



NCCP INTRODUCTION TO COACHING ATHLETES WITH A DISABILITY



National
Coaching
Certification
Program

PARTNERS IN COACH EDUCATION

The National Coaching Certification Program is a collaborative program of the Government of Canada, provincial/territorial governments, national/provincial/territorial sport organizations, and the Coaching Association of Canada.



Coaching Association of Canada
Association canadienne des entraîneurs



The programs of this organization are funded in part by the Government of Canada





Acknowledgements

As we continue to learn and grow in coaching, we revise our programming based on the best available evidence in coaching and feedback from our partners. It's with the strong foundation of previous editions that we're able to grow our programming and respond to the needs of our community. The Coaching Association of Canada recognizes all who have contributed to the current and previous editions for setting the foundation for our success.

Version Control

2005 _____ Original Publication
2024 _____ Version 2

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Thank you to the NCCP Partner Task Force on Coaching Athletes with a Disability for their thoughtful contributions to this manual.

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Photo and resources credits

- Canucks Autism Network
- Canadian Disability Sport Project
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Special thanks to Anne-Renée Thibault, Chief Executive Director of Parasports Québec, for reviewing the French version.

What would you like to learn?

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Reflect on several models of disability and consider their potential impact on an athlete or coach's sport experiences

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Develop ways to listen to, and learn from, each athlete's unique goals and needs

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Defining disability



How we communicate and our language are important and impact the people we interact with every day. Our language immediately conveys a positive or negative perception of a person's value.

Language about disability is deeply personal, nuanced and ever evolving. In this resource, person-first language (athlete with a disability, people with disabilities) is used interchangeably with identity-first language (disabled person, disabled participant). Also, “non-disabled” or “without disabilities” are used and are generally preferred to “able-bodied.”

Terms are used interchangeably because various people, sports, regions, or communities may use different vocabulary. There are so many different terms that are often suited to different contexts. There's no one universally accepted term. The best way to know what terms to use is to ask your athletes what they prefer.



An actual definition of “disability” is complex!

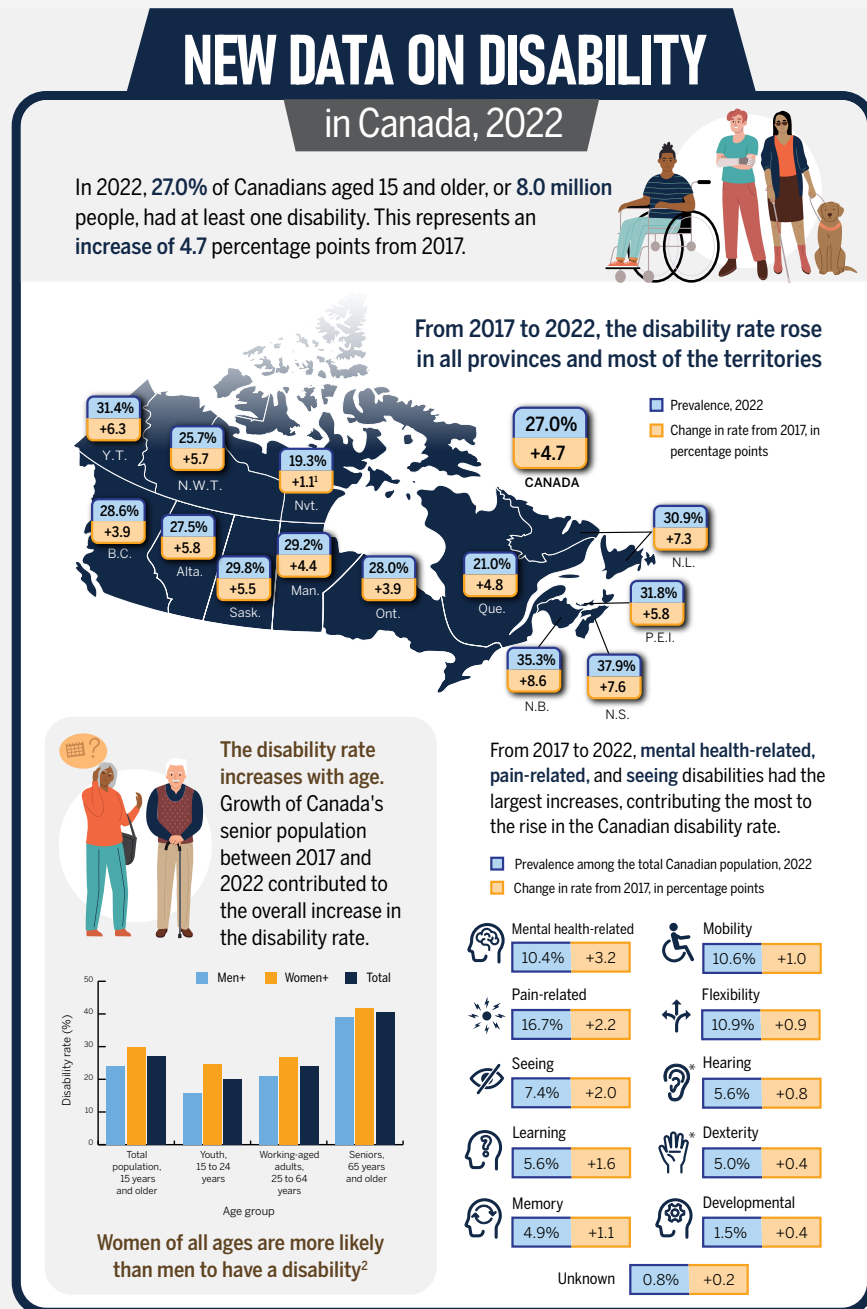
Various models have shaped how disability is perceived and described. These models impact people who have disabilities. The Government of Canada acknowledges this complexity with a definition that explains the connection between the person and the environments around them:

“Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and mind and features of the society in which they live. A disability can occur at any time in a person’s life; some people are born with a disability, while others develop a disability later in life. It can be permanent, temporary, or episodic. Disability can steadily worsen, remain the same, or improve. It can be very mild to very severe [...] Because of its complexity, there is no single, harmonized ‘operational’ definition of disability across federal programs.”

Not all disabilities are visible. Neurodivergence (for example, autism, ADHD) is an example of an invisible disability. Low vision, hearing impairment, co-morbidities such as epilepsy or organ damage (transplants, cardio-vascular malformations,...) are not visible but can impact activity to various degrees.

Statistics Canada estimates that in 2022, 27% of Canadians had at least one disability. The infographic below shows how some disabilities are very common. Coaches must avoid assuming that all athletes are non-disabled, regardless of their appearance. Athletes of all abilities and neurotypes benefit from sport participation.

Everyone should be prepared to welcome and include athletes with disabilities in their sport environment.



¹Updated image
²The change observed since 2017 is not statistically significant at a 5% significance level, meaning that it is likely due to sampling variability.
³The category "Women+" includes women and some non-binary persons, while the category "Men+" includes men and some non-binary persons. Given the small size of the non-binary population, data aggregation to a two-category gender variable is most of the time necessary to protect the confidentiality of the responses provided.
 Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability, 2022.
 ISBN: 978-0-660-68707-0 | Catalogue number: 11-627-M
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Models of disability and their potential impact on an athlete or coach's sport experiences

Overview of disability models

You can think of a disability model as a mental map or a way of perceiving and categorizing disability, either intentionally or subconsciously. There are many models of disability; the three models that are the most commonly discussed are the medical model, the social model and the social relational model. Some of these models, especially the medical model, have contributed to demeaning attitudes towards disabled people, and have helped perpetuate negative stereotypes. It's important to think about these models because they have enormous impact on the lives of people with disabilities.

“Understand your own views of disability, sport, and society. Consider how these views affect how you coach and interact with others.”

GENEVA COULTER,
Player on the Canadian Women's National Ice Sledge Hockey Team; Club Coach



Medical model:
The athlete is a
problem to be “fixed”

Social model:
The social environment
disables participants

Social relational model:
Social conditions
influence disability, but
functional limitations
are real

The medical model assumes that a disabled person is “broken” or “abnormal” and needs to be “fixed”, often by nondisabled people.

Medical models of disability dominated how disability was viewed, discussed and valued (often devalued) for many decades. The medical model is important to keep in mind, as it can be easy for sport to slide into this viewpoint and inadvertently promote the idea that sport is a “cure” for disability, or a way to help athletes with disabilities be “more normal.”

Not surprisingly, this type of view is least preferred by many people with disabilities.

The social model says that disability is a “constructed” concept: it’s the choices and cultural norms of society that lead to disability.

It shifts the focus from the individual to social and environmental conditions around the individual and in society at large. A common example of this is a person who uses a wheelchair would like to enter a building, but the only entrance is a flight of stairs. Is the issue the person’s mode of movement or the fact that a decision was made to not include a ramp?

Many of the barriers could be removed simply with different decision-making. This model is part of why some people prefer identity-first language, such as “disabled person,” as they feel this more accurately captures their experience. They are disabled by factors external to them and often outside of their control.

