

EVERYONE PLAYS

Inspire. Unite.

A GUIDE TO
FIRST INVOLVEMENT
AND QUALITY PARTICIPATION



**ONTARIO
SOCCER**
EST. 1901

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IF WE CAN DO IT, SO CAN YOU



IF WE CAN DO IT
PICKERING SOCCER CLUB



SO CAN YOU
BRADFORD SOCCER CLUB

It's understandable that the thought of providing opportunities for children with disabilities to play soccer can seem daunting at first. We certainly experienced that but at the end of the day we simply needed to find a way for everyone to play. Starting with just five children, our program has just kept growing and growing and we've kept learning and learning. Today, the All Abilities program is an integral part of our programming that is attracting the attention of our recreation and competitive teams, coaches and parents.

By learning as much as we can about accessibility and inclusion, asking children with disabilities what they like to do and learning from their parents about strengths, barriers and strategies, we have been able to provide opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in soccer and ensure that no child is left watching from the sidelines.

We have since had the pleasure of being able to share our learning and experience with other clubs and sports to help them create opportunities for children with disabilities to play soccer in their communities. Our hope is that by sharing our experience we can build the confidence in other clubs to try what we did and discover for themselves the incredible things that can happen.

Our goal for an All Abilities Program was to be able to offer an accessible soccer program that met the needs of children with disabilities and their families in the York and Simcoe regions. We've known for years there was interest but weren't sure how to get started.

Through our work with Pickering Soccer we quickly learned how important it was to make sure that the very first engagement children with disabilities and their parents had with us, and with soccer, was a positive experience.

We took care to really understand and address the needs of our athletes with disabilities, their parents and families before, during and after their first session and as a result, we are happy to report that not only did 10 athletes sign up for the first session but that because of our success at first engagement, the "one-session pilot" has now evolved to be an ongoing program for this indoor season!! We are expecting more registrations for the outdoor program as word gets out.

Parents continue to tell us how much they appreciated all our front end work as it helped make them and their children feel confident, comfortable and welcome. We have now all experienced how important first involvement really is and will work continuously to provide positive experiences each week.

Our message to other clubs is "if we can do it, so can you". There are excellent supports and resources out there to get you started and many people who are willing to help. Just do it. And like us, you will find how incredible it is to work with athletes of all abilities.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ONTARIO SOCCER



Ontario Soccer is proud to present “Everyone Plays Guide to First Involvement and Quality Participation” achieved through funding with the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport – Parasport Strong Fund.

Ontario Soccer’s mission is to “Lead and support the growth of soccer through innovative and sustainable programs and services” and our value on inclusion and welcoming all who wish to play is well aligned with principles and development strategy and priorities of the Ontario Parasport Pathway envisioned by the Ontario Parasport Collective. Accessibility, inclusion and first involvement are all mission-aligned goals for Ontario Soccer.

“Everyone Plays Guide to First Involvement and Quality Participation” follows the 2017 Achieving Accessibility Guide and AODA video that was provided and launched to all our members in 2017 to ensure that we keep strengthening our capacity to reach, include and support all who want to play soccer, including people with disabilities.

Ontario Soccer is confident that the clubs in our member community will benefit from the understanding of, and ability to respond to, first involvement and will positively support their coaches and parents, and most importantly, increase recruitment and retention of children with disabilities in soccer by ensuring they have great first experiences. “Everyone Plays Guide to First Involvement and Quality Participation” will result in more kids playing the game and staying in the game.

Sincerely,

Johnny R. Misley
Chief Executive Officer
Ontario Soccer

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PARASPORT ONTARIO



At ParaSport® Ontario, we are very conscious of the diverse barriers that people with disabilities face in their efforts to participate in sport and recreation activities. We are keenly aware of the growing population of children with disabilities and their families across Ontario who are looking to find ways to participate in sports and enjoy the physical, psychological and social benefits that come from participation.

As a result, we are excited to have had the opportunity to contribute to the development of this very important Guide to First Involvement and Quality Participation as it offers valuable insight into the challenges of starting new inclusive programs and shares specific strategies that can help sport clubs ensure first experiences are positive for children with disabilities, their families and everyone involved. We know this will go a long way in providing even more support toward the goal of ensuring great experience and quality participation for children with disabilities and their families.

The delivery of tools such, as the Guide, that help remove barriers, improves quality of programming and promotes access through knowledge building and sharing is consistent with our Mission to help members of the disability community – regardless of age or stage in life – to find, connect with, and participate in competitive and recreational sport programs and activities”.

We congratulate Ontario Soccer on its leadership in making soccer more accessible at the grassroots and breaking down barriers so many more children with disabilities can participate and enjoy sports.

