

USATM
LACROSSE



ADAPTIVE LACROSSE
GUIDEBOOK



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INTRODUCTION

Lacrosse is for Everyone

Everyone should have the opportunity to play lacrosse and feel included, accepted, and valued regardless of their ability or disability. Some athletes with disabilities can and do participate in “mainstream” lacrosse programs at all levels of play. For many others, it is beneficial to participate in a modified version of the game that is designed specifically for the inclusion, safety, and enjoyment of people with disabilities. This is Adaptive Lacrosse!

7.3 million

7.3 million K-12th graders are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

[Pew Research Center](#)

15% of students

Students with disabilities made up 15% of United States public school enrollment in 2021-22.

[Pew Research Center](#)

4.5x

Youth who have disabilities are 4.5 times less active than their non-disabled peers.

[Aspen Institute Project Play](#)

The purpose of this guidebook is to help local organizations start their own adaptive lacrosse programming. The strategies highlighted here have been gathered from leading disability sport organizations as well as experienced adaptive lacrosse coaches and program administrators. Thank you for embracing the opportunity to make your community more accessible to athletes with disabilities!

Sincerely,
USA Lacrosse

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE LACROSSE?

Definition

Adaptive Lacrosse is any format of lacrosse that is designed for athletes with disabilities.

Who Can Participate?

Any athlete with a disability that prevents them from playing typical or “mainstream” formats of lacrosse can participate in an adaptive lacrosse program with appropriate support.

Can Family and Friends Play?

Yes! Family, friends, and peer athletes without disabilities may participate in some formats of adaptive lacrosse as adaptive teammates. Teammates provide support and may assist adaptive athletes in skills like scooping, throwing, and catching—but only as needed.

What Equipment Do I Need?

You just need a lacrosse stick and a soft practice ball or tennis ball. Stick checking and body checking are typically not allowed, and protective equipment is not required. (Note: full men’s lacrosse protective equipment is currently required for wheelchair lacrosse competitions that allow checking).

What Rules are Followed for Games?

The [Flex6 Lacrosse](#) Rules and Guidelines may be used as the basis for an adaptive lacrosse game—with the understanding that flexibility and adaptability are key elements of all types of programming. [Wheelchair Lacrosse USA](#) has developed rules for the wheelchair game in collaboration with USA Lacrosse.

How Do I Get Involved?

This guidebook offers a framework for developing and delivering an adaptive lacrosse program. If you are interested in supporting a new or existing adaptive lacrosse program in your community, please send an email to: adaptive@usalacrosse.com

WAYS TO PLAY

There are several different ways for people with disabilities to play lacrosse. Choosing the best format often depends on a combination of disability type, level of impairment, and personal preference.

Adaptive and Inclusive Lacrosse

Adaptive and Inclusive Lacrosse is designed to include players with a wide variety of disabilities in a station-based or small-sided game format. Any athlete with a disability may participate with appropriate support. This format is typically played on a solid surface to allow athletes who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices to participate as independently as possible.

Unified Lacrosse

Unified Lacrosse is designed to allow athletes with disabilities to play alongside their non-disabled peers. This format is often played by athletes with cognitive or developmental disabilities in a small-sided game format using modified rules. These programs often follow a model that is very similar to [Special Olympics Unified Sports](#).

Wheelchair Lacrosse

Wheelchair Lacrosse is designed for players with physical disabilities that affect their mobility. Games are played 7v7 on a solid surface roller hockey/box lacrosse rink using a no-bounce lacrosse ball and box lacrosse goals. Teams are often mixed gender and mixed ability. A small-sided and non-contact version may also be played on a basketball court. The same sport wheelchairs that are used for wheelchair basketball may also be used for wheelchair lacrosse.

Impairment-Specific Formats

Impairment-specific formats are designed to allow athletes with similar disabilities to participate alongside and against each other. Some examples of impairment-specific formats include programs for athletes with amputations/limb differences, vision impairments, and hearing impairments.

Mainstream Formats

Athletes with disabilities may also participate in typical or “mainstream” formats of lacrosse at all levels of play. See page 13 (“Mainstream Inclusion”) in the appendix for more info.

