

Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder and Extracurricular Participation: Structured Activities Matter for Inclusion, Belonging, and Well Being

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social communication, behavior, and sensory processing. Support needs vary widely across individuals and contexts. While students with ASD often experience social isolation, research consistently shows that participation in structured extracurricular activities – such as clubs, sports, creative arts, and volunteering – can promote social connection, confidence, and overall well being, particularly when appropriate supports are in place.

Why Extracurricular Activities Are Important

Research consistently shows that many students with ASD experience social isolation and limited peer interaction, even when academically capable. Without intentional supports, these barriers can undermine motivation, engagement, and long term success. Extracurricular activities – when structured, supported, and inclusive – can function as essential learning supports, not optional add ons.

Adolescents with ASD participate in social activities less frequently than their peers. National longitudinal research has found that many youth with ASD have limited peer contact outside of school and receive fewer social invitations, contributing to loneliness and reduced opportunities to build relationships (Shattuck et al., 2011).

Extracurricular activities provide:

- Predictable structure, which reduces anxiety
- Shared interests, which ease social interaction
- Adult facilitation, supporting positive peer engagement
- Natural contexts to practice communication, collaboration, and self regulation

When adequately supported, these activities can become meaningful pathways to inclusion rather than additional sources of stress.

Common Barriers to Participation

Despite the benefits, many students with ASD face barriers that limit access:

- Limited inclusion in school and community programs
- Insufficient training for educators, coaches, and program leaders
- Transportation and scheduling challenges
- Financial costs of fees, uniforms, equipment, and materials
- Sensory overload in unstructured or noisy environments
- Negative attitudes or misunderstandings of autism

A lack of autism informed practices among adults often results in missed opportunities for participation and growth (Emberti Gialloreti & Curatolo, 2018).

*The material in this document builds on work done by Sophia Mamonong a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

Opportunities for Participation

Below is a range activities and what each can help accomplish.

School Based Clubs

School clubs offer structured, low pressure environments centered around shared interests (e.g., art, gardening, gaming, music). Research indicates that participation in clubs can:

- Increase peer interaction and communication skills
- Improve sense of belonging and self confidence
- Support emotional regulation and academic engagement

(McDaniel et al., 2022; Wigston et al., 2015)

Creative arts clubs are especially beneficial for students who experience difficulty with verbal expression, allowing them to communicate through performance, music, or visual media.

Athletic & Physical Activity Programs

Sports and physical activities support both mental and physical health. Reviews of sport based interventions show improvements in:

- Emotional regulation
- Adaptive behavior
- Communication and social interaction

(Grosprêtre et al., 2024)

While athletic participation does not alter core autism characteristics, it strengthens functional skills that support inclusion and participation in group settings.

Volunteerism & Community Involvement

Volunteering offers opportunities to develop work related skills, social responsibility, and community connection. Youth with ASD who engage in volunteer activities often gain:

- Increased social capital
- Exposure to real world expectations
- Improved self advocacy and independence

(Lindsay, 2015)

Successful experiences depend on thoughtful role matching, clear expectations, and supportive supervision.

Participation for Students With Higher Support Needs

Students who need substantial or very substantial support require individualized planning to align activities with strengths and needs and benefit from:

- Gradual entry into activities
- Individual or low interaction options (e.g., cycling, walking clubs)
- Visual supports and predictable routines
- Adult or peer mentors
- Assistive technology to support communication, planning, and emotional regulation – assistive technology has been shown to enhance autonomy, reduce anxiety, and increase participation across settings (Wohofsky et al., 2021).

Moving Forward

Extracurricular involvement is not simply an “add on” to learning – it is a powerful context for fostering engagement, belonging, identity development, and long term success for students with ASD. When implemented in an inclusive environment, such opportunities have potential to improve outcomes not only for students with ASD, but also for their peers.

In moving forward, structure, predictability, and adult support are essential and involve:

- Staff, coach, and volunteer training in autism informed practices
- Coordination across school, after school, and community programs
- Attention to equity, access, and sustainability
- Recognition of extracurricular activities as developmental and engagement supports, not privileges

Extracurricular activities can serve as powerful learning supports. From our Center’s perspective, the goal is not merely to increase “participation,” but to embed extracurricular engagement fully into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.*

Concluding Comments

Students’ engagement, reengagement, and success at school are shaped not only by classroom instruction but by the full range of supports and opportunities that enable learning and development. For students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), participation in extracurricular activities can be a powerful – but too often underused – learning support.

The evidence is clear: structured extracurricular activities hold significant potential to enhance social competencies, emotional health, and school connectedness for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Too often, however, access is limited by assumptions about ability, lack of coordination, or insufficient support structures. Reframing extracurriculars as important developmental and relational spaces – rather than optional privileges – can result in schools and districts allocating resources, preparing staff, and strengthening cross-system collaboration.

As schools continue to prioritize inclusive practices, structured extracurricular activities represent an underutilized but promising avenue for supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The potential impact is profound. By fostering environments where students with ASD can engage around shared interests, practice social interaction, and experience belonging, schools promote not only individual growth but stronger, more inclusive communities. The challenge moving forward is not whether inclusion is possible, but whether systems are willing to make it intentional and sustained.

*For details, see:

>*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemchangesteps.pdf>

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