The social relational model tries to strike balance of the personal experience of disability and the socially constructed aspects.

The social model has received criticism at times for discounting the tangible impacts of disability that are real and experienced by disabled individuals. Take the stairs versus ramp example from above. While it shines a light on where we have the ability to make change, it may also oversimplify the experience of disability, or even erase it by implying that once the stairs are gone, so is the disability. This also risks fostering a narrative that disability is somehow negative or something to be hidden.

The social relational model continues to consider attitudes people may still have towards disability after a ramp is put into a building entrance. In other words, even though the physical barrier has been removed with a ramp, it hasn’t removed the perception people may still have of a person with a disability nor has it removed the disability from the individual.



“Disability” isn’t a bad word, but it’s only one facet of a person’s identity. Disability exists, and each person’s experiences with it will be unique. There are other disability models and many ongoing conversations about disability and accessibility. You can explore by researching, reading, and listening, especially to advocates, authors, and experts with lived disability experience.

You don’t need to know everything about a person’s disability, nor be an expert on societal views of disability. **What’s important, as a starting point, is to think about how certain ways of categorizing or labelling disability and disabled people may impact individuals.** How you think about disability will impact a person with a disability’s experience and how you provide opportunities in sport either positively or negatively.

Athletes who come to your program may have experienced limited sport choice, condescending or patronizing attitudes, or overt discrimination in their lifetime. **You can be a part of developing a program that is thoughtful and co-creates genuinely positive and empowering spaces.**

“To get persons with a disability involved you have to use role modeling,”

CARLA QUALTROUGH,
2-time Paralympian in Para
Swimming, Minister of Sport,
and Physical Activity



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Quality and inclusive programming for athletes with a disability

Quality sport and physical activity is developmentally appropriate, well run, safe, and inclusive. It's your responsibility as a coach to provide and ensure a quality sport environment **to anyone joining your program.**

The [Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children, Youth, and Adults with a Disability](#) (or "the Blueprint" for short) is a free resource that introduces key concepts regarding quality participation and provides tools for building quality participation for disabled participants in sport programs.

Quality participation is achieved through regular quality experiences in sport. Quality experience may mean different things from one individual to the other. However, the Blueprint identifies 6 building blocks that contribute to a quality experience.

Quality, inclusive programming is beneficial and a right for participants with disabilities.

Quality participation

"When athletes with a disability view their involvement in sport as satisfying and enjoyable, and experience outcomes that they consider important."

The Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP)

The 6 building blocks of quality experience

“Focus on what an athlete can do. It doesn’t have to look like how other people do the skill/sport, it must work for that specific athlete.”

DARDA SALES,
2-time Canadian Paralympian in Para Swimming and Wheelchair Basketball; Para Swim Coach

Autonomy

Having independence, choice, control

- Ask athletes how to best address their needs or make adaptations
- Allow athletes to choose the skill or technique that they feel is most important to work on
- Help athletes set attainable, individualized goals

Belongingness

Feeling included, accepted, respected, part of the group

- Understand athletes’ needs and goals and tailor training to their needs and goals
- Build a solid relationship with the athletes in your program
- Recognize the contributions of all group members

Challenge

Feeling appropriately tested

- Collaborate with athletes or locate resources to make activities appropriately challenging
- Provide options for activities that cater to varying levels of skill or ability
- Implement regular fitness or skills testing, and/or record athlete progress

Engagement

Being in-the-moment, focused, absorbed, fascinated

- Ensure equipment is adapted to meet participants’ needs
- Add new activities and games into sessions to maintain athlete interest
- Create playful competition between athletes and volunteers or staff to encourage athletes to try new skills

Mastery

Feeling a sense of achievement, accomplishment, competence

- Get trained and certified within your sport
- Provide athletes with training logs to record personal progress or notes
- Offer opportunities for athletes to learn from their peers

Meaning

Contributin toward obtaining a personal or socially maningful goal; feeling a sense of responsibility to others

- Assign roles to individual group members or create roles that participants can choose to fulfill (examples: team captain, equipment manager, social events coordinator)
- Provide opportunities for family members and caregivers to get involved in sport organizations or activities
- Show interest in the athletes’ personal lives and demonstrate concern for their well-being



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Ideally, you would use all 6 building blocks to meet the needs of all athletes. However, you can obtain effective results by relying on only a few. Belonging is foundational. If an athlete doesn't feel they belong, they'll likely choose not to participate. Belonging is a fundamental psychological need we all have.

Prioritize building blocks based on your organization's mission or vision and the majority of your athletes' needs. It's likely more effective to do a good job implementing the building blocks that are most important to the majority of the athletes in the program than to do a poor job incorporating all of them.

The 6 building blocks of quality experience must be supported by physical, program and social environments that are safe, welcoming and inclusive.

“Even if a child may initially seem reluctant to engage, or even uncooperative, hang in there. With patience, positivity, and a collaborative approach, many young neurodivergent athletes will gain confidence and better understand the routines and expectations. And as they grow to love a sport that suits their interests and strengths, they thrive.”

JEANNIE ROHR,
Director of Coach Education at Tennis BC.

You can read more in the following documents:



Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children, Youth, and Adults with a Disability



Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder



Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children and Youth with Intellectual Disabilities

Proactive inclusion

The Becoming Para Ready (BPR) framework was developed by The Steadward Centre at the University of Alberta as an introductory guide to provide coaches and club administrators with the knowledge, confidence, and tools to be more proactive in inclusion.

The Becoming Para Ready framework offers 5 principles created to help everyone in sport to think about how they can offer quality and safe experiences for all athletes with a disability.



“Knowledge and planning are important. Get comfortable with the athlete and the family. The more comfortable the athlete is, the more information they’ll give.”

TOM HAINEY,
3-time Paralympian in Para Swimming;
Club Coach

An overview of the 5 BPR principles

1. Be proactive

- Plan for inclusion. **Take initiative** to improve inclusion for your program and anticipate the needs of others.
- All people benefit from an inclusive approach.

2. Include the voices and choices of people experiencing disability

- Center the disability community in the creation of inclusive programs
- **Include people with lived experience at all stages** of your program and practise development and delivery.

3. Be reflective and purposeful in your actions

- You can have a positive impact; it takes **time and continued commitment** to improve inclusion.
- Your attitudes and behaviours set the tone for disability inclusion in your context.

4. Disability is one facet of identity

- Consider intersectionality: people experiencing disability have **diverse backgrounds, life experiences and perspectives.**

5. Disability is a social construct and impairment is experienced on a continuum

- People experience impairments that may seem similar very differently.
- **Disability has been created through social understandings** and it may vary by social, cultural, and individual interpretations.

The BPR Framework also proposes 3 main areas of reflection to give you ideas of decisions you could make, processes you could implement and concepts to try in your coaching environment.



Perspective



Planning



Programming



A goal of the BPR Framework is for you to always reflect on your program and revisit the concepts to continually grow and change in a cyclical process. Examples are offered on the next page and you can read more in the [Becoming Para Ready full resource](#).



● Programming

Emphasize collaboration, variety and choice through practice:

- Use athlete-centered coaching to ensure you're co-creating practices and sport experiences in partnership with them (example: reciprocal coaching)
- Focus on creating quality experiences through close athlete collaboration and the application of professional, sport, and disability knowledge
- Familiarize yourself with practice adaptation frameworks (examples: TREE, STEP, CHANGE IT; Universal Learning Design; NCCP A-D-A-P-T-I-V-E) to (re)consider your practice design

● Planning

Plan for quality and safe experiences for all:

- Conduct an accessibility review of your facilities to identify any potential barriers
- Review your current promotional materials (brochures, website, social media accounts,...) and identify areas in which you could include wording or pictures that would help an individual recognize that your club or program is open to individuals with disabilities. Don't assume athletes will just show up!
- Contact at least 3 organizations in your community who could help your club identify and support athletes with disabilities

● Perspective

Challenge your personal paradigm:

- Understand your views on disability, sport and society
- Create a personal statement about how you view disability and how you'll implement an inclusive approach into your practice
- Work with your club's board or management team to create an inclusion commitment statement