STARTING A NEW PROGRAM

The first step to starting a successful adaptive lacrosse program is to develop partnerships with the people and organizations who are already serving athletes with disabilities in your area. Consider reaching out to the following community partners for support:

Adaptive Sports Organizations

Organizations which already offer sports programming for athletes with disabilities are a great place to start. [Move United](#) and [Challenged Athletes Foundation](#) both offer a state-by-state listing of adaptive sports organizations.

Special Olympics

The Special Olympics were created specifically for athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities and offer over 30 individual and team sport options for all ability levels. Research your local Special Olympics chapter and reach out for support.

Parks and Recreation Departments

It is increasingly common for local Parks and Recreation Departments to offer programming for people with disabilities. These programs may offer accessible facilities, volunteers, and athletes. Try searching for “Therapeutic Recreation” or “Inclusive Recreation” programs near you.

Schools, Teachers, and Support Groups

The Special Education department within your local school district is another valuable resource for finding experienced volunteers and promoting your events to local students. Start with your personal network and then branch out to see what support groups exist in your community.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

One of the most important strategies for developing any adaptive sport program is to collaborate with, listen to, and learn directly from the local disability community. Collaboration with the following groups is often essential for gaining trust and removing barriers:

People with Disabilities

Consult with and include people with disabilities in all areas of the program.

Experienced Athletes

Engage experienced athletes with disabilities to serve as coaches, mentors, and role models.

Volunteers with a Background in Disability

Recruit volunteers who have a strong background in youth development and/or disability. Volunteers with experience in special education, adapted PE, occupational therapy, or physical therapy may all be good candidates.

Volunteers with a Background in Lacrosse

Recruit volunteers who have a strong background in lacrosse and are patient, flexible, and passionate about sharing the game with new players. Specialized training in disability is fantastic, but it is not required to get involved in adaptive lacrosse.

Parents of Youth with Disabilities

Host parent meetups to help families find resources and connect with other members of their community. Recognize that some caregivers may be hesitant to enroll their child in sports due to fear of injury or exclusion and try to address those concerns upfront.

Local Teams and Leagues

Organize events or scrimmages with local youth, high school, or college lacrosse programs so that they can share the experience of inclusion.

WHAT ATHLETES NEED TO KNOW

When designing an adaptive lacrosse program, it is important to thoughtfully consider and communicate each of the following factors:

Field or Court Surface

Explore different playing surfaces. Solid surfaces (such as a basketball or tennis court) tend to be more accessible and inclusive of various disabilities.

Accessibility of Facilities

Investigate whether the facility has accessible entry ways, elevators, restrooms, and parking lots before hosting an event in a new location.

Transportation Options

Consider how athletes and their families will travel to and from your session, including proximity to public transportation and major roadways.

Level of Challenge

Let participants know ahead of time if the session will be tailored to beginner, intermediate, or advanced players, and whether new athletes are welcome.

Relevant Coach Qualifications

List the relevant certifications and experiences of your coaches and volunteers to build trust and confidence in your program.

Safety Considerations

Disclose any risks or safety concerns, including whether stick checking and body checking will be allowed and what equipment will be required.

Equipment Availability

Provide clear instructions about whether any specialized equipment such as lacrosse sticks or sport wheelchairs will be provided at each session.

ADAPTIVE COACHING STRATEGIES

Effective adaptive lacrosse coaches are patient, flexible, and collaborative. Here are some things to consider when working alongside athletes with disabilities:

Ask Questions and Listen

Talk to the athlete, their family, caregivers, or teachers to learn what might work best for them. They are the experts on their disability.

Be Flexible and Individualized

Understand the needs of each participant and adapt activities accordingly. Recognize that adaptations may work immediately for some, but not for others.

Coach with High Expectations

Use the minimal adaptation that is necessary to keep athletes safe and engaged. Then, try to decrease those adaptations over time.

Focus on Changing the Environment

Understand each athlete's disability, but do not be led by it. Coaching adaptive lacrosse is about changing the learning environment, rather than changing the athlete.

