active disability ireland

Autism in Sport – Factsheet

The 8 Senses



Over (Hyper) & Under (Hypo) Sensitive

Each of the eight senses can lead to sensory avoiding (when input feels overwhelming) or sensory seeking (when someone craves more input). For example, an autistic person who avoids bright light may turn the lights off in a room; In contrast, someone who seeks light input may turn every light on (a tricky situation if two people with different needs share the same space). For individuals who are sensory avoiding, environmental input can actually feel physically painful.

Sight

- Visual Sensitivity: Bright indoor lights, glare, busy visual backgrounds, or high-contrast clothing can cause sensory overload and anxiety.
- Eye Contact: Forcing eye contact can be uncomfortable, dysregulating, or even physically painful. Looking away is often a necessary tool for a participant to listen, focus, and feel safe.
- Visual Seeking: Some participants seek out extra visual input to feel regulated. They may focus intently on small details, motion, bright patterns, or specific lighting.

Strategies to support participants:

- Modify venue lighting where possible and minimise glare.
- Reduce non-essential visual clutter in training areas.
- Never demand direct eye contact, allow participants to look away while receiving instructions.

Sound

- Sound Sensitivity: Loud or sudden noises (whistles, echoes, cheering) can cause sensory overload or pain.
- Noise Filtering: Participants may make sounds (e.g. humming) or cover their ears to block out background noise and regulate themselves.
- Processing Delay: A delayed response when spoken to is rarely disinterest, it often means they need extra time to process auditory information.

Strategies to support participants:

- Warn athletes before using whistles, or switch to visual signals (hand gestures, flags).
- Welcome noise-reducing earplugs or ear defenders.
- Keep instructions concise and grant a few extra seconds for processing before repeating.

Touch

- High Sensitivity: Unexpected contact, firm coaching prompts, or specific kit fabrics can cause severe discomfort or sensory overload.
- Tactile Seeking & Deep Pressure: Some participants seek out intense physical input to feel grounded, which might include touching equipment, textures, or leaning into others.
- Personal Space: Boundaries can work both ways—some need strict physical space, while others need gentle guidance on respecting the personal space of coaches and peers.

Strategies to support participants:

- Ask about individual touch preferences and kit sensitivities before your first session.
- Always announce touch in advance (e.g., "I'm going to guide your elbow now").
- Respect boundaries by using visual demonstrations or verbal cues instead of hands-on physical guidance whenever possible.

Taste

- Selective Food Preferences: Sensitivity to textures, temperatures, or flavors can lead to very specific diets (e.g., preferring only dry, crunchy foods for predictable sensory input).
- Sensory Seeking (Oral Fixation): Chewing or placing objects in the mouth is often an unconscious tool for self-regulation and stress relief.

Strategies to support participants:

- Check in with parents or carers before the first session to learn about specific eating patterns, safety risks, or oral fixations.
- Ask if the participant uses safe, dedicated sensory aids (such as chewable jewelry or sensory chews) to satisfy oral seeking needs safely.

Smell

- Sensitivity to smells: Everyday odors (chlorine, rubber mats, deodorants, cleaning supplies) can cause sensory overload or leading to avoidance of specific spaces like changing rooms.
- Scent Seeking: Some participants seek out strong, distinct scents for comfort and sensory regulation.
- Reduced Odor Awareness: Lower sensitivity can mean a participant doesn't register environmental scents, including danger signals like smoke or gas.

Strategies to support participants:

- Avoid wearing strong perfumes/body sprays and use low-odor cleaning products.
- Ensure indoor coaching areas and locker rooms are well-ventilated.
- Maintain visual safety checks if a participant cannot rely on smell to detect hazards.

Interoception

Interoception reads internal signals like heart rate, thirst, temperature, and bladder fullness, helping us recognise physical needs and emotions.

- High Sensitivity: Internal sensations are felt intensely. Mild heart rate spikes or muscle fatigue can trigger anxiety, frequent bathroom requests, or strong discomfort.
- Low Sensitivity: Internal cues aren't registered until extreme. Participants may ignore heat, thirst, or pain, or delay bathroom breaks until urgent.
- Difficulty Pinpointing: Recognising exact sensations can be tough. An athlete might feel dysregulated without being able to explain what hurts or how tired they are.

Strategies to support participants:

- Build in scheduled water, rest, and bathroom breaks instead of waiting for athletes to ask.
- Actively monitor for signs of overheating, cold, or exhaustion and prompt gear changes.
- Use simple visual scales (1–5) for quick energy or comfort check-ins.

Proprioception (Body Awareness)

Proprioception is the internal sense via joints and muscles tracking body position, movement, and physical force.

- Spatial & Force Challenges: Difficulty judging body position or distance can look like "clumsiness" or misjudging personal space and effort.
- Sensory Seeking: Seeking heavy input (jumping, stomping, crashing safely, gripping tightly) helps the body feel grounded.
- Deep Pressure: Many find calm and nervous system regulation in deep pressure or compression wear.

Strategies to support participants:

- Use floor markers (tape, cones) to clarify personal space.
- Incorporate "heavy work" like carrying equipment or pushing mats.
- Give specific force feedback (e.g., "Use a gentle throw") rather than vague corrections.

Vestibular

The vestibular system reads movement, gravity, and balance telling us our speed, direction, and orientation in space.

- Movement Sensitivity: Quick, unexpected, or off-ground movements (like spinning or balancing) can feel frightening, causing motion sickness, anxiety, or reluctance to participate.
- Movement Seeking: Some participants crave intense motion, spinning, swinging, or jumping, to stimulate their balance system and feel regulated.
- Coordination Impact: Balance differences can make tracking fast-moving objects or executing multi-step movements tricky.

Strategies to support participants:

- Never force off-ground or rapid spinning movements; offer grounded alternatives.
- Incorporate controlled movement breaks (e.g., swinging, controlled jumps) for sensory seekers.
- Break complex balancing or agility skills into smaller, stable steps.