

Basketball coach George talks about Chris who has autism

Scenario

Chris started attending a basketball club several weeks ago. Increasingly the coach has found his behaviour difficult to manage and disruptive. Chris shouts, doesn't concentrate and puts other players off. The coach has decided to suspend Chris's involvement for several sessions in an attempt to deal with this behaviour. When he contacts Chris's father he learns that Chris has been diagnosed with autism, which the club hadn't been told about. Chris's father was worried that his son wouldn't have been allowed to join if this was known. Apparently Chris is very enthusiastic about playing at the club. When the coach refers back to Chris's challenging behaviour and says he needs to consider what to do, the father becomes very angry and claims it would be illegal to bar his son from the club.

Discussion points

What is autism?

Autism describes a range of developmental disorders (autistic spectrum disorders) that begin in childhood and persist throughout adulthood. At one end of the autistic spectrum will be the child with severe autism and profound learning difficulties and at the other, children of average to above average intelligence and milder autism, known as Asperger syndrome.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how a child:

- relates to other people
- communicates with others
- makes sense of the world around them.

What should the coach and club do in this situation?

The overall aim should be to make sure that Chris can continue to participate – but in a way that allows the rest of the group to do so too. In the first instance the coach, perhaps with the support of the club welfare officer, should meet with Chris and his parents to establish a clear picture of the implications of Chris's condition, and how he can be supported to continue to participate in the sport. This will include:

- understanding the diagnosis Chris has been given
- identifying how Chris's autism affects his behaviour and communication
- sharing effective ways to communicate with him
- identifying what triggers there may be for Chris's outbursts or challenging behaviour
- considering ways in which his challenging behaviour can be reduced, managed and responded to in the sports team environment
- agreeing what type and level of additional support Chris may require, and where this may be found, such as one of his parents or another person attending sessions.

Chris and his parents need reassurance from the club about its commitment to include him and to find ways to effectively involve him in activities where practicable and reasonable, as well as to overcome their understandable concerns about potential discrimination.

The coaches need to understand the most important aspects of Chris's condition and ways to manage the behaviour arising from it. It may be useful (with the family's permission) to talk to Chris's teacher or someone else with experience of him in a group situation. Information may also be available from the sports governing body, or relevant local and national support organisations. Training and information around disability and inclusion, and specifically autism, would be helpful to the relevant coaching staff.

There is a clear need for Chris's disruptive behaviour to be appropriately addressed and handled in order for the sessions to meet the needs of the rest of the group – this should be informed by the discussion with parents and others with relevant experience or expertise.

Arrangements should be agreed with Chris and his parents for regularly reviewing these arrangements and his progress, and for responding to any concerns arising.

Further information on autism can be found in handouts on the CD-Rom.