COACHES

- Demonstrate respect for everyone in the program.
- Create a sense of belonging for everyone in the program.
- Provide opportunities for control, mastery, and support.

TEAMMATES

- Focus on positive engagement and instruction.
- Help each other create opportunities for joy and success.
- Acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments appropriately.

HOW TO ADAPT ACTIVITIES

If you answer “no” to any of the key considerations below, try adapting the activity or the environment using the acronym STEP: Space, Task, Equipment, People.

Is the environment safe?

Are the athletes engaged?

Do the athletes experience success?

AREA	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Space	Change the space where the activity is happening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play indoors to reduce distractions, background noise, and other sensory triggers. • Play on a hard surface to accommodate wheelchair users.
Task	Change what activity is happening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have athletes scoop the ball with their hand before trying to scoop with their lacrosse stick.
Equipment	Change what is being used for the activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a smaller size stick to allow better grip, or use a goalie stick to facilitate catching.
People	Change who is involved in the activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign teammates to help lead or demonstrate a skill. • Create balanced teams based on age and ability levels.

OPERATING TIPS

The following suggestions have been provided by leading disability sport organizations as well as experienced adaptive lacrosse coaches and program leaders:

Program Structure

- Strive to have at least one (1) coach for every four (4) athletes in a session.
- Recognize that some athletes may require one-on-one support while others will not.
- Utilize teammates or partners to help assist athletes and provide support when needed.
- Consider organizing stations based on age and/or skill level.
- Allow athletes to self-select their level of participation with some guidance.
- Modify activities as needed, with the understanding that some athletes may require different modifications than others to participate in the same activity.

Communication

- Be proactive and ask open-ended questions during your registration process, such as:
 - What accommodations does the athlete need to participate?
 - Is there anything important that you would like us to know about the athlete?
- Publish flyers and other materials which clearly welcome athletes with disabilities.
- Provide clear directions about your program to parents and caregivers, including what to wear, what to bring, and what to expect.
- Create opportunities for interaction between athletes before, during, and after sessions.
- Recognize specific athletes for achievement, sportsmanship, or leadership.
- Offer a variety of ways for participants to ask questions and provide feedback.

Terminology

- Use language that portrays people with disabilities in a respectful and balanced way.
- Emphasize abilities rather than limitations. For example, using the phrase “athlete who uses a wheelchair” is generally more appropriate, empowering, and accurate than using phrases like “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair”.
- Avoid using offensive language, condescending euphemisms, or overly emotional terms such as “suffering” or “afflicted” which may perpetuate negative stereotypes.
- See here for more helpful tips: [Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities](#)

Scheduling

- Establish a consistent routine with practices scheduled at the same time each week.
- Provide frequent water breaks, rest periods, and feedback opportunities.

Physical Space

- Examine the accessibility of the facility, playing surface, and restrooms.
- Consider how athletes will travel to and enter the site.
- Mark positions on the field where specific stations or activities will take place.
- Ensure all athletes are aware of any boundaries or safety concerns.
- Consider hosting sessions indoors to reduce distractions which may cause anxiety.

Sensory Space

- Let athletes know ahead of time when loud noises may be expected.
- Use headphones to filter out extraneous sound.
- Provide breaks from noise, light, or other sensory triggers.
- Allow athletes to take breaks if the stimulation of the group is too intense.
- Reduce harsh fluorescent lighting, loud fans, scoreboards, and buzzers.

Equipment

- Experiment with different colors, textures, and types of equipment.
- Utilize any type of lacrosse stick that helps create success for the athlete, including a men's lacrosse stick, women's lacrosse stick, soft stick, or fiddle stick.
- Add grip tape to the stick to help athletes learn where to place their hands. Some athletes may be engaged by bright colors or unique textures.
- Use a soft foam practice ball or tennis ball when not wearing protective equipment.