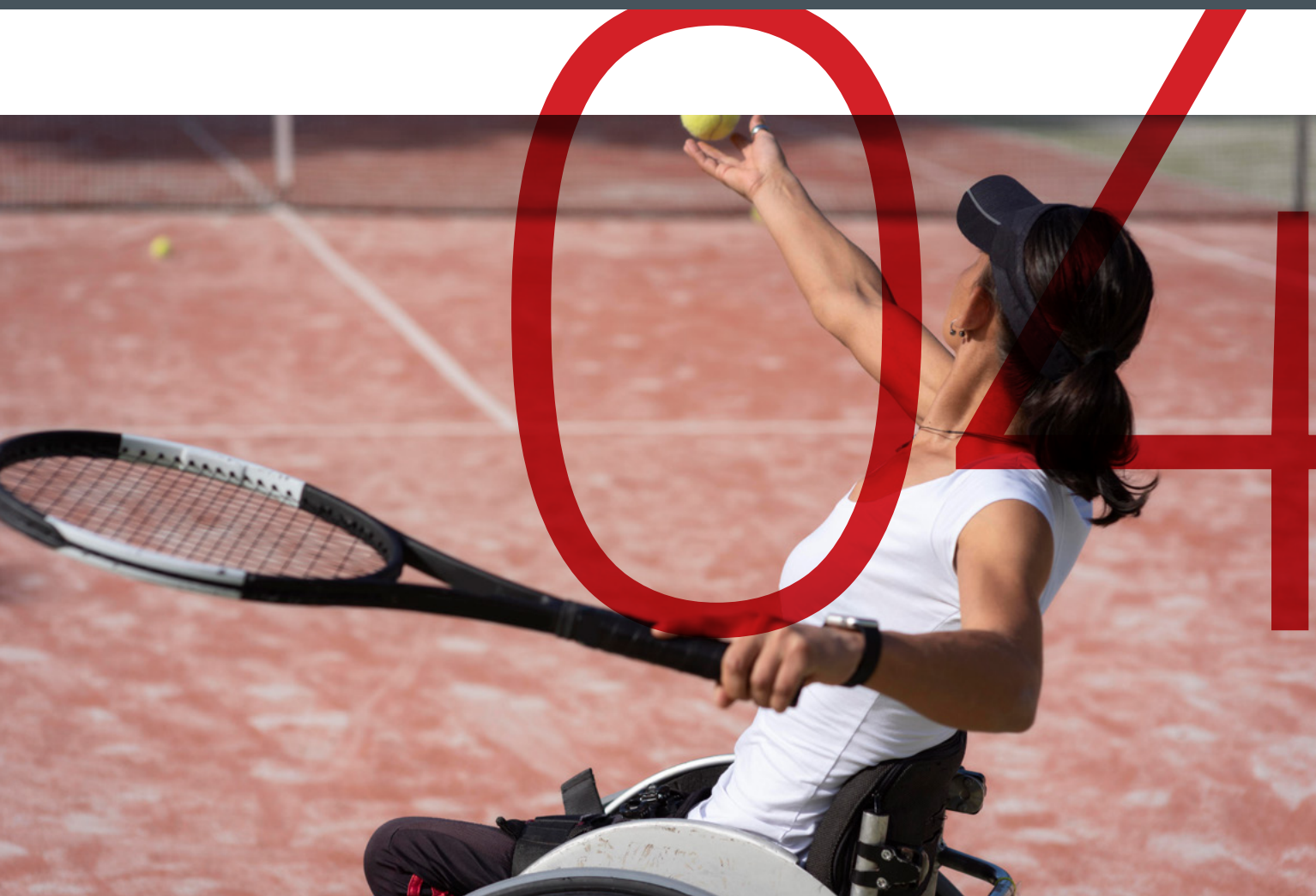
People will have a variety of goals and reasons why they want to participate. Clubs and coaches need to be proactive and explicit about the ways they can and cannot support all athletes.

As you get to know the athletes in your context, you can have ongoing conversations with them to help them reach their own goals and enjoy their time in sport.

The path a person with a disability takes to achieve their sport goals doesn't have to be the same path as their peers who are non-disabled. They can achieve their goals by working with their coaches to design a different path that meets their needs.

“Don't be afraid to challenge people with a disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions about the disability. And don't be afraid to try different things so you can get an idea of what they are facing.”

JAMES HOOD,
Director, High
Performance
Equestrian Canada



>>>

Listening to, and learning from, each athlete's unique goals and needs

Interaction is a dynamic interpersonal process performed with a clear purpose whereby the coach establishes a rapport with others to effectively communicate, teach, lead, intervene or manage. It has great impact on the social environment (**the human side of the program**) and supports a safe, welcoming and quality sport experience.

Coaching athletes with a disability will be a fantastic opportunity to enhance your interacting competency!

***“Really get to know the person and the specific disability.
Expand your horizons on adapting, keeping in mind that any sport and any training session can be adapted to that athlete. It's just a matter of learning and using creativity.”***

DEAN KOZAK,
4-time Paralympian for Canada in Goalball

Get to know the athletes

Everyone has differences that impact how they interact in and with sport. Each athlete's experience comprises a unique combination of the following elements:

- Socio-economic factors
- Life experiences and other elements
- Developmental stage
- Health
- Disabilities and impairments
- Sexual orientation
- Abilities
- Internal motivation for sport
- Emotional intelligence
- Mental health
- Gender expression and identity
- Races and cultural background
- Sex assigned at birth



When an athlete joins your program, you must ensure you have enough information about their unique goals and needs. Here are examples of questions you should be asking:

- Have you participated in sports before? If so, what sports have you been involved in and at what level?
- Have you worked with a coach before? If so, what's been successful for you?
- What are your goals in participating in this sport?
- How do you prefer to communicate feedback and discuss your progress?
- If a disability is visible: What type of disability do you have?
- If there's no visible disability: Do you have any disability, medical condition, limitation, or specific needs?
- Are there any specific adaptations that would help you to participate fully and safely?
- Are there any activities or exercises that you are uncomfortable doing?
- Do you use any assistive devices or adaptive equipment?
- Are there any concerns or questions you have about participating in our program that you'd like to discuss?

“Be honest, focus on the person related to the sport, and be patient.”

CATHY CADIEUX,
Former CEO Wheelchair
Rugby Canada



While athletes are your primary focus, they aren't the only ones you need to consider. Some athletes may arrive with a caregiver, personal support worker or spouse. Whoever this person is, have a conversation with them and the athlete to define the type of experiences they can have with the program and how you'll interact with them.

The Participant Support Needs Form¹ developed by Inclusive Sport Design is a great resource you could use to get to know your athletes.

Participant Support Needs Form



Club/Program name		Coach/Instructor name	Date
Participant full name		Age	Parent/Guardian full name
Phone		Email	

What are your goals in sport?	What is the best way for us to communicate?
What can I do to help you fully participate?	What specific or modified equipment do you need to fully participate?
What supports do you have in general life that could be used to assist your participation?	Does anything impact your ability to perform the sport skills and activities?
What do I need to know to ensure you can participate safely?	Who else can I speak with to better understand you and your support needs?
What else do I need to know to help you participate fully and achieve your goals?	

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Communication Tips

The athlete is the expert on their goals, needs, and abilities. Listen to and work with them to develop plans for enjoyable and quality participation in your program.

It's important to **speak directly to the athlete**, not the person accompanying them. If the athlete has a system where their support person assists in communication, they'll let you know.



Use people-first language.

Be respectful and emphasize the person and not the disability. For example, when referring to a person with a disability, refer to the person first by using phrases such as “a person who ...”, “a person with ...” or “a person who has...”.

However, **there are exceptions to this guideline...**

Some individuals and groups prefer to self-identify as Deaf, Autistic, or blind. Listen to how the person describes themselves and adopt the same language (example: autistic versus person on the spectrum).

In any case, people usually prefer to simply be called by their name!

Some athletes may have conditions that impact their verbal communication. For example, post-stroke, epilepsy, cognitive processing disorders, incomplete hearing loss, executive function deficits..., can all result in stable or variable verbal comprehension difficulties.

- Remember that speech patterns or communication techniques are not an indication of cognitive or intellectual ability.
- It's ok if you have difficulty understanding someone. Asking an athlete to repeat or rephrase is fine. Your tone is key. If you sound frustrated, that will be seen negatively. Use an even tone that sounds genuinely curious.
- When communicating with athletes in ways that are new to you, or if you are having difficulty understanding someone, confirm that you heard correctly by repeating back what you have understood.
- Don't pretend to have understood someone if you did not. With time, you'll likely find a good pattern of interaction that will work for both of you.
- If an athlete communicates with a communication board (a physical or digital board with symbols, letters or words), take time to become familiar with the board and practice communicating effectively with the athlete. It's ok if learning this takes time!

Some athletes may have strong verbal communication skills, but still benefit from visual supports to help with predictability, organization, and structure.

“Get to know the person. Each individual on the autism spectrum will have different needs. For some, visual supports are key. For others, it’s frontloading and reducing sensory challenges. Get to know your athlete and match your coaching to their individual needs.”

KATIE ASHLEY,
Program Coordinator at Canucks Autism Network

If an athlete comes with a support animal and guide dog, remember that the animal is often working, which means they shouldn’t be touched or distracted. They may wear a harness when in “work mode,” but always check with the owner before touching or speaking to the animal.

If you’re speaking with a chair user and do not use a chair yourself, consider sitting down to be at eye level with the athlete. Sitting is preferred, if possible; bending down, especially for long periods, can feel awkward.

Give everyone appropriate personal space. This includes considering any mobility aids such as wheelchairs, walkers or canes. If you’re helping an athlete with a piece of sport equipment or a maneuver that requires more direct support, ask first, and then follow their directions. For new athletes who may be unsure, have a discussion and ask for support from experienced athletes to figure out the best plan.



