



FACT SHEET

ATHLETES WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

What is an Intellectual Disability?

Intellectual disability is characterised by both a significantly below average intelligence level (based on an IQ test) and by difficulties in ability to function in areas of everyday living such as communication, self-care and social situations (identified before the age of 18 years old).

It is estimated that about 2 per cent of the population has an intellectual disability. People with an intellectual disability have more difficulty than others in understanding concepts, solving problems, concentrating, remembering and learning new skills. About three quarters of this group are affected mildly and outwardly appear no different from their peers, while the remaining individuals are moderately, severely or profoundly affected.

There are many causes of intellectual disability, but in the majority of cases, the reasons are still unknown. Intellectual disability is not a psychiatric or mental health problem, but a person with an intellectual disability may have other additional disabilities. These can include cerebral palsy, epilepsy, vision impairment, hearing impairment, psychiatric disorder, autism etc.

People with an intellectual disability can and do learn new skills, but they may develop more slowly than those with average or above average intelligence and adaptive skills.

Common Facets of Intellectual Disability

- Learning difficulties
- Poor literacy/numeracy skills
- Lack of decision making ability
- Poor short term memory
- Inability to think in abstract terms
- Lack of opportunity to be aware of their own physical capabilities
- Concentration not consistent
- Lack of self-esteem and generally poor attitudes to their own social competence

Common impacts of Intellectual Disability

- Require longer time to learn and practice a skill
- Experience difficulty in learning complex skills
- Require skills and tasks to be broken down into 'small steps'
- Benefit from instructors to use simplified language and repeat instructions

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General Coaching Tips

- Firstly, it is vital that the person is treated as an 'Athlete' first with the focus on their ability and due respect for what they can do.
- Develop a good understanding of the nature of the person's intellectual disability and the impact this has on their development.
- Enquire if there are any associated conditions which may impact on training or participation e.g. sensory impairment, epilepsy, heart defects etc.
- When designing programs always focus on the individual's unique abilities.
- Set realistic goals relating to a person's physical ability and sport skill proficiency.
- Be flexible with expectations of the athlete's participation, break skills/tasks down into smaller parts wherever possible and if necessary modify requirements of the skills.
- Keep directions simple, brief and to the point.
- Use verbal cues such as "Jump like a frog" (remember that your words may be taken literally so choose them carefully!)
- Use repetition to assist the learning process.
- Keep the athlete busy by using a variety of short tasks.
- Check to make sure that instructions are understood by having athletes repeat directions, rather than simply asking if they understand.
- Be generous with praise and acknowledge achievements frequently.
- Provide immediate and specific feedback to the athlete. Comments such as: "Well done you kept your arms bent while running" are more effective than "Your arms were good".
- Be prepared to adapt activities (rules, equipment, etc.) to allow the athlete to participate. This may require some creativity and thinking "outside the box". The extent of the modifications will depend on the athlete's ability. Some athletes may not require any modifications. Others may require extensive modifications to become involved. Modifications can also be made with a view to phasing these out over time.
- Be flexible, positive, patient and understanding.
- Set clear rules and boundaries.
- Set up a buddy system to accompany the athlete in the initial phase of participation.

Safety Considerations

- Be aware that athletes with an intellectual disability may have associated conditions. These can include heart problems, skeletal problems, obesity, hearing problems, epilepsy, vision problems and behaviour problems. Talk with parents/guardians about what you need to be aware of.
- Some athletes with an intellectual disability may not have a sense of danger or fully understand the consequences of certain behaviours. Positively stated rules such as "Stay with the group" and close adult supervision are the first steps to minimize risks.
- The physical fitness and basic motor skills of people with an intellectual disability can be poor because of a lack of opportunity to participate in physical activity from an early age.

Useful Links

NSIA - National Sport Inclusion Alliance

<http://nsia.org.au/>

AUSRAPID - Australian Sport and Recreation Association of Persons with Integration Difficulties

<http://ausrapid.org.au/>

INAS – For Para-Athletes with an Intellectual Disability

<http://www.inas.org/>