Jeff Tiessen
Executive Director
Parasport Ontario

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

Guided by the principle of access and opportunities for all, Grassroots Soccer has always been a priority for Ontario Soccer. We want all children to have access to programs that they want to join and offer opportunities to participate in programs. The number one goal in Grassroots Soccer is to ensure this first experience is fun and enjoyable and revolves around child-friendly soccer. Most of all, it is to have them fall in love with the game.

While we recognize that participation rates of children with disabilities are very low in organized sports, there are simple steps we can take to help members in our communities overcome barriers and ensure everyone has the opportunity to play soccer.

In 2017, Ontario Soccer provided all soccer clubs in Ontario with *Achieving Accessibility: A Guide for Soccer Clubs and Academies - Program Guidelines and AODA Requirements* to help clubs meet their obligations in terms of accessibility.

To continue this support, Ontario Soccer has developed this second Guide: *Everyone Plays – A Guide to First Involvement and Quality Participation*. The guide provides soccer clubs across Ontario with information to help ensure soccer is accessible, inclusive and a great experience for everyone.



We are proud of the leadership of our member clubs across Ontario in promoting accessibility and inclusion and ensuring that Our Vision, “*Soccer is Ontario’s sport of choice*”, is extended equally to everyone including adults and children with disabilities. *Everyone Plays* simply provides another tool that will help Clubs be successful at increasing participation of children with disabilities and support our mission to “*Lead and support the growth of soccer through innovative and sustainable programs and services*”.

Simply put, our strategy is to create opportunities so everyone can play, and to build programs, resources and supports that promote participation and inclusion.

EVERYONE PLAYS: ONTARIO SOCCER’S STRATEGIC PLAN

THE PARTICIPATION GAP

■ WE NEED TO GET KIDS WITH DISABILITIES INTO THE GAME.

Physical activity is vital to every child's development. Kids who regularly participate in recreational activity and organized sport are physically healthier than those who don't and are far more likely to become healthier adults. Participation also boosts mental development by offering opportunities to experiment, create, problem-solve, and build self-awareness. From a social perspective, participation allows kids to interact with others, learn social norms, improve communication skills, and develop leadership abilities.

Despite the clear benefits of participating in sport and recreation, kids with disabilities are too often not in the game at all. As a consequence, they miss out on key childhood experiences, opportunities to learn fundamental skills, and vital physical health benefits that last far into the future. All of this means that kids with

disabilities do not have the same opportunities as their peers—a gap which only continues to grow as they develop into adults.

Here are some facts about kids with disabilities and their participation in sports that highlight the participation gap:

- 1 in 9 children in Ontario have a disability
- 37% have never taken part in any organized physical activity
- 70% are not playing any team sports
- Only 16% of youth with a disability are meeting the physical activity guidelines of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day, and only 1% engage in active play
- In contrast, 75% of youth with disabilities exceed screen-time guidelines, with an average of 4.5 hours of screen time (both TV and computer use) per day.

■ WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Actively creating opportunities and removing barriers preventing participation in sport is crucial to improving participation levels of kids with disabilities. By sharing proven strategies of how kids with disabilities can be included in sports such as soccer and using them to build successful inclusive sport and recreational programs, we can begin to remove the barriers to sport and community involvement—barriers that have prevented kids with disabilities from experiencing the rich and varied benefits of being physically active. In this guide, we present strategies for how you can remove barriers and promote sport and community involvement through consideration of first involvement and quality participation experiences.

Creating opportunities and removing barriers to participation are essential at all stages of sport involvement from awareness all the way through training to win and being active for life. This may be especially important in early stages of involvement. For parents of a child with a disability, getting their child involved in physical activity may not be high on the priority list. Therefore, when a child or parent thinks about participating in soccer, it is important to be able to help them translate their desire to participate into action. Understanding the concept of “first involvement” is an important step to successfully engaging new athletes, increasing participation and promoting retention.

According to Sport for Life Society, “sports need to create a welcoming environment” for prospective players with disabilities because barriers make access and entry difficult. For kids with disabilities to engage in sport, they must be aware of opportunities and have a positive first experience. **First involvement** refers to “the first experiences participants have in sport”. It is in this phase where children with disabilities, their parents and families first connect with a soccer club, the sport, coaches and facilities and determine if they will continue. To increase the likelihood that they will enjoy soccer and come back time and time again, it is critical to ensure positive first experiences are well thought out by clubs; otherwise, “negative first experience can lead to non-participation”. Even when first

experiences prove to be positive ones, it does not end there and a “clear direction should be provided to participants with regarding their second involvement”.

