



Practical Guides & Toolkits

Inclusive Sports & Adaptations Toolkit

Adapting activities across equipment, rules, environment, and sensory needs —
so participation comes first, for every body and every profile.





How to Use This Toolkit

The starting principle here is simple: adapt the activity to the person, not the person to the activity. This toolkit covers 8 categories of adaptation, a sport-by-sport guide to common barriers and fixes, inclusive coaching strategies, an adaptive equipment reference, and a builder for a personal participation plan.

Getting started

- Start from what the person already enjoys or is curious about – motivation matters more than the “ideal” sport.
- Layer adaptations rather than picking just one – most people benefit from combining a few categories from Section A at once.
- Success is participation and enjoyment, not performance or keeping up with a standard pace.
- Revisit adaptations regularly – what's needed can change as skills, confidence, or the activity itself changes.
- This toolkit pairs with NeuroReHub's Behavior Management Plans toolkit (Section A: the 8 sensory systems) for sensory-specific planning.

A note on approach

- Presume enjoyment is possible for every activity, with the right adaptations – don't rule an activity out before trying it adapted.
- Consent and choice matter, especially around physical contact, touch, or hands-on correction.
- Check with the person's physician or physical therapist before starting a new physical activity if there's a relevant medical or cardiac consideration (see Section G).

A Adaptation Categories – Quick Reference

Most activities benefit from combining adaptations across several of these categories at once.

Category	What It Means	Examples
Equipment	Modifying the tools used	Larger/softer balls, adapted grips, ramps, tee stands, buoyancy aids
Rules & Format	Adjusting how the activity is played	Extra attempts, no time limits, smaller teams, walking variants
Environment	Adjusting the physical space	Reduced crowd noise, controlled lighting, defined boundaries, quieter session times
Communication	Adjusting how instructions are given	Visual schedules, demonstration over verbal instruction, consistent simple language
Sensory	Addressing sensory needs	Noise-reducing headphones, choice of textures/equipment, built-in sensory breaks
Social & Group	Adjusting group dynamics	Buddy systems, smaller groups, structured turn-taking, peer mentors
Physical & Motor	Supporting movement needs	Seated/adapted versions, mobility-aid-friendly setups, transfer assistance
Pacing & Structure	Adjusting session flow	Built-in breaks, shorter sessions, visual timers, predictable routines

B Sport-by-Sport Adaptation Guide

What each activity offers, common barriers, and adaptations to try first.

1. Swimming & Water Activities

Why it's a great fit

- Low-impact and full-body
- The water's pressure can be calming and regulating
- Minimal social pressure – easy to do solo

Common barriers

- Fear of water or unpredictable sensation
- Chlorine smell/taste
- Changing-room transitions
- Following instructions over pool noise/echo

Adaptations to try

- Flotation aids and noodles
- Quieter or private swim times
- Consistent visual signals (e.g. colored markers) alongside verbal cues
- Goggles/earplugs allowed for sensory comfort
- Gradual, self-paced water entry rather than forced submersion

Coaching tip

- Let the person set the pace of water entry, and demonstrate in the water rather than only describing it from the side.

2. Athletics & Running

Why it's a great fit

- Predictable, repetitive movement can be regulating
- Fully individual pacing is possible

Common barriers

- Unpredictable starting signals (gun/whistle)
- Crowded start lines
- Unclear distance or pacing expectations

Adaptations to try

- Visual or tactile start cues instead of a starting gun
- Clear visual distance markers
- Option to run with a guide or buddy runner
- Adjusted or removed time pressure

Coaching tip

- Use the exact same start routine every session so the sequence becomes predictable.

3. Ball Sports (Football, Basketball, and similar)

Why it's a great fit

- Builds coordination and teamwork
- Clear, simple team goals

Common barriers

- Fast-changing rules and positions
- Unpredictable ball trajectory or noise (whistle, crowd)
- Physical contact

Adaptations to try

- Softer, brighter, or larger balls
- Slower-paced or “walking” variants
- Position boundaries marked visually on the ground
- Reduced-contact rule variants

Coaching tip

- Break plays into small, practiced sequences before combining them into full game play.

4. Cycling

Why it's a great fit

- Builds independence
- Strong vestibular and proprioceptive input
- Works solo or with others

Common barriers

- Balance challenges
- Road/traffic sensory overload
- Multi-step motor sequencing (steering + pedaling + braking together)

Adaptations to try

- Adapted bikes (tandem, trike, hand-cycle)
- Stabilizers with no age limit attached
- Quiet, controlled practice areas before road use
- Step-by-step visual instruction for each motor component

Coaching tip

- Practice balance, pedaling, and braking separately before combining them.

5. Martial Arts & Self-Defense

Why it's a great fit

- Structured, predictable movement sequences
- Builds body awareness and confidence
- Often a calm, respectful group culture

Common barriers

- Physical contact or proximity to others
- Loud group commands
- Complex movement sequences (forms/katas)

Adaptations to try

- Solo practice of forms before partner work
- Advance warning before any physical contact
- Visual, step-by-step breakdown of sequences
- Consistent verbal/visual command structure

Coaching tip

- Ask before initiating any physical contact or hands-on correction, every time.