Always ask a person if they would like help before assisting, wait for them to respond, and respect their answer.

You can set the stage for quality participation by understanding each athlete’s holistic profile, unique goals and needs and establishing effective communication.

While learning from athletes with lived experience is one of the most important steps in coach development, **it’s also important to research and seek learning opportunities. Leaning too heavily on athletes can be limiting and place a heavy expectation on the athlete**, particularly for athletes who are new to sport and may not have the required background knowledge. Your professional development is your opportunity, not your athlete’s responsibility.





Understanding barriers to and value of participation

For athletes, participation in sports often leads to physical, **psychological, and social benefits**, enabling **personal empowerment**. The benefits exist regardless of age: kids with disabilities who participate in physical activity experience more inclusion, better physical function, and an overall increase in well-being. Athletes with disabilities reported that participating in sport left them **deeply satisfied from being a part of competitive sports** and accessing **opportunities to be independent**. Other participants speak of making **connected friendships and strengthening communication skills** through sport.

There are many benefits for coaches and athletes to get involved in sport. However, many things can hold people back from participating in sport and physical activity. Sometimes called “barriers,” these obstacles can uniquely impact disabled people compared to people without disability.



“Stop seeing limits in kids. We are all capable if given a chance. If you focus on what we CAN do, you will see some incredible things. We learn differently but we can learn quickly!”

JAYDEN RUDGE,
Autistic athlete

Barriers can range from individual factors (such as a person's own motivation and how much family or social support they have) up to facility accessibility, availability of equipment, program costs, policy decisions, and even climate. You may not control every aspect of the program where you work or volunteer. However, being aware of challenges athletes may encounter when accessing the sport environment can help you reflect on how to develop solutions, or simply help you to be empathetic, a good listener, and a person who aims to see things from the athlete's perspective.

Some of the most cited barriers for disabled individuals when it comes to accessing sport and physical activity include the following:

- Lack of qualified, experienced coaches to work with individuals who have disabilities
- Reluctance of coaches to include disabled athletes in their sport environment
- Cost and access to specialized sport equipment
- Strained family support due to increased stress, lack of time or finances
- Natural and built environment (such as weather, uneven ground, lack of ramps,....).



For children, these barriers tend to **increase** as they age and want to explore new, wider networks with less parental support.

Challenges in any of these areas could lead to negative experiences or even keep people from trying sport altogether. Let's explore further barriers that impact sport accessibility for athletes with a disability, and, more importantly, how they can be addressed!

QUALITY, INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING IS BENEFICIAL
AND A RIGHT
FOR DISABLED PARTICIPANTS

Accessibility

Accessibility can be defined as “the practice of making information, activities, and/or environments sensible, meaningful and usable for as many people as possible.”

— Government of Canada; Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency

While often designed specifically for the needs of people experiencing disability, ensuring our places, spaces and programs are accessible and barrier free will benefit all people.

Improved accessibility benefits everyone!

Curb cuts, which are ramps that are graded down on sidewalks to meet with the street, were designed for wheelchair users to safely navigate getting off sidewalks. However, this also benefits families using strollers, the elderly, and anyone rolling a bag behind them. You may also notice textural enhancements to these curb cuts; without them, curb cuts are less accessible for those with visual impairments.



Closed captioning is another example of accessible design that benefits everyone. This tool was designed to support the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community when they watch television. Many individuals benefit from using closed captioning; it isn't just for people with disabilities.

Within sport, accessibility means that a sitting volleyball player can access the building and practice space for a national team training session, or a para swimmer can change and prepare for their swim meet with wider or padded benches in the changing area.

While many places are becoming more accessible, it shouldn't be assumed that everything is barrier-free. From rural communities that lack resources for accessible infrastructure, to older sections of cities that were designed without access needs in mind, to Canada's winter climate, people with disabilities are continually navigating and having to adapt to an inaccessible world.

Having a greater understanding of what your athletes' access needs may look like will better support yourself and your athletes in addressing the inaccessible world together. This begins with a conversation because access needs will look different everyone.

Barriers to accessibility

Most barriers to accessibility can be broken down into 5 overarching categories including: physical, attitudinal, organizational, informational, and technological.

The categories aren't experienced independently! They interact to create an individual's experience while participating in their desired activities.

PHYSICAL BARRIERS

Physical barriers are outdoor spaces or built environments that exclude people experiencing disability.

In sport settings, physical barriers can be:

- Front desks at recreation centres that are too high for wheelchair users to interact with the staff
- Dressing room showers without a bench for athletes who struggle with balance
- Room signage without braille

Accessibility wasn't at the forefront when many buildings were designed, so retrofitting is required to reduce barriers. This can be challenging because it's typically more expensive to modify existing spaces and places. For new buildings, accessibility standards are typically utilized, however, they don't necessarily support everyone's access needs.

Transportation

All athletes will have different transportation needs, depending on their location and access to a vehicle or reliable public transportation. Transportation is a common accessibility issue among all disability groups, both within and beyond sport settings. A participant may have driving restrictions or may not drive for several reasons. Some of these reasons may be situational or intermittent (for example, lighting conditions, seizure activity, fatigue,...).



Gather information about how each athlete will arrive to regular programming or practice. This information will help you identify access needs and appropriately time and schedule your program.

Someone who cannot drive will most likely use public transportation and, in some situations, they may require carpooling. Venues or programs in locations where public transit isn't easily accessible may limit the athlete's ability to arrive on time. These barriers may also cause undue

stress and fatigue. You can mitigate these problems by accounting for them when choosing facilities (where applicable) and designing training plans and recreational programming.

How can you support athletes in your program?

- Could other teammates provide support by carpooling?
- Is there funding available for alternative options when no other option is available (for example, having a taxi fund when the buses are down or late)?
- Could you reconsider your practice time to allow a parent or caregiver to drive the athlete according to their schedule?
- Do adults in your program have a support network? Be aware of your assumptions and expectations. Unlike children, adults often have even more difficulty securing reliable transportation.

These actions may support the athlete in reducing coordination fatigue, which is common for people experiencing disability as many aspects of their lives require planning and scheduling.

Accessible bussing

Accessible bussing options designed for people with disabilities may not always be the best choice. Many restrictions limit people's access to these services. They usually require booking at least a couple of days in advance, so any changes to regular programming may impact your athlete's access if they're using such services.

Adapted vehicles

Some people who have physical disabilities and drive may require adapted vehicles that are expensive to modify. This may be a barrier, and some people may decide to use public transportation instead.

People who have an adapted vehicle may rely on others to drive the vehicle. Also, accessible parking at the venues will be important to consider. If the team includes multiple athletes requiring accessible parking, consider making prior arrangements with the venue to ensure multiple spots are available. Don't forget to ensure accessible spots in the winter are cleared and maintained!



Team transport

The team may need to book an accessible bus or van. The cost of doing this may not be in the budget. You may want to explore alternative options like shared vehicles or multiple rental vehicles. Athletes with physical disabilities may require space to transport both mobility aids and sports equipment. For example, consider the needs of a para ice hockey team: athletes travel with wheelchairs, walkers (or other mobility aids), sleds and hockey equipment bags. Ensuring you have room for people, mobility aids and sporting equipment will influence the decisions you make. For some people, transferring into a vehicle may be more difficult so this will be important to consider when selecting a vehicle.



Be sensitive to transportation!

Through regular communication and exploring options, you can assist the athletes in your program in overcoming this barrier. Each athlete has a unique situation; approaching transportation logistics with flexibility and creativity will help your athletes to access your program.

Buildings, facilities, and outdoor venues

Access to sporting facilities will impact an athlete's participation in sport. In Canada, many facilities are not completely accessible, although improvements are being made. Inaccessible change rooms and washrooms are common barriers. Outdoor locations at modern recreation and training facilities (such as at a lake for a rowing practice) can also be barriers. Remember that there may be intersectional considerations for individuals with disabilities. For example, some athletes may require access to gender-neutral washrooms or changing facilities.

There are actions coaches can take to be proactive about reducing the barriers that may impact their athlete's or team's ability to participate. These include:

- Researching the accessibility of practice and competition spaces. Ensure that the space meets the team's needs before committing to a practice schedule.
- Making the most of the training space (for example, retrofitting access to a space with a temporary ramp) or advocating for and with the athlete to have improvements made).
- Providing feedback to a venue or training centre if it lacks accessible signage.
- Requesting additional accessible parking spaces or rearranging floorplans for ease of access.
- Choosing spaces (such as change rooms or meeting rooms) that meet the accessibility needs of athletes.
- Asking questions and advocating for facilities to improve their accessibility when registering for competitions.

Venue and facility accessibility becomes a bigger challenge when you are looking at outdoor sports, where the environment and landscape may restrict access. For example, a watersport like rowing or wakeboarding may not have access to the docks due to the steepness of where the water is located. Sometimes you may have to develop workable solutions rather than ideal ones.

Obtaining as much information as possible from the athlete will aid developing a plan to support accessibility. The more the coach and athlete work together, the better the outcome.