Sport for Life's **First Involvement Checklist** presents a number of strategies ranging from sensitivity training for staff and coaches, to helping staff and coaches successfully “deal with an initial approach by a person with a disability”, to providing specialized, adapted equipment and proactively following-up with first-time participants a few days after their first involvement. Many of these strategies reflect good customer service while others can specifically help children with disabilities and their parents overcome specific barriers.



INTRODUCTION TO FIRST INVOLVEMENT (LTAD CONCEPT)

INTRODUCTION TO QUALITY PARTICIPATION



While a clubs' understanding of how to plan for and "manage" first involvement will help make the initial experience a positive one (for player, parent, coaches and staff) and will set the stage for second involvement strategies, we ultimately want to be able to maintain participation, enjoyment, and satisfaction over time and build quality participation.

Quality participation occurs when players find their involvement in parasport satisfying, enjoyable, and leading to outcomes they consider important. Our goal in Grassroots Soccer is to create that great first experience for players and their parents, AND, to ensure that their involvement leads to outcomes that are important to them such as fun, friendship and fitness.

What we want to do is build on the player's first great experience and ensure they are exposed to quality experiences week after week after week. When we get good at creating positive experiences continuously, players are more likely to stay, develop and build a foundation for being active for life.

■ IT'S ALL ABOUT QUALITY

When we think about participation in the context of a sport program such as soccer, we often focus on *quantity* of participation—the number of players registered in a league, or the number of people aware of the program. Unfortunately, this approach doesn't consider the quality of a player's participation.

■ WHAT IS QUALITY PARTICIPATION?

Quality participation results when players view their involvement in a positive light—when they find it satisfying and enjoyable, and when they experience outcomes that they consider to be important. Quality participation is an important determinant of a player's continuing involvement in an activity or sport.

A BLUEPRINT FOR BUILDING QUALITY PARTICIPATION

A number of organizations place emphasis on quality participation and quality programming. Among these is the Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP), a Canada-wide network of community organizations and researchers committed to improving physical activity participation levels for all Canadians. Using the most up-to-date research evidence as a foundation, they *specifically* focus on what quality participation means for people with a disability and how it can be built.

A team of CDPP researchers, in consultation with members of the disability sport community (administrators, coaches, parents, and players), recently created a *Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children and Youth with a Disability*. As you'll soon see, the blueprint (which is how we'll refer to this document from this point on) provides the broader context for this entire guide. It was developed through an extensive, multi-step process that considered the best of current research evidence and expert feedback. (Visit www.cdpp.ca for a full description of how the blueprint was developed and the supporting research evidence.)

The essence of the blueprint is illustrated in the graphic below.

- **Quality participation** is the direct result of a player's positive, **quality experiences**. Repeated and sustained exposure to quality experiences should contribute to lasting quality participation.
- The presence in any sport program of **six building blocks**—belonging, autonomy, mastery, challenge, engagement, and meaning—allows players to have quality experiences.
- In turn, these six building blocks can only be present in a meaningful way when they are supported by a **solid foundation** consisting of physical, program and social environments that are welcoming, accessible and supportive.

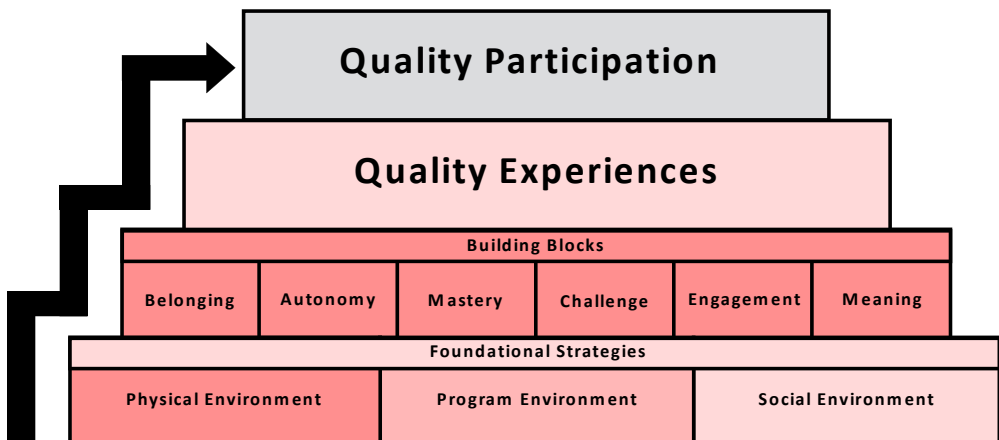


Figure 1. A Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children, Youth, and Adults with a Disability (www.cdpp.ca)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