6. Yoga & Fitness / Strength Training

Why it's a great fit

- Self-paced with low social pressure
- Strong proprioceptive and interoceptive benefits — body awareness, calming

Common barriers

- Unfamiliar body positions
- Verbal-only pose instructions can be hard to translate into movement
- Mirrors or group settings can feel exposing

Adaptations to try

- Visual pose cards or demonstration
- Option to modify or skip a pose without needing to explain why
- Low-mirror or private practice space option
- Chair-based or floor-based variations

Coaching tip

- Offer a modification for every pose, and normalize using it as a first option, not a fallback.

7. Team & Group Games

Why it's a great fit

- Builds social skills around a shared goal
- Fun in a structured, repeatable format

Common barriers

- Unclear or fast-changing rules
- Unstructured “free-for-all” moments
- Social pressure to keep up

Adaptations to try

- Visual rule charts
- Assigned rather than chosen teams, to reduce social pressure
- Structured turn-taking
- A designated peer buddy

Coaching tip

- Walk through the rules with a visual or physical demonstration before every session, not just the first one.

8. Outdoor & Adventure Recreation (Hiking, Camping, Climbing)

Why it's a great fit

- A novel sensory environment with nature's calming effect
- Achievable, personal-challenge goals

Common barriers

- Unpredictable terrain or weather
- Unfamiliar sounds and smells
- Uncertainty about duration or distance

Adaptations to try

- Known, mapped-out routes shared in advance
- A visual or written itinerary with clear timing
- A sensory kit on hand (sunglasses, hat, snacks, noise reduction)
- Built-in rest points along the route

Coaching tip

- Share the full plan – route, timing, what to expect – before setting out, not only at the trailhead.

C Choosing the Right Activity

There's no universal “best” sport — fit comes from interests, sensory profile, and goals together.

- Interests & motivation — what does the person already gravitate toward?
- Sensory profile — seeking or avoiding, across the 8 sensory systems (see the Behavior Management Plans toolkit, Section A)
- Motor & physical ability
- Social preference — solo, small group, or team setting
- Environment tolerance — indoor/outdoor, noise levels, crowd size
- Goal for this activity — fitness, social connection, competition, or calm/regulation

Activity Fit Snapshot:

Interests to build from

Sensory profile notes

Motor / physical considerations

Preferred social format

Environment preferences

Primary goal for this activity

D Inclusive Coaching Strategies

How an instructor shows up matters as much as any single piece of equipment.

- Demonstrate, don't just describe — show the movement rather than only explaining it verbally.
- Keep instructions short, consistent, and concrete.
- Build in predictable routines, and give warning before any change to them.
- Offer a modification for everything, and normalize using it as a first option.
- Ask before physical contact or hands-on correction — every time, not just the first time.
- Focus feedback on effort and participation, not just performance or standard technique.
- Build in sensory breaks proactively, on a schedule — not only once someone is already overwhelmed.

E Adaptive Equipment Quick Reference

A starting list — availability varies by sport, budget, and region.

Category	Examples
Grip & Handling	Built-up grips, strap-on mitts, velcro attachments
Mobility	Sports wheelchairs, hand-cycles, sport-adapted walking frames, tandem bikes
Vision Support	Audible (“beep”) balls, guide runners/tethers, high-contrast equipment
Hearing Support	Visual signal flags or lights instead of whistles, vibrating start signals
Positioning & Support	Sport-specific seating or harnesses, standing frames, buoyancy aids
Sensory Comfort	Noise-reducing headphones, sunglasses/visors, choice of equipment textures

F Activity Goal & Participation Plan Builder

Turn the Section C snapshot into a plan the whole support team can follow.

Activity / sport chosen

Why this activity (interest or goal link)

Adaptations needed (equipment, rules, environment, communication, sensory, social, physical, pacing)

Who will support participation

How enjoyment & participation will be tracked (not just performance)

Review date

Complete alongside the individual's physician or physical therapist where relevant.

- Check with the individual's physician or physical therapist first if there's a relevant medical or cardiac consideration.
- Build in hydration and rest breaks proactively, especially in heat.
- Make sure every supervising adult knows any relevant emergency procedure before the activity begins, not during it.

Team Sign-Off

Name	Role	Signature	Date
	Individual (if appropriate)		
	Parent / Guardian		
	Coach / Instructor		
	Physical / Occupational Therapist		

Appendix A – Glossary

A quick reference for coaches and instructors – plain-language, not clinical definitions.

Adaptive PE	Physical education specifically modified to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
Inclusive Sport	Activities structured so people of all abilities participate together, with adaptations as needed.
Unified Sports	A model pairing athletes with and without disabilities as teammates.
Para Sport	Competitive sport organized specifically for athletes with disabilities, often with formal classification.
Classification	A system grouping athletes by functional ability, to keep competition fair.
Buddy System	Pairing a participant with a peer or volunteer for support during an activity.
Sensory Break	A planned pause to reduce sensory input before it becomes overwhelming.
Modified Rules	Adjustments to standard rules that increase accessibility and participation.

Appendix B – When to Bring in a Professional

- The person has a medical condition that needs clearance before starting a new activity.
- Persistent pain, fatigue, or safety concerns come up during an activity.
- You're unsure which adaptations fit a specific motor or sensory profile.
- You'd like a formal, individualized adaptive PE or therapy-informed activity plan.
- An adaptive PE specialist, physical therapist, or occupational therapist can help build one around this toolkit.

See NeuroReHub's Medical & Health Professionals directory to find a specialist near you.