

Awareness & First Involvement: Two crucial concepts when working with people with disabilities in sport & recreation

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To engage in sport and physical activity, individuals must be aware of what opportunities exist for them, and when they try an activity for the first time it is critical that the experience is positive. That is why Sport for Life emphasizes the two stages of Awareness and First Involvement.

Awareness Stage

The Awareness Stage is about helping people understand and access the range of available opportunities for sport and physical activity, including knowing how to get involved. Sport and recreation organizations need to develop awareness and communication plans to make their offerings and resources better known to a wider audience.

People who have not been active previously, or for an extended period of time, as well as those who have a disability or cultural barrier to participating, may not understand or appreciate that there are many places for them to start in sport and physical activity. Individuals who acquire a disability generally experience great change and transition and some of their previous physical activities may no longer be – or appears to be – available to them. Individuals who are new to Canada or who come from diverse backgrounds where they were not introduced to sport and physical activity in the same way as many Canadians are need additional supports and awareness campaigns to showcase the opportunities available to them.

Awareness plans and effective communication can help foster sport and activity awareness among parents, individuals and people who work in supporting roles, and can help get new participants engaged in sport and physical activity.

Awareness Checklist

- Provide information about the opportunities for all abilities and backgrounds
- Provide opportunities for all abilities and backgrounds to practice or compete in the same location and at the same time
- Provide marketing and collateral material that showcases and is welcoming to all abilities and encompasses the diversity of the population, including information on websites, newsletters, and publications. It is also important to include translation options as appropriate
- Engage with rehabilitation centres to let those with newly acquired disabilities know that they can take part; create relationships with settlement agencies, Friendship centres and health care practitioners to showcase the diversity of programming and the expertise of staff to accommodate and welcome new participants and those requiring additional support to programs.
- Provide opportunities within the school system for all abilities and backgrounds to take part
- Provide information materials that can be used by physicians, physiotherapists and other health professionals when talking to individuals about their options for sport & physical activity
- Provide information materials that can be used to help physical education teachers ensure that students of all abilities and backgrounds meet required curriculum outcomes
- Provide awareness raising presentations to teacher education, physiotherapy, recreation/sport management, and other university/college programs that are training future leaders/practitioners

- Provide opportunities for elite athletes to speak at schools about sport and the opportunities it provides for BOTH able bodied athletes and those with a disability. Ensure diversity of gender, culture and backgrounds for these presentations.
- Engage with community recreation programs, and provide information to program organizers on where they can direct anyone showing an interest in getting active.

First Involvement Stage

The First Involvement Stage ensures that individuals who are trying an activity for the first time have a positive first experience and stay engaged. Accordingly, organizations need to train coaches and leaders, and develop programs to provide a suitable orientation for individuals, helping them feel confident and comfortable in their surroundings and welcome among their peers and activity leaders. During this stage, remedial physical literacy development is important to help individuals develop their movement skills, grow in confidence and develop and sustain the desire to continue their participation.

First Involvement Checklist

- Provide training to coaches and leaders (and other first point of entry individuals such a receptionists) to deal with an initial approach by a person with a disability or a person from a different background. Has this been scripted and practiced?
- Provide opportunities for and be welcoming to ALL new participants, including those with a disability or from various backgrounds
- Provide sensitivity training at all levels of the organization to ensure that the culture of the organization is prepared for and welcoming of diversity
- Develop an accessibility checklist that clubs or facilities can use to determine if sport and physical activity opportunities are accessible. These checklists should include the four facets of universal accessibility.

- If the facility is physically not accessible, are there ways that it can be inexpensively made accessible, or can accessibility be achieved through “social engineering” - rallying necessary support for the potential athlete to overcome barriers.
- Develop partnerships with local organizations for persons with a disability, Friendship centres, settlement agencies, and health care organizations so that individuals who have relationships with those organizations KNOW they will be positively received if they want to try out a sport or program?
- Be proactive and follow-up with first time participants in the days after their first involvement to let them know they will be welcomed back, and to find out if there is anything that the organization could do to make the experience better.
- Look for opportunities to make specialized equipment available for participants to try-out the sport or physical activity at very low cost (or no cost), particularly where equipment is a critical component of ongoing engagement: example are Wheelchair rugby, road racing, hockey, wheelchair tennis, basketball etc.
- Ensure participants are able to engage in the sport or physical activity at their own comfort level.
- Ensure suitably sized equipment is available for younger participants.
- Welcome any support personnel who come with the participant and ensure there are support personnel available provided by the sport.