In this guide, we draw upon the Blueprint to help you promote quality experiences in soccer for kids with disabilities. In the following pages, program administrators, coaches, parents, and players will learn easy-to-use strategies for building quality soccer programming for kids with disabilities. The strategies are organized in to four phases of a child's involvement:

- 1. Getting to "Yes".**
This is the process of finding ways to connect with kids with disabilities and their parents, and encourage them to make a commitment to participate.
- 2. Getting to First Involvement.**
If you're involved in the development or delivery of any sport and recreation program, it's likely that you're familiar with the concept of first involvement—and that it's often a struggle to ensure that kids do, in fact, show up for their first team experience.
- 3. Delivering a Quality Program: First Involvement.**
It's vital that players have a positive, satisfying, and enjoyable first experience, since a negative experience means that a player may not only drop-out, but they may also reject all future sport opportunities.
- 4. Delivering a Quality Program: Ongoing Involvement.**
Given that quality participation hinges on successive ongoing positive experiences long after first involvement, care must be taken to ensure that your program provides satisfaction and enjoyment for every child, each and every time they participate.

The guide is a starting point for building quality programming. Organizations will find the Achieving Accessibility Guide (www.ontariosoccer.net) and the Quality Participation Checklist Audit Tool (www.cdpp.ca) as additional, detailed resources.

GETTING TO “YES”



The first step to getting kids with disabilities involved in your soccer program is to encourage them and their parents to say “yes” and sign up.

Remember that this population may have faced barriers to sport participation and may have had negative experiences in the past. So it’s important to keep in mind that, when it comes to registering their child with a disability into a soccer program, many parents have valid concerns and issues that may not exist for parents of children without disabilities, or that sport clubs may not recognize or consider.

BUILDING QUALITY

The best way to address these concerns is to ensure that your program is developed and delivered in a way that embraces and relies on foundational strategies to promote accessibility and inclusiveness in three environments identified by the *Blueprint for Building Quality Participation*:

- 1. Physical
- 2. Program
- 3. Social

When a program is built on a solid foundation that achieves accessibility and inclusiveness in those three key environments, you can be confident that parents and kids with disabilities will recognize the quality of your programming and club and **will be more likely to return and engage in sport.**

1) STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

These strategies consider the geographical locations and facilities where the soccer program is held, as well as available equipment.

Strategy	Example
Accessibility: Facilities are set up to allow access for players	There are sufficient accessible washrooms for the number of players, and change rooms available for parents to help their children get ready, change clothes, and/or feed. These are all accessible for kids with limited mobility or other needs.
Travel and Access: Sport setting is conveniently located for players. Players have ease of access to the sport setting.	The location of the facility is easily accessible by transit. There are no obstacles or difficult pathways between the parking lot, change rooms, and the space where the program will take place (e.g., uneven surfaces, narrow doorways).
Safe Places: Players are assured that the facilities and geographical location of the program are safe.	Facility inspection is up-to-date and parents can feel confident leaving their children with coaches, instructors, and/or trained program volunteers. The facilities are also considered to be in a safe neighbourhood.
Access to Equipment: Players have access to equipment that suits their needs or competitive level.	Use different types of soccer balls based on developmental abilities and level of competition (e.g., tactile ball, rattle ball, traditional ball, etc.). For children with developmental disabilities, programs might also incorporate appropriate visual aids (e.g., picture communication).

2) STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

These strategies focus on the how the program is structured (including funding, program size, player groupings and coaching support) and how it is delivered.

Strategy	Example
Drill Type: The activities are ideally suited to the needs of the players, with chosen drills and games meeting the abilities and goals of players.	Children with limited mobility will not be asked to immediately run between cones.

Program Size: The program seeks ways to attract enough players to be self-sustaining.	Club hosts demonstrations in public spaces to promote awareness and sign-up new families. Club hosts “try it out” sessions and visits to facilities and fields to provide opportunities for children to visit a practice and try soccer beforehand.
Funding and Cost: Program has funding to support the basic needs for player involvement. Cost is as low as possible.	Program managers can help players’ parents identify and apply for grants that support participation. The program has funds available to purchase appropriate equipment such as lighter and/or brightly coloured balls.
Options: Players have choice among drills and games that offer varying skill levels.	Players can choose whether they wish to be recreational or competitive. For example, a child can play at the recreational level but if he/she demonstrated interest in competition, program staff can provide resources for other programs or move the player into a different program stream within the club.
Individual Level of Challenge: Consult with players/family to design activities and games to appropriately challenge all players and safely push them out of their comfort zone.	Player goals and milestones are tailored to the individual abilities of the player through regular goal-setting workshops and conversations between the coaches and players.
Safe Activities: Planned drills include a comfortable level of risk while limiting potential for harm.	Players and their parents do not need to worry about injury. For example, coaches may choose no-contact activities so that children are less likely to fall and/or injure themselves—a particular concern for parents of children who already have physical limitations.
Classification: Classification process to group athletes ensures equal opportunity, fair competition, and limited chances for alienation.	Classification for games is appropriate, taking into consideration the players’ functional abilities and skill levels.
Diversity: Consider the level of integration with players without disabilities, or group members with differing abilities.	Players are grouped with others who have similar abilities, players are paired with others with different abilities (peer support/role modelling), participants may be integrated or segregated from peers without disabilities as appropriate.

