Supporting Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Recreation

by Phyllis Coyne and Ann Fullerton (2013)
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“There are more individuals with ASD than those affected by diabetes, cancer, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, or Down syndrome combined” (Coyne & Fullerton, 2013, p. xvii).

While autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the second most common developmental disability, (intellectual disabilities are the most common), professionals and family members may not realize the impact ASD presents during recreation participation. Consequently, they may not be aware of supportive leadership and accommodation strategies. Thus, the intent of this second edition is to present strategies appropriate to inclusive and therapeutic recreation experiences helpful to professionals and family members. The preface illustrates in Table 0.1, p. xviii, text content applicable to various professionals and family members.

Four goals for the book are to provide (1) information on the impact of ASD on recreation participation, (2) suggestions for program development, (3) guidelines on how to support individuals with ASD, and (4) examples of selected programs that are using promising practices. Chapters 1 through 4 consider ASD and recreation participation. Chapters 5 and 6 cover program development and accommodations. The closing chapters, 7–11, share examples of programs and accommodations found with specialized programs, parks and recreation, youth organizations, camps, and parent-initiated projects.

The second edition introduces the diagnostic category of ASD found in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Also included is current research related to recreation engagements and best practices for instruction and intervention. The Appendices (A–C) list resources on supports, websites, and organizations—one of the major assets of this text for professionals, students, and family members. The pedagogical features also distinguish this publication. Throughout the text, practical examples, scenarios, and quotes are highlighted in grey text boxes; tables and figures summarize key points and present useful protocols, forms, and resources; and, the concluding five chapters, 7 through 11, describe actual programs listing training resources, accommodations, and interventions.
The text is grounded on a strength-based and ecological approach to programming best illustrated in the first four chapters of the text. These chapters address the benefits of participation (Chapter 1), challenges and strengths of ASD during participation (Chapter 2), and parent (Chapter 3) and participant (Chapter 4) perspectives on leisure and recreation. Primary benefits of participation include (1) increased quality of life, (2) increased social relationships, (3) decreased inappropriate behaviors, (4) increased physical well-being, and (5) increased skills for accessing the community. After defining ASD according to APA, IDEA, and the WHO International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (10the revision; 2010), Chapter 2 summarizes characteristics of ASD that may affect recreation participation by identifying two broad convenience categories of behaviors—impairments in social communication and social interaction and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. Also presented are common misinterpretations of behavior followed by strengths found with ASD. Research and best practices identify evidence-based strategies to use in recreation to teach skills that accommodate participant characteristics and include prompting, reinforcement, self-management, structured work systems, task analysis, and visual supports.

In Chapter 3, the reader is introduced to questions and transitions faced by parents as they explore recreation options—“Sometimes parents cannot imagine in what activities their child could be involved, so they do not know where to start” (p. 49). A list of questions parents might ask providers (p. 99) and questions providers might ask of parents (p. 82) are presented as guides to decisions about accommodations and supports. Chapter 4 shares stories of persons with ASD. These stories capture the social and sensory challenges of recreation experiences while illustrating the varied preferences of participants—professionals are encouraged to listen to the self-knowledge of what will assist participants regardless of how challenging we might find communication.

Chapters 5 and 6, Planning Participation and Supports for Success, respectively, present content invaluable to program delivery and managing interventions. Chapter 5 is organized into 10 essential steps planners undertake as they prepare and deliver programs. These steps summarize APIE and include marketing, initial contact and registration, participant assessment, activity/program selection, environmental inventory, supports, training, participation, follow-up, and transition. As suggested by the author, these processes do not have to be complicated (p. 80). A number of usable resources found in the figures and tables exemplify the APIE process and could easily be replicated by professionals. To illustrate, Table 5.1 (p. 101), and Figure 5.8 (p. 102) provide guidelines for selecting and implementing successful activities applicable across therapeutic settings. Likewise, information on activity procedures (Figure 5.10, p. 104) and supports (Table 5.2, p. 105) would be helpful to professionals leading a variety of interventions.

Chapter 6 expands on the topic of supports introduced in Chapter 5. Together these two chapters comprise the heart of the text. Initially, the reader is introduced to universal design principles. The remaining portion of the chapter considers support strategies defined as accommodations, modifications, adaptations, supplementary aids, and other strategies enabling optimal benefit from services and activities (p.125). Eight categories of supports are vividly described and represented in illustrations and
by participant scenarios. These supports are visual, structural, sensory, novelty preparation, communication, social, instructional, and behavioral. A helpful figure, Figure 6.1 on pp. 127-130, presents a checklist with descriptive narrative summarizing each support category. Within each category, multiple subcategories describe various supports. For example, the category of structuring a predictable environment is subdivided into routines, physical organization, expectations, and visual structure. Professionals might find the category on behavioral supports to be very useful as the subcategories outline how to identify and manage challenging behaviors (pp. 164–173). This chapter concludes with a glossary of terms on supports that incorporates numerous URLs with additional resources.

The concluding five chapters, 7 through 11, present practical programming strategies, supports, training, and participant examples from the full spectrum of recreation settings and agencies in Canada and the USA. The reader will find each chapter summary identifies best practices used by the agencies covered in the chapter. For example, Chapter 7 considers special programs that focus on serving persons with ASD or that train others to serve persons with ASD. The best practices of these types of agencies include comprehensive assessments; environmental assessments especially as it relates to sensory stimulation, need for predictability, behavioral triggers, and support for ongoing training; and pre-visits and observations with participants prior to their actual participation in particular programs (p. 201). Key best practices found with parks and recreation agencies (Chapter 8) are staff development, the use of structured programs with familiar leadership, and the provision of inclusive programs with parental input. Youth-serving organizations, Chapter 9, have policies that suggest supports be provided according to individual needs; yet, due to the volunteer leadership found with these agencies, there is a need for some level of training, resources, and support of the leadership (p. 243). Chapter 10 documents the contributions of a camp experience to self-confidence and independence that improves participants’ functioning at home (p. 245). Practices used by camps include preparation of the camper prior to attendance, visual supports, and opportunities for break supports away from sensory stimuli during camp. Parents may become involved in their child’s recreation because appropriate options are nonexistent. The closing chapter (11) shares examples of parent initiated programs. The collective wisdom of parents is evident in the illustrations of supports used to create successful programs that teach leisure and community living skills.

Holistic intervention encompassing professionals, family members, and participants is important to successful and safe programming. This publication is written and designed to be used by all team members. Throughout the text, practical examples and scenarios tell the stories of individuals with ASD. Students and professionals will find numerous well-illustrated examples of evidence-based programming practices. The text would be appropriate as a support text in Introductory and Intervention classes and as a primary text with classes focusing on developmental disabilities. Resources in the Appendices and throughout the text will be helpful to both professionals and families.

References