The goal is to support the athlete in being as independent as possible, while maintaining the athlete's dignity.



ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

Attitudinal barriers are assumptions and behaviours that exclude people experiencing disability. Often emerging from a lack of understanding, attitudinal barriers are frequently perpetuated unknowingly.

In sport, attitudinal barriers may be evident through a physical barrier that suggests an ableist assumption. In some hockey arenas, there's easy, barrier-free access to spaces designed for spectators (such as seating areas to watch), but there's limited or no access to spaces for athletes (such as rink level entrance or dressing rooms). This illustrates an assumption that a person who experiences disability would watch sports but wouldn't be an athlete, which sends the message that people experiencing disability don't belong in the spaces for athletes and are not welcome in the sport.



Ableism refers to discriminatory thoughts and actions towards a social group, in this case disabled people. It manifests when heightened value is placed on the non-disabled experience which is seen as the optimal, reflecting a lack of value placed on the disabled experience. It demonstrates how certain ideals and attributes are valued or not valued.

Conscious or unconscious ableism remains prevalent in our sports systems today. We can all be a part of challenging ableist notions and practices.

For neurodivergent individuals, barriers are often related to lack of knowledge and understanding of invisible disability. Settings are inaccessible because people working in those environments don't understand the behaviour they see and may misinterpret behaviour as inappropriate or uncooperative. For example, someone may interpret the behaviour of a child athlete who has difficulty following group instructions or completing transitions quickly as "defiant" or "disruptive." In reality, that child needs a coach who understands that their brain functions differently than other children and that slight changes in communication can lead to much more success. These changes (such as shortening instructions, using visual supports, and providing transition warnings) can benefit not only that child, but all athletes in the group. The greatest help for accessibility for neurodivergent individuals is usually a combination of training and additional people to provide support to the person with the disability.

"I can't tell you how many coaches I've met that write off my child when they hear he is on the autism spectrum. And then, with minor adaptations, he blows them away. My kid is a competitive swimmer (alongside neurotypical peers), a snowboarder, and also loves playing hockey with his friends on an adapted hockey team. Give these kids a chance."

ANITA RUDGE,
Parent of an Autistic athlete

Attitudinal barriers can impact all areas of an athlete's participation and can come from anyone involved in the activity (such as the coach, spectators, other participants,...). Education is the best way to combat attitudinal barriers.

ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

Organizational or systemic barriers are factors of an environment that discriminate or exclude people experiencing disability from taking part to the fullest extent.

Think about a blind rower who's competent and confident in their sport. There may be policies in place that mandate that a rower with a visual impairment must have another person on the water with them. This creates a barrier for the athlete as they aren't able to be independent in their training and it requires them to rely on others to meet their goals.

Sometimes policies have been in place for a long time. Making the recommendation to review or reconsider an existing policy or practice can go a long way in reducing this type of barrier.

INFORMATIONAL BARRIERS

Informational barriers occur when communication strategies don't meet the needs of most people. This can be seen specifically with sensory disabilities (vision loss, Deaf or hard-of-hearing), but also in general communication.

In sport, an informational barrier could include program information written at too high of a grade level (that is, not in plain language) for the audience. You could see informational barriers as well in a practice setting where a coach doesn't relay information about a skill or drill using different formats (verbal, illustrated or demonstrated instruction). Delivering too much information at once can also be problematic, particularly for neurodivergent thinkers, but also for many other athletes. Direct, specific, and clear communication delivered in a variety of formats is the best way to breakdown this type of barrier.

TECHNOLOGICAL BARRIERS

Technological barriers are typically closely tied to informational barriers. They occur when there's a misunderstanding about how information should be delivered to its intended audience.

For example, printed handouts may not work for an athlete with a visual impairment. You can remove this barrier by providing an electronic version of the document, which is screen reader compatible. Be careful though! Not all documents are screen reader compatible. Additionally, while using videos to go through skills or strategies with an athlete who is Deaf or hard of hearing, closed captioning is important. There are many great resources available to help reduce these barriers!

Travelling

When it comes to travelling, the amount of assistance and access needs will vary depending on the athlete. In addition to the logistical considerations below, you should be aware that travel can significantly impact everyone's daily living activities. This can be much more involved and complex for some people than for others. Be sure to engage the athlete and their support networks, as appropriate, to ensure that all needs are accounted for, not just those that are most visible.

AIR TRAVEL



We highly recommend researching the various airline supports that are available because every airline is different.

Athletes with a disability will often travel with various medical equipment and sporting equipment. Calling the airline ahead of time to address this will support smoother travel.

Many athletes may already have a system for addressing airline travel, so an initial conversation with the athletes will be helpful when you begin planning. If they haven't done so already, or are new to air travel, planning ahead with them will best support the travel day.

HOTEL



Athletes may have preferences in what they need for a hotel room (for example, a bathtub versus a shower). Ask!

Oftentimes, hotels only have a few accessible rooms. If you're travelling as a team, you'll have to prioritize who has the most access needs for the accessible rooms.

Calling ahead and finding out what features exist in the accessible rooms (such as a roll-in shower, lower bed frame) will also support you in making room arrangements.

Most vacation rentals, such as Airbnb, aren't fully accessible. However, examining photos and using the filter function for accessibility allows you to decide whether the accommodation will work for you and your athletes.

The more you and your athletes travel together, the more you'll establish a routine for finding appropriate accommodations.

Rely on the more experienced athletes in your group! They can offer newer athletes tips, techniques, and shortcuts. Their mentorship is an incredible asset to the team!

Canada's accessibility is gradually improving!

Although Canada's accessibility isn't perfect, communities continue to prioritize improving access and reducing barriers for members of the disability community. However, this may not be the case internationally.



We encourage you to do your research prior to arriving in another country to ensure your athletes are prepared for the challenges that may arise in inaccessible locations.



Dedicated programming for people with disabilities

During athletes' early experiences in their sport journey, the primary emphasis should be on fun, learning and creating spaces that feel safe and welcoming. In community and instructional settings, athletes of different ages, genders, functions, and skill levels may play and learn alongside each other. Many different types of programs can offer safe and quality experiences for the people who use them; there's no "one size fits all" or "best" option. Some athletes have participated in sport programs with disabled athletes as well as mixed settings.

Having said that, specialized programs for athletes with disability exist and there are many ways to describe these opportunities. Depending on the nature of the disability, and an individual's preference, disability-specific environments can offer many benefits.



Types of dedicated programming

Sport programs for disabled participants come in many formats and use many different names and descriptions. You might come across some of the following terms:

- **Disability sport:** An umbrella term used to describe any and all types of sport program for people with disabilities. More commonly used in the United Kingdom.
- **Integrated program:** At the club level, an integrated program is where participants with and without disabilities practice and compete together. In Canada, at the national and provincial or territorial levels, “integrated” sports mean that one governing body is responsible for overseeing streams of sport for both non-disabled and disabled participants (for example, both Olympic and Paralympic programming).
- **Para sport:** The prefix “para” comes from “parallel,” meaning adapted opportunities existing alongside non-adapted counterparts. Para sport means any sport in which people with a disability participate and which has classification rules compliant with the IPC Athlete Classification Code. In other words, para sport is any sport that is recognized by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC); the list of sports that are “para” is quite short.
- **Special Olympics:** While many Special Olympics programs are offered in generic sports such as soccer, basketball or alpine skiing, Special Olympics also offers programming in sports that are unique to the organization, including bocce, snowshoe, and floor hockey.
- **Adapted or adaptive sport:** Modifications in sport environments to support varying needs, abilities, and goals. “Adaptive” is more commonly used in the United States.
- **Inclusive sport or accessible sport:** Terms that people use when they intend to signal an inclusive program but may not be helpful without clear, specific details about how the program or event will support inclusion or accessibility.

You may also come across broad terms that apply beyond sport programming such as:

- **Barrier-free:** Usually refers to building codes and is centered on architectural or physical access and was traditionally very focused on wheelchair users.
- **Universal design:** Sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably with “barrier-free,” universal design is design that is functional for as many people as possible, without changing how they typically interact.
- **Unified Sport®:** Unified Sports integrates individuals with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) on teams for sport training and competition to promote social engagement and development

Individual sports may use their own subsets of terminology within these broad terms. For example, Canoe Kayak Canada uses “paracanoe” to describe disciplines on the Paralympic Program, and also has a national program called PaddleAll for athletes with intellectual disabilities. People will use different vocabulary in different settings, and there’s rarely one perfect or universally accepted definition for any of these terms. It’s like someone’s pronouns; you don’t know someone’s preferred pronoun unless they tell you. Disability-centered language is equally personal.

Not all athletes with disabilities will seek or be well suited to specialized disability sport options. For this reason, all coaches should be prepared to include and support athletes of all abilities.

- Some individuals with disabilities will prefer participating in mainstream sport from community or introduction through to high performance.
- Most neurodivergent athletes will likely be best suited to competing alongside their peers in mainstream sport environments.
- Athletes with an intellectual disability may enjoy competitive opportunities offered by Special Olympics or they may choose to engage in para sport.
- Athletes with a physical disability interested in high performance may have a goal to compete at the Paralympics.