■ 3) STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

These strategies focus on the key people who impact a player’s experience: coaches/ instructors, peers, and family members.

■ COACH/INSTRUCTOR

Strategy	Example
Coach/Instructor Knowledge, Skill, & Learning: Coach/ instructor possesses sufficient technical knowledge and skill related to soccer, and the specific disability context to design appropriate activity.	Coach has received soccer-specific training and has knowledge of the different disabilities presented by all players.
Coach/Instructor Autonomy Support: Coach finds ways for players to perceive that they have some control over training or activities.	Coach provides players with options to choose which drills and activities and want players with to focus on first.
Interpersonal Skills of Coach/ Instructor: Coach develops a supportive leadership style and fosters positive relationships with players and their parents that build trust.	Coach shows concern for the players’ well-being by following up on whether they are enjoying their soccer experience, and taking an interest in the players’ lives and activities outside soccer.
Coach/Instructor Develops Roles: Coach actively encourages players to take on roles that are vital for the group, and ensures that these contributions are recognized.	Opportunities are provided for players to fill formal or informal roles (e.g., captain, social event organizer).
Coach/Instructor Tracking Player Improvement: Coach leads benchmarking or encourages self-monitoring so that players know when they have improved, even marginally.	Coach records player progress in individual participation logs.

■ PEERS

Strategy	Definition
Group Environment: Players become a cohesive group and feel united as they pursue shared goals. This group environment is supported and fostered by coaches/leaders and other group members.	Coach facilitates peer support and interactions through team-building activities such as partner work in drills, and buddy systems.
Mentorship or Role Modelling: Players have opportunities to mentor others or to seek and build relationships with personal mentors. Peers also contribute to the teaching/learning process.	More experienced players can help newer/less experienced players by giving advice or providing instruction.

■ FAMILY

Strategy	Definition
Educating Family Members: Family members (e.g., parents) have opportunities to learn about soccer.	The club offers access to educational resources for parents. Coaches are available for family questions and communication.
Familial Support and Family Integration: Family members generally support sport involvement and do so in a way that supports players' growth and independence. Clubs provide roles for family members to take on in the soccer community.	Family has opportunities to attend events as spectators, or as volunteers who help to run events (e.g., annual fundraisers).

For additional ideas about program accessibility, we refer you to Ontario Soccer’s Achieving Accessibility Guide (available at www.ontariosoccer.net). Organizations can also access a Quality Participation Checklist Audit Tool (www.cdpp.ca) to help evaluate whether they are addressing the foundational strategies identified.



Many sport program organizers and coaches note that it can be particularly challenging to ensure that kids who are signed up for a program actually show up on the first day.

The reason is that often a child’s or parent’s initial excitement for the program wanes, or they have fears about the potential barriers, real or imagined, that might be encountered during participation. There may also be a fear that the activity is too challenging, involves too much risk or there might be lingering memories from a previous negative experience.

Communication to parents and the player about how the three foundational strategies have been incorporated into the program is an important first step in easing any fears that may exist. There are also additional effective strategies to bridge the gap to first involvement:

- Have the coach call the parents in the week prior to the first soccer session. This introductory call is a great way to begin to build a relationship and discuss any concerns or barriers the parent and/or child may be experiencing. It’s also an excellent time to share more information about the program, discuss what equipment might be available or may need to be supplied by the parents, and answer any questions that the parents or child may have.
- Establish parent or child mentors within your program, who can reach out to parents and kids who are new to the program prior to the first practice. They can share their own thoughts and tips to make the most of the first experience and ease any concerns.

GETTING TO FIRST INVOLVEMENT

- Before even starting a program, there are many questions racing through a parent’s mind depending on the severity of their child’s disability. For example:
 - Will there be transit?
 - What time would I have to leave in order to get to the field or facility on time?
 - Will there be adequate parking?
 - Will there be sufficient space to get my child into uniform?
 - Will I have assistance, if necessary, to transfer my child?
 - Will there be space to meet my child’s needs (e.g., feeding, changing)?
 - Will the coaches/instructors be adequately trained?
 - How will the environment impact my child?