Transitions

- Make a visual schedule with pictures or icons to indicate what is coming next.
- Waiting in line may be difficult for some athletes. Consider using group activities that engage everyone and minimize lines and lectures.
- Use a transition countdown to indicate when it is time to transition from one activity to another. Use gestures or pictures for children who need more than just speech.
- Allow many opportunities for repetition and practice.

MAINSTREAM INCLUSION

Athletes with disabilities can and do participate in typical or “mainstream” formats of lacrosse at all levels of play—from youth to the pros. Anyone with the desire and ability to play a mainstream format of lacrosse with reasonable accommodations should be allowed to do so.

What's the Policy?

In the United States, school districts must provide an equal opportunity for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular sports. At a minimum, schools must try to determine if modifications or adaptations would allow an individual student to participate alongside their non-disabled peers. See here for more info: [Students with Disabilities in Extracurricular Athletics](#)

Accommodate or Create

Importantly, these guidelines do not require schools or other organizations to change essential elements of the sport, give students with disabilities an unfair advantage, or compromise safety in any way. Students with disabilities still need to qualify and compete with everyone else to earn their place on a team. Some examples of reasonable accommodations may include:

- Utilizing an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, printed collateral, and hand signals to assist an athlete with a hearing impairment.
- Allowing an athlete with an amputation or limb difference to play with modified protective equipment that does not compromise safety.
- Providing glucose testing and insulin administration to an athlete with diabetes.

In some cases, students with certain disabilities may not be safely included in existing sport programs. If reasonable accommodations cannot be made, then school districts may create new adaptive sport programs specifically for disabled students. For example:

- **Adaptive and Inclusive Lacrosse:** programming hosted in an accessible space that offers station-based skills and/or small-sided games for athletes with a variety of disabilities.
- **Unified Lacrosse:** programming that allows students with cognitive or developmental disabilities to play alongside non-disabled students as teammates.
- **Wheelchair Lacrosse:** programming that combines eligible students from several different school districts into one regional wheelchair lacrosse team.



ADAPTIVE LACROSSE MENTOR GROUP

The Adaptive Lacrosse Mentor Group was created to provide resources and support to both new and existing adaptive lacrosse coaches and administrators.

Mission and Vision

The mission of the Adaptive Lacrosse Mentor Group is to inform the development of adaptive lacrosse resources and to provide a forum for program leaders to share ideas, ask questions, and provide support to each other. Through dialogue, collaboration, and mentorship, these leaders will make the sport of lacrosse more accessible to youth and adults with disabilities.

Who are the Mentors?

The mentors are a diverse collection of adaptive sport professionals, teachers, therapists, parents, and volunteers. These leaders represent dozens of adaptive lacrosse programs from coast to coast. About one quarter of the group reports living with a disability themselves.

What are the Expectations?

The mentor-mentee experience is what you make of it. Upon request, USA Lacrosse will connect you with a volunteer mentor in your specific area of interest. We also host a virtual meeting every 6-8 weeks to provide a space for members to share their successes, discuss their challenges, and formulate new ideas. Attendance is voluntary for all meetings.

What are the Benefits?

- Connections to experienced adaptive sport leaders from around the country
- Opportunities to expand your leadership abilities and expertise
- Discussions about key topics including communication, recruiting, fundraising, program development, adaptive coaching strategies, and adaptive lacrosse equipment
- Ability to help shape and create resources and programs for athletes with disabilities

Get Involved

If you are interested in joining this group or attending our next virtual meeting, please send an email to: adaptive@usalacrosse.com

FIND MORE RESOURCES

The strategies in this guidebook were researched and synthesized from discussions with the Adaptive Lacrosse Mentor Group as well as the following sources:

[Coaching to Support Inclusion of Youth Athletes with Disabilities](#)

Aspen Institute Project Play

[Becoming Para Ready: A Resource to Help Club and School Athletics Programs Support More Effective Integration](#)

Konoval T., Leo J., & Ferguson J. (2019)

[Move United Inclusive Playbook](#)

Move United

[Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide](#)

Special Olympics

[USTA Adaptive Engagement Guide](#)

United States Tennis Association

[How to Start a Wheelchair Lacrosse Team](#)

Wheelchair Lacrosse USA