants with higher needs

# THANK YOU!