The list goes on and on. A great way to address these questions, beyond the initial phone calls, is to have a “Q and A’s” brochure, or better yet, to invite parents and children for a “Meet your team” orientation before the first formal practice. This dry-run will give parents and their children a feel for how to prepare for practices, as well as a sense of the environment (you can provide maps for how to navigate the area, and key landmarks). It will also allow coaches and volunteers to introduce themselves to families—and to explain what they can expect from the program. And it’s a good time for coaches and volunteers to get to know more about the child, including their interests and personal goals. Coaches and volunteers can end the orientation practice with a few sampler activities that the kids play together with the staff. Parents can watch or perhaps may choose to even join in on the fun!



Ideally, at this point, the child is signed up and has shown up for his/her first involvement experience. What now?

Remember, every experience matters, but once again, the first experience is vitally important. A negative first experience can lessen the chance of kids returning to the program, and possibly prevent them from joining other sport programs in the future.

The answer to delivering a quality program is to make sure to incorporate the Blueprint’s six building blocks that are supported by solid foundational strategies. All six building blocks are important, but in particular, there are two that are vital to ensure a player or participant’s first involvement experience is a positive one: Belonging and Mastery. In other words, first-time players must quickly gain at least a partial sense of belonging within the team, program or club, and experience and celebrate at least some modest success toward mastery of the sport.

■ **BELONGING**

The building block of belonging can be defined as players feeling a sense of connection, camaraderie, and cohesion during the sport experience. Belonging is created when a participant builds relationships with peers, volunteers, and coaches/instructors.

Belonging is particularly key for kids with disabilities, because they may often feel isolation in other activities and settings. Providing a sense of belonging will allow players and their parents to get a feel for the important social benefits that are the byproduct of long-term sport participation—benefits that some players may not have opportunities to experience in other activities and areas of their lives.

Here are some strategies that can be used to create a sense of belonging during a first involvement experience:

- Greet players by name as they enter the field, and introduce new players to teammates, volunteers and coaches/instructors.
- When first introducing players to each other, ask them to join together in a circle, and share their name. Depending on the nature of the disability, you could also ask them a simple question, such as, “What’s your favourite colour/food/animal?” or “What did you do this summer?” While in this circle, the group can also choose a team name, and coaches can share instructions and expectations with the group to help foster a feeling of community.
- At the end of the practice, bring all players back together to finish the practice—have them gather in a circle again, and put their hands together and share a cheer (“Go Team Go!”). Having them invent a team name and/or cheer can further promote belonging.

- Promote socialization between the players during practice by telling them that, whenever they pass the ball to someone else, they have to introduce themselves and give each other a high five. Players may also be paired with different teammates during different segments of practice and asked to learn as much as possible about their partner during this time. At the end, they would have to share something they learned about their teammate with the group.
- Some kids may initially have difficulty building relationships with other players. Provide opportunities to first build a relationship with the coach or, if present, a one-on-one volunteer. Ideally, that volunteer would be present at each session, and fulfills the initial sense of belonging by demonstrating to the player that he/she can trust and have fun with others in the soccer environment.

■ **MASTERY**

The building block of mastery can be described as feeling confident in one’s skills and abilities and enjoying the resulting sense of accomplishment.

Building initial feelings of confidence in the first practice, and celebrating initial achievements, allows a sense of progress to be built starting from the first involvement experience.

- Here are some strategies that can be used to build mastery during a first involvement experience:
- At the beginning and end of the practice, celebrate the fact that players showed up/completed the practice. This may be a huge step for some players and their families!
 - Start with a simple or basic form of the skill or drill. For example, players can use their walker to walk over small or short pylons while emphasizing high knees—the short pylons act as hurdles. During the practice, and in subsequent practices, the emphasis may be on trying to do the activity faster, or without a walker while holding on only to a volunteer or coach. Other examples of modifications can include moving the net closer, placing target points on the ground, using larger soccer balls, and using equipment with bright colours.
 - Always provide verbal feedback and praise. Praise can be given on the first try for a drill by acknowledging effort. Praise can also be given to acknowledge the player’s success—for example, “You made contact with the ball! That was perfect!” Everyone can also cheer and give high fives when a player does something well (e.g., hits the ball, controls the ball properly throughout a drill, or completes a pass).



At this point, players have had their first involvement experience—one that has quickly allowed them to begin to feel like they belong, and that they’re capable of playing the game and contributing. But what now?