If an athlete shows interest in high performance and has a disability that offers a specific competitive pathway, coaches must be aware of local programs where they could direct the athlete. Once the athlete has entered those disability-specific environments, concepts such as classification, categorization or divisioning (covered in another section of this manual) become relevant. Before that, there may not be any need to group athletes formally or have any admission requirements.



Competitive opportunities

Some athletes will have competitive goals in mind. Remember, depending on the nature of the disability and an individual's preference, some athletes with disabilities (such as neurodivergent athletes) are well suited for competitive opportunities in mainstream sport.

However, there are several major sport movements, competitive pathways and events that have evolved for specific groupings of athletes or specific communities.

- **Paralympic Games:**

The Paralympic games take place every 4 years and align in terms of location and timing with the Olympic games. They are parallel to the Olympics, as identified by the “para” of Paralympic. Athletes in 3 major categories of physical, visual and intellectual impairments undergo classification to determine eligibility and sport class.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://paralympic.ca/games/>

- **Special Olympics:**

Over 4 million athletes with intellectual disabilities worldwide play, train, and compete in individual and team sports in the Special Olympics program. Summer and Winter World Games are held every 4 years.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://www.specialolympics.org/?locale=en>

- **Invictus Games:**

A biennial event using competitive adaptive sport to aid recovery for international wounded, injured and sick service personnel and veteran. The spirit of the Games therefore lies not in elite sport, but the delivery of a high-profile, international, adaptive sports event where rehabilitation of the individual is at the core.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://invictusgamesfoundation.org/>

- **Deaflympics:**

The International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD) leads a system of sport activities for Deaf people. The Deaflympics are quadrennial summer and winter international competitions, organized by and for the community they serve.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://www.deaflympics.com/icsd>

- **Blind Sport World Games:**

Hosted by the International Blind Sport Federation, this multisport competition is held every 4 years for athletes with visual impairments.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://ibsasport.org/ibsa-world-games/overview/>

- **Unified Sport®:**

Unified Sport® is a model led by Special Olympics that brings together athletes with and without intellectual disabilities to train and compete together.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://www.specialolympics.ca/programs-gamesprograms/unified-sportsr>

- **Virtus Global Games:**

Virtus, formerly International Federation for Athletes with Intellectual Impairments (INAS), leads the movement for athletes with intellectual impairment and hosts a quadrennial Global Games that draws 1,000 athletes.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://www.virtus.sport/about-virtus>

- **World Dwarf Games:**

Hosted by International Dwarf Sports Federation, these Games are the largest sporting event for athletes who have dwarfism.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://internationaldwarfsportsfederation.com/>

- **World Abilitysport:**

World Abilitysport was created with the merger of the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sports Federation (IWAS) and the Cerebral Palsy International Sports and Recreation Association (CPISRA). The biennial World Abilitysport Games. (<https://worldabilitysport.org/world-abilitysport-games/overview/>) include archery, athletics, powerlifting, shooting, swimming, table tennis, wheelchair fencing, wheelchair rugby, and volleyball.

LEARN MORE HERE:

<https://worldabilitysport.org/>



Additionally, there are increasingly integrated options where athletes with and without disabilities compete at the same event, sometimes in separate categories and sometimes directly alongside each other. The following list contains examples of integrated events:

- **Canada Summer Games:**
Para athletics, Para cycling, Para swimming, Special Olympics swimming, Special Olympics athletics
- **Canada Winter Games:**
Wheelchair basketball (Para athletes and non-Para combined), Para alpine, Para Nordic, Special Olympics figure skating.
- **Commonwealth Games:**
3x3 wheelchair basketball, Para swimming, Para athletics, Para cycling, Para lawn bowls, Para powerlifting, Para table tennis, Para triathlon

In some provinces and regions, there are increasingly options for accessible high school sport, such as Para divisions in competitions or minor rule to have Para and nondisabled athletes compete together (for example, one ball bounce for a standing tennis player and two bounces for the wheelchair player on the other side of the court). Although Canada doesn't have a formalized accessible varsity structure, athletes with disabilities can and have competed in varsity sport at the college and university level.

Classification, categorization, and divisioning

Classification

According to the International Paralympic Committee, classification is the process to determine if athletes are eligible to compete in a Paralympic sport, and how they are grouped together for competition. Athletes are grouped by the degree of activity limitation they have.

Categorization

Similar to classification, categorization ensures athletes can compete at an equivalent level for the Invictus Games. The system is defined by the host organization and is different for each Games.

Divisioning

Special Olympics uses a process called divisioning to ensure athletes of all abilities have equal chances to succeed. Special Olympics Canada states: Athletes compete with others of the same gender, similar age and comparable ability.

You can explore your sport to find out if eligibility requirements are part of the competition structure. If so, you can determine the right time for a conversation with the athlete. However, be aware that misconceptions that these processes are always mandatory can be a barrier to people trying a new sport. By educating yourself about the processes and what options your sport offers, you'll be better equipped to welcome new participants and support athletes who are ready to take the next step in their competitive careers.

For more information about sport-specific programming and classification or divisioning, connect with your Provincial/Territorial or National Sport Organization.





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Organizations that can help

National Sport Organizations (NSOs)

<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/sport-organizations/national.html>

Provincial/Territorial Coaching Representatives (PTCRs)

<https://coach.ca/provincialterritorial-coaching-representatives-ptcrs>



Provincial/Territorial Sport Organizations in each Province & Territory

Alberta:

Home | Alberta Sport
<https://albertasport.ca/>

British Columbia:

BC's Accredited, Recognized & Affiliated Sports | ViaSport
<https://viasport.ca/accredited-recognized-affiliated-sports-in-bc/>

Manitoba:

Our Partners | Sport Manitoba
<https://www.sportmanitoba.ca/partners/>

New Brunswick:

Associate Member Directory Archives | SportNB
https://www.sportnb.com/member_category/associate-member-directory/

Newfoundland and Labrador:

Member Sports – SportNL
<https://sportnl.ca/member-sports/>

Northwest Territories:

Territorial Sports Organizations | Sport North Federation
<https://www.sportnorth.com/territorial-sports-organizations>

Nova Scotia:

Provincial Sport Organizations — Sport Nova Scotia
<https://sportnovascotia.ca/provincial-sport-organizations/>

Nunavut:

Territorial sport and recreation organizations | Government of Nunavut
<https://www.gov.nu.ca/en/recreation/territorial-sport-and-recreation-organizations>

Ontario:

Provincial sport organizations and multi-sport organizations | [ontario.ca](https://www.ontario.ca)
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/provincial-sport-organizations-and-multi-sport-organizations>

Prince Edward Island:

Our Members - Sport PEI
<https://sportpei.pe.ca/our-members/>

Quebec:

List of recognized sports federations (available in French only)
<https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/athletes-entraîneurs-et-officiels/partenaires/federations-de-regie-sportive-du-quebec>

Saskatchewan:

Membership — Sask Sport
<https://www.sasksport.ca/about-us/membership/>

Yukon:

Find a Sport — Sport Yukon
<https://www.sportyukon.com/find-a-sport>

Paralympics sports

Paralympic Sports | Canadian Paralympic Committee

<https://paralympic.ca/paralympic-sports>

Summer Sports

- Para archery
- Para athletics
- Para badminton
- Blind football
- Boccia
- Para canoe
- Para cycling
- Para equestrian
- Goalball
- Para judo
- Para powerlifting
- Para rowing
- Shooting Para sport
- Sitting volleyball
- Para swimming
- Para table tennis
- Para taekwondo
- Para triathlon
- Wheelchair basketball
- Wheelchair fencing
- Wheelchair rugby
- Wheelchair tennis

Winter Sports

- Para alpine skiing
- Para biathlon
- Para cross-country skiing
- Para ice hockey
- Para snowboard
- Wheelchair curling

Special Olympics

[Special Olympics Programs | Special Olympics Canada](#)

- Alpine Skiing
- Athletics
- Basketball
- Bocce
- 5-Pin Bowling
- Cross-Country Skiing
- Curling
- Figure skating
- Floor Hockey
- Floorball
- Golf
- Gymnastics- Rhythmic
- Powerlifting
- Short Track Speed Skating
- Snowshoeing
- Soccer
- Softball
- Swimming
- Tenpin Bowling