Ideally, every experience is given the same amount of thought as the first experience. Sustained quality experiences over time ensure that players achieve optimal outcomes, such as improved health, confidence, and well-being.

The building blocks of the Blueprint provide strategies to help you think beyond the first involvement experience, and to ensure that every subsequent experience is a quality experience. The next few pages describe each building block and provide strategies for how they can be implemented in every ongoing practice, game or team event.

When reviewing each of the strategies, it’s important to remember that different building blocks may vary in their importance to each player, based on factors such as personal preference, age, and level of competition. For example, competitive players may prefer a focus on the challenge and mastery building blocks, while others may prefer a focus on belonging and engagement. Feel free to adapt as you go along, based on your knowledge of your players and the group environment.

A key point to remember is that, no matter what building block you focus on, it should be implemented with a sense of fun, and with respect for the player and his/her abilities.

**DELIVERING A QUALITY PROGRAM:
ONGOING INVOLVEMENT**

■ BUILDING BLOCK: AUTONOMY

Autonomy considers the player’s ability and desire to make choices. Autonomy is present when coaches/instructors allow the player to feel that they have independence or choice during their participation in the program.

■ STRATEGIES THAT ENCOURAGE A SENSE OF AUTONOMY:

- Some players may not want to join others or may want to play on their own. Provide them with that space, but also train volunteers to eventually guide them back into the group activity. Give them space to withdraw again, if needed. Knowledge of player behaviours and triggers can be learned from parents.
- Allow players to do things by and for themselves. Provide support when needed, and allow players to request help rather than immediately rushing to show help. For example, the coach can verbally praise a player and make suggestions while walking beside the player, instead of physically guiding them. Another strategy would be to allow the child to creatively figure out how to accomplish a task or skill first before intervening. Praise their efforts. If their idea was unsuccessful, provide advice and give them space and opportunity to let them apply it.
- Provide choice to players through multiple drill stations. The coach can ask, “What station would you like to start at?” or, “Which would you like to do next?” Remember, however, that some players (e.g., players with autism) may prefer structure, or have difficulties communicating. Pay attention to subtle behaviours and facial expressions to understand what the child may enjoy most.
- Involve players in planning the next practice. For example, ask them, “What games should we play next week?” Allow time for the child to process the question and formulate a response.

■ BUILDING BLOCK: CHALLENGE

Challenge exists when the activities are appropriately tailored to the skill level or ability of each player, and there are opportunities to realistically challenge the child either physically (e.g., through new ways of completing a drill) or mentally (e.g., by asking the child to step out of his or her comfort zone).

Remember that, while soccer may have age-related guidelines (e.g., equipment size, field size), these guidelines may not always be applicable to kids with developmental disabilities. When implementing challenge, emphasize activities that are developmentally appropriate for the child to increase opportunities for enjoyment—and decrease the potential for frustration.

■ STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING CHALLENGE:

- In one-on-one situations, try to increase the distance between the player and the volunteer incrementally throughout the practice. At first, the volunteer may stand very close (e.g., within a one meter radius) and then gradually increase the distance to three to five meters.
- There are many types of balls that can be used (rattle ball, tactile ball, fin ball, inflatable ball, traditional ball, etc.). Players can start with one type of ball but, over time, other types of balls can slowly be introduced to increase the sense of being challenged. Other variations include changing the size of the goal or the field.
- Recognize when a player has developed a skill, and then modify the drill and make it more challenging by incorporating other dynamic skills or equipment. For example, once a player is comfortable doing a drill with their dominant foot, have them practice using their non-dominant foot.
- Some players may choose their routine and favourite drills based on comfort rather than skill-building. Challenge can also be introduced by asking them to stretch outside their comfort zone. Ask them to start a session with a different drill, or to model the activity for their peers.



■ BUILDING BLOCK: ENGAGEMENT

Engagement can be defined as feeling fully involved in the activity. When engaged, a player is fully motivated to participate.

■ STRATEGIES TO KEEP KIDS ENGAGED:

- Some kids may be nervous in groups, or feel overwhelmed in the new and busy environment of a soccer practice. In these cases, have the player practice shooting a ball in a private space with a parent. Over time, the coach and other players can join them.
- Avoid elimination games unless you have an equally engaging follow-up game for “eliminated” players. At no point should any players be left on a side-line watching others play.
- Reduce wait-time and lineups during drills by ensuring that you have enough equipment and building small side games.
- Engagement can also happen off the field. Ask players to do a drill at home and report back on their success. This strategy is an excellent way to engage the family, and show parents how a child is progressing (i.e., demonstrate mastery).
- Engagement may be difficult if children are less verbal. In these cases, visual aids can be used to draw in and communicate with the player (e.g., the Picture Exchange Communication System).