Other Organizations

Organization	About the organization	Webpage
Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability	Provides training and resources to support the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in physical activity and recreation.	https://ala.ca/
Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation	Promotes and supports the development of health, physical education, and recreation in Canada through advocacy, professional development, and resource provision.	https://phecanada.ca/
Canadian Blind Sports Association	Serv[es] individuals who are blind, visually impaired, Deaf-blind, or are blind and have additional disabilities; and their families and other supporters. CBSA is currently the national governing body for the sport of goalball.	https://canadianblindsports.ca/
Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sports Association	Supports athletes who have cerebral palsy (CP) across a variety of sports and is the national governing body for the sport of boccia.	https://ccpsa.ca/en/
Canadian Deaf Sports Association	Promotes and supports the development of sports for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community in Canada.	https://assc-cdsa.com/en/
Canadian Paralympic Committee	Supports Canadian Paralympic athletes and promotes the Paralympic movement in Canada.	https://paralympic.ca/
Canucks Autism	Provides year-round sports and recreation programs for individuals with autism and their families.	https://www.canucksautism.ca/
Dwarf Athletic Association of Canada	Provides life-long fellowship, athletic support, and information to people with dwarfism, their families, and friends across Canada.	https://daaca.ca/
Sport Canada	Provides leadership and funding to help ensure a strong Canadian sport system which enables Canadians to progress from early sport experiences to high performance excellence.	https://www.canada.ca/en/services/culture/sport.html
The Steadward Centre	A centre for individuals with disabilities offering physical activity, sport, and fitness programs.	https://www.ualberta.ca/steadward-centre/index.html



Disabilities “Must Know”

Preface

The goal of this section is to provide basic information about some different disabilities. Remember that disabilities are individual, nuanced, and may fluctuate or evolve. Two people with the same disability may not have the same impacts or experiences. As described in earlier sections, the impact of a disability on a person’s sport participation will be influenced by the physical, social and program environments present. People may also experience multiple disabilities at once. Disabilities may also co-occur with mental health conditions or other disabilities (for example, 70% of individuals on the z spectrum are also diagnosed with ADHD or anxiety).

Nonetheless, learning some basics about different disabilities and some of the more common impacts on sport participation can be helpful to be able to reflect on individual experiences, ask the right questions, and foster safe and positive sport environments. Learning about different disabilities can also lessen how much burden is placed on the disabled athlete to explain and educate. However, it’s still important to get to know each athlete as an individual.

Athletes may have a congenital or acquired disability. A congenital disability is present at birth or in very early infancy, while an acquired disability results from an injury or illness after birth.

Disabilities may be visible, such as an athlete who uses a wheelchair. But disabilities may be invisible; for example, you cannot tell from looking at someone if they are neurodivergent, have low vision, a hearing impairment or epilepsy. Getting to know your participants is the best way to learn about their functional differences.

This section describes different disabilities and, at times, uses medicalized language. The intent is to be specific about what impacts athlete may experience so you and the athlete can have clear and honest conversations to create safe and developmentally appropriate environments. It's by no means an exhaustive list. This section is meant to be a starting point; athletes know their bodies and goals best.

“Understand the different disabilities through communications and awareness.”

OZZIE SAWICKI,
Former Para Alpine and Para
Athletics National Team Coach

Cognitive disabilities

Cognition refers to a broad array of aptitudes, capabilities, and skill sets. Cognitive disabilities encompass learning deficits to low intellectual quotient (IQ) scores.

- Intellectual Disability: Characterized by deficits in intelligence and adaptive behavior, impacting learning, reasoning and problem-solving.
- Learning Disabilities: Refers to difficulties in acquiring, processing, and retaining information, including conditions like dyslexia and dyscalculia.

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Provide simple, short, and clear instructions and include a demonstration.
- Use appropriate level of language and allow enough time to process the information.
- Use brief and focused language while giving initial instructions and while working on the skill or activity with the athlete.
- Offer athletes choices regarding the training session but keep the choices simple.
- Try to provide athletes with 2 simple, clear choices that are both viable.
- Ensure that the athlete's attention is appropriately directed to the object or activity prior to delivering instructions about the object or activity.
- Check regularly for understanding using repetition and positive reinforcement.
- Appeal to different learning modalities using a variety of approaches to coach.
- Ensure your toolbox is tailored to the strengths, needs and constraints of the athlete.
- Provide a visual illustration, a verbal explanation, and a physical demonstration.
- Introduce new skills and drills gradually, incorporating them into their existing framework. Adapting to new and novel skills, procedures, and environments adds cognitive load for all individuals. For those who have cognitive disabilities, it's important to make strategic choices.
- Use a range of methods to maximize the potential for the athlete to understand the skill, learn the skill and apply the skill.
- Allow for increased transition time between activities.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity recognizes that differences in cognition, social learning and behaviors are normal, important variations in human neurodevelopment. It refers to the wide range of cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional traits observed in individuals.

Neurodivergence is “a term used to describe the concept that a brain processes things differently to what’s considered ‘typical’”, sometimes called “neurotypical”² (Butler, 2022)

Examples:

- Autism spectrum: Autism is defined by differences in social communication and the presence of restricted, repetitive, and/or sensory behaviors or interests.
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): challenges with attention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that impact functioning or development.

“Coaches should be prepared to welcome neurodivergent athletes in their mainstream community sport programs, as well as high performance settings. Disabilities such as ADHD and autism are common. Playing alongside nondisabled peers is desired and expected for a lot of these athletes and their families.”

SARAH RUSSELL,
Autistic athlete, advocate,
teacher and coach

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Provide short clear instructions and include a demonstration.
- Give time to process the information. Check for understanding (“Can you show me?” “What will we start with?”).
- Do not give too much information all at once. Give an instruction, then allow the athlete to move and try it.
- Break new skills and activities down into small steps.
- Teach and coach using a multisensory approach: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Materials such as pylons and spot markers can be helpful to show what you want athletes to do.
- Use whiteboards to write lists, breakdown skills or draw diagrams to support understanding.
- Avoid abstract language and sarcasm. Say what you mean.
- Incorporate the interest of the athlete into activities where possible (for example, create a game including a child’s interest in Pokémon). For adult learners, offer analogies to other activities they’re already familiar with where possible.
- Develop your athlete’s abilities by introducing new skills and drills gradually, incorporating them into their existing framework skills.
- Familiarize yourself with your athletes’ preferences. Some people may prefer identity-first language (such as autistic person rather than a person with autism). Listen to how they describe themselves and use the same language.
- Discuss your athlete’s communication needs with them; they’ll know best what works well for them. If it’s a younger athlete, involve caregivers.
- Create a context or environment of low arousal (reduced stimulation). Offer spaces where athletes can take a break from busy environments.
- Some individuals may have heightened sensitivities to noise, touch, smell, and textures. These can easily be overstimulating, which can lead to athletes feeling overwhelmed. If something seems to be an issue, ask the athlete (or their caregiver, where relevant) if you can do anything to help. Reduce exposure to problematic aspects of the environment where possible.

2 <https://neurodiversitymatters.com/what-is-neurodivergence-am-i-neurodiverse-are-you-neurodivergent-neurodiversity-explained/>



Physical disabilities

Limb deficiencies

Limb deficiencies include limb loss from an accident or illness, congenital amputations (limbs shortened or missing at birth), atypical bone formation or lack of development resulting in altered limb function. Some causes of limb deficiency may also cause poor blood flow, making skin and soft tissue injury (including skin) more risky or more difficult to heal.

Examples of limb deficiencies:

- Amputation
- Absent or underdeveloped limb
- Limb deficiency
- Fingers or toes fused together
- Craniofacial impacts

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Accommodations for a limb deficiency may change athletes' posture and movement through the day. This can impact their joint health, balance of strength and habitual motor patterns. Be sure to take this into account when assessing functional movement.
- Prosthetics and mobility aides can be important for safe movement and agency. Take care not to make assumptions about why or when your athlete needs them.
- Prosthetics can be made and used to serve different purposes. For example, your athlete may have an array of prosthetic hands for cosmetic purposes, for grasping, for weight bearing, and others.
- Prosthetics need to fit properly and be well maintained.
- Athletes will have a good sense of how to fit their prosthetic(s) and predict when chafing or limb swelling (such as from warm weather, or in pressure changes such as during flights) could be problematic. Listen and work with them to avoid discomfort or injury.
- Some sports allow the use of prosthetics in competition, others do not. Those that do will usually have rules and regulations about when, where and what kind of equipment can be used.

Muscle strength

Disabilities related to muscle strength loss can come from nerve damage (including spinal cord injuries), degenerative conditions and surgical interventions. It's important to note that not all cases of strength loss lead to paralysis, and the loss of strength is not always immediately visible. Along with weakened muscles, people might also notice changes in sensation, such as reduced feeling, chronic pain, or difficulty sensing joints. Impaired muscle power refers to strength loss that can't be improved through training.

Examples of causes of muscle strength loss:

- Spinal cord injury from accidents or surgical procedures
- Spina bifida: A congenital condition resulting in spinal cord issues at birth.
- Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease: A hereditary condition causing weakness and atrophy, particularly in the extremities
- Spinal muscular atrophy
- Muscular dystrophy
- Genetic disorders leading to progressive muscle weakness
- Brachial plexus injuries (such as Erb's Palsy), which can cause strength loss from the shoulders to the fingers in one arm

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Risk of lasting sores increase due to friction, pressure, and poor blood flow. Athletes with reduced sensation are more prone to pressure sores and may also struggle with temperature regulation.
- Some strength losses can affect respiratory functions, making tasks like effective coughing or breath control difficult.
- Fatigue might necessitate longer recovery times or substitution with smaller muscle groups, which can lead to overuse injuries.
- Prolonged strength loss can lead to joint restrictions, making movement challenging.
- Balance issues are common, so activities emphasizing core stability or seated balance exercises can be beneficial.
- Joint protection is crucial as altered muscle usage may put joints at risk of injury. Doing an activity sitting or with supports may be necessary.