■ BUILDING BLOCK: MEANING

Meaning focuses on making each and every sport experience matter. Players experience meaning if they feel that their participation is helping them achieve a valued goal, regardless of whether it’s a personal or group goal.

■ STRATEGIES TO INCREASE MEANING:

- Dependent on their developmental abilities, encourage players to provide leadership and peer instruction during a practice. For example, assign players with roles for the practice, making sure to alternate roles over different practices so everyone has a turn. For example, for each practice, a coach can have a different “assistant coach” who helps lead drills. However, achieve this in a way that ensures no player feels that they have been picked last.
- Help players set personal or group goals. These goals can relate to soccer or life outside of sport. Individual progress can be tracked through log books with progress charts, while group progress can be tracked through posters with progress charts in each practice area.
- Based on developmental abilities, provide opportunities for advancement. For example, can some skilled players become volunteers, summer staff, or practical coaches as they get older? If kids don’t have the skills to take on these roles, remind them at different points that “We need your help!” during a drill or a game.
- For kids unable to take on traditional leadership roles, make it clear how they contribute to the group—and how important their contribution is. For example, set a team goal for number of times the team has to make contact with the ball during a game. After the game, tell the player “We wouldn’t have achieved our team goal without you...thank you!” Teams can also find ways for these players to be buddies of leaders. For example, ask a player to buddy with their peer who is leading the stretch. The player in charge of the stretch can choose the stretch, while the buddy would model it. This allows both players to gain a sense of meaning through leadership experience.



BUILDING BLOCK: BELONGING

We previously explored the concept of belonging in the section dedicated to creating a positive first involvement experience. However, belonging is essential throughout the duration of the program. In addition to strategies used during first involvement strategies, there are additional ways to promote belonging, which can be used throughout the player’s program involvement:

- Make time to talk to each player at some point during each practice. Be available (before, during and after a practice) to talk to players about their thoughts and needs, whether or not these relate to soccer. In order to build trust, demonstrate genuine interest in all players and their experiences.
- Over subsequent practices, ask players to learn each other’s names (e.g., learn one new name per practice). Once that’s done, they can start again by learning one new thing about each player.
- Dependent on team funding, have team jerseys with player names and numbers. Ideally, they can have two—one to wear during practice and one to wear outside of practice—so they always feel like part of the team!
- Build small groups or pair players based on developmental ability—children may feel left out or feel like they don’t belong if they’re unable to keep up with their peers.

BUILDING BLOCK: MASTERY

Just like belonging, mastery remains important beyond the first experience and throughout a player’s program involvement. Finding ways to experience and celebrate success is key to long-term development and well-being. While all building block strategies previously mentioned should continue to be implemented, further strategies exist to promote mastery throughout the season:

- For younger players, create “I’m a Soccer Star” log books. Build collaborative goals with the player and write them in the books. Give the player a sticker when they successfully complete any activities that relate to their goal. They can place these stickers in their workbook as a visual reminder of their progress.
- Always stress the importance of personal best rather than winning. Give players skill-based tasks so that they don’t focus on the score of the game. For example, as players develop, give them tasks such as a number of passes that need to be completed with teammates in each game. These become the markers of success, and the successfully-completed tasks are acknowledged and celebrated with verbal feedback and praise.
- The skills in players’ logbooks can relate to soccer, but also other areas of their lives. Support and reinforce any positive behaviour each time it’s demonstrated—showing up, helping collect equipment, remembering to bring your own equipment, etc.
- Don’t introduce a complex key skill (e.g., dribbling) all at once. Break it down into smaller core steps that can be learned and celebrated when mastered. For example, a coach can first introduce walking across a space. The ball can then be added to the walking, followed eventually by technique tips (e.g., foot placement, speed). This skill can be further adapted—for example, by starting with larger soccer balls for players with visual impairments.





■ **WANT TO KNOW MORE?**

This guide introduces the concept of quality participation and provide tips for building a quality soccer program inclusive of kids with disabilities. Visit the Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP) website www.cdpp.ca/resources-and-publications for additional resources, including:

- The Blueprint for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children, Youth, and Adults with a Disability including a Quality Participation Checklist Audit Tool
- Evidence-Based Strategies for Building Quality Participation in Sport for Children, Youth, and Adults with a Disability
- KT Brief #2: Sport and Exercise Participation and Disability: A Blueprint for Change
- KT Brief #3: Rethinking the Meaning of “Participation” for People with Disabilities

For further information on the Achieving Accessibility Guide and resources from Ontario Soccer, please visit the Ontario Soccer website www.ontariosoccer.net

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