- Alongside athletes, regularly inspect and maintain adaptive equipment, such as sports wheelchairs, to ensure safety and functionality.

When meeting new athletes with limited or no hand or arm movement (for example, an athlete with quadriplegia), a friendly smile or a gentle touch on the arm are appropriate replacements for a handshake. A fist bump can be used as well. Fist bumps are a common adaptation for a handshake and can remove awkwardness in these situations.

Muscle tone

Muscle tone is essentially how much tension a muscle holds. Some athletes might have muscles that don't work quite like others or have different degrees of tension. Muscles may be quite rigid or quite loose, or "floppy." Altered muscle tone is not about being weak or unfit, it's more about how a person's muscles move and respond. The resistance and readiness for action of their muscle impacts their ability to move and hold posture reliably. Some causes of muscle tone disability are stable while others can be progressive. Every athlete will have regressions in skill and fitness from time to time.

Examples of causes of altered muscle tone:

- Cerebral palsy
- Genetic conditions, such as Friedreich's ataxia
- Down syndrome

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Altered muscle tone can also impact coordination and how quickly someone can react or plan movements. It may take them longer to master technical skills. Investing time in skill development is vital, and patience pays off for both athletes and coaches.
- Understand that the athlete's abilities might vary from day to day or even throughout the day, especially when they're tired.
- Note that these impacts are present off the field of play as well. Travelling, preparing for practices, recovering between games, and so on may also be impacted.
- Altered muscle tone can also affect things like speech, breathing and swallowing. Be mindful of athletes' needs both on and off the field.
- Unreliable muscle and joint control can make certain activities unsafe. Create an environment that is safe for athletes at all levels of physical function.

Range of motion

Disabilities with altered range of motion include both lasting limitation in one or more joints and unusually flexible joints that lack stability. Limbs affected by limited movement from birth may not grow typically or may have a different shape, and a joint with restricted range of motion typically exhibits poor strength and stability.

Range of motion can be either active (how far the athlete can move the joint with their own strength) or passive (how far the joint can be moved from an external force).

Examples of causes of altered range of motion:

- Osteoarthritis or Rheumatoid arthritis: Characterized by restricted joint movement, pain, stiffness and deformity
- Arthrogryposis: A genetic condition the results in restricted range of motion, poor strength, and sometimes atypical skeletal formation(s). This can present to varying degrees in one or more joints.
- Club foot: A congenital condition where one or both feet are twisted. The condition results in permanent impact on the bones, muscles, tendons, and ligaments of the foot and ankle.
- Hypermobility

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Adjust sports skills and techniques to fit the athlete's range of motion so they can still participate and have fun.
- Exercises will not change the restricted movement. The restrictions are permanent and result in muscle shortening, and joint surface and shape changes.
- If a joint can't move well, the other joints may take on more stress, which could lead to overloading and potential injury.
- Athletes with hypermobile joints may not experience movement the way you do; try not to assume that their sensation and limits will match yours.
- Restricted joints are more prone to injuries even within their limited range of motion.
- Joints with restricted mobility can affect balance and lead to functional deficits.
- People with hypermobile joints may lack complete proprioception and joint awareness, increasing the risk of injury. Monitor activities and work closely with athletes to ensure movements stay within safe ranges.

Stature

Short stature

Short stature refers to individuals who have a significantly below-average height. Short of stature adults typically reach a maximum height of 4 feet, 10 inches, or 147 cm. A short of stature athlete may also have limbs and torsos of varying proportions.

Dwarfism is a group of genetic conditions. There are more than 400 known types of dwarfism.

Examples of causes:

- Growth hormone deficiency (GHD)
- Osteogenesis imperfecta (OI)
- Turner syndrome
- Williams syndrome
- Noonan syndrome

Safety considerations and coaching tips:

- Stature disabilities can significantly impact technical development and accommodations for best performance. The athlete may need to perform repetitive movements many more times than their peers.
- Depending on your sport, training environment and facility access, you may be able to adjust your environment to better accommodate what the athlete(s) can reach.
- Being a little person in a world designed for taller people can carry significant load: where nothing fits and everyday tools are too big, too tall, too heavy, or just out of reach. Ensure your environment is a safe space to play and is truly accessible.
- Many health conditions that result in short stature can lead to other disabilities such as limited range of motion, decreased muscle power, and joint function.

Tall stature

- Tall stature is medically defined as a height more than two standard deviations above the mean for the age, sex and ethnic background of a person. Tall stature is not generally addressed in disability sport. However, being a tall person may be accompanied for example of lax joints, poor strength or coordination challenges that should be considered by coaches.
- Rules and equipment may also limit the participation of people with a tall stature. For example, rules around wheelchair height make it more difficult for people taller than 6'6", or 198 cm to participate. They would have to sit on a chair that doesn't fit as well, making it difficult to push it. This can impact the athlete's experience of the athlete.



Sensory disabilities

Hearing

“Hearing loss” and “Deafness” are used to describe different degrees of the ability to hear.

Hearing loss is the diminished ability to hear sounds compared to what is considered normal.

There are several degrees of hearing loss:

- **Mild:** Difficulty hearing soft sounds or faint speech
- **Moderate:** Difficulty hearing regular conversation, especially in noisy environments
- **Severe:** Difficulty hearing loud speech and may rely on amplified sounds for communication
- **Profound:** Very limited or no ability to hear, even with amplification

Deafness is used to describe a more profound or complete loss of hearing.

Common examples and causes of hearing loss and Deafness:

- Head trauma
- Infections (such as mumps, measles)
- Genetics conditions
- Benign or malignant tumors
- Congenital development of the inner ear

Coaching tips and safety considerations:

- Familiarize yourself with basic sign language or learn specific sports-related signs to effectively communicate with Deaf athletes. Note that there are many different sign languages. In Canada, American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoises (LSQ) are common.
- Establish clear signals or procedures to communicate important information during emergencies or urgent situations. This will ensure that athletes with hearing loss can quickly and safely respond.
- Use visual cues, gestures, and signals to convey instructions. Make sure your facial expressions and body language are clear and expressive.
- Provide written instructions or use a whiteboard to supplement verbal communication. This can help reinforce key points and ensure understanding.
- Check in with athletes regularly to ensure they have understood instructions.
- Use consistent terminology and cues so that athletes can rely on patterns and easily understand instructions without having to hear every word.

Vision

Visual disabilities either limit visual acuity or visual field (how much a person can see and how well they see it). Blind or Totally Blind refers to someone with no vision.

Examples of visual disabilities:

- Injuries and trauma that caused damage to the eye structures or the optic nerve.
- Infections affecting the eyes.
- Structural conditions including the following conditions:
 - Cataracts (clouding of the lens)
 - Glaucoma (increased pressure inside the eye)
 - Optic nerve hypoplasia (underdeveloped optic nerve)
 - Retinoblastoma (retinal tumours)
 - Retinis pigmentosa (genetic conditions causing progressive loss of rod cells in the retina).
- Macular degeneration which can be age related or caused by progressive conditions

Coaching tips and safety considerations

- Orienting oneself to new environments and situations is important. Make sure the athlete is equipped to comfortably adapt to your sporting environments.
- Incorporate auditory cues (such as sound signals or verbal instructions) to help athletes with visual disabilities navigate the field or track, anticipate movements, and respond to specific game situations.
- Consider that athletes with little visual experience may not have a frame of reference for visual metaphors. Provide orientation and reference points

for athletes with visual disabilities by marking the playing surface or equipment with tactile markings (such as raised lines, textured areas, or different surfaces to signify specific areas).

- Provide adaptive sports equipment such as audible or tactile cues, balls with bells, tapping devices for swimming and specialized goalposts or targets.
- Ensure the athlete is in charge of their activities and is not dependent on others more than necessary.
- Follow the lead of athletes who are blind or partially sighted when meeting them for the first time. Wait for them to extend a hand to shake to avoid startling them. When communicating with athletes who are blind or partially sighted, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) suggests aiming to be “natural, inclusive, considerate, and descriptive” by using these guidelines:
 - Identify yourself when you are speaking, or when speakers change. Use their names so they know they are being spoken to.
 - Use your usual cadence and tone speaking.
 - Be specific when giving directions. Avoid visual cues (say “the door is about ten steps ahead on your right” instead of “the door is down the hall by the red sign”).
- When guiding a person who is blind or partially sighted, you can let them know what side of them you are on and offer a way for them to have contact with you to follow your lead (for example, an elbow, shoulder, handle on your wheelchair)

You can learn more about guiding in CNIB’s guide: [Step-By-Step: A how-to manual for guiding someone who is blind or partially sighted.](#)



References and resources

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