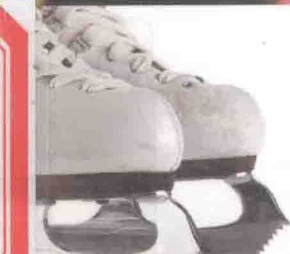




VERONICA SMITH AND
STEPHANIE Y. PATTERSON
Foreword by Connie Kasari



Getting into the **GAME**

*Sports Programs for
Kids with Autism*

VERONICA SMITH AND
STEPHANIE Y. PATTERSON

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into the*
GAME

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Kids with Autism*

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"This book importantly provides strategies for engaging children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other disabilities in sporting activities. It offers needed, practical information for parents, coaches, teachers and others. The reader is guided to consider sport as a means to physical fitness, community engagement and quality of life. The book is an important contribution in building 'welcoming' communities, and critically addressing under-studied opportunities in sport for persons with ASD. A highly recommended read!"

— David Nicholas, Associate Professor, Faculty of
Social Work, University of Calgary

"As a gymnast with Asperger syndrome, I have had to overcome many of the issues highlighted in *Getting into the Game*. I was very fortunate to start gymnastics at the age of three and so I am testament to the fact that sport can help young people with autism spectrum disorders overcome fears and difficulties in all aspects of their lives. I would highly recommend this book to parents or teachers who have children with autism. It is full of information and advice that will help readers gain a better understanding of ASD and how to introduce and teach sport to children on the spectrum."

— Philip Davis, 26, gymnast, "Special Olympics" silver medallist
(Athens, 2011), former Senior and Junior British Champion (2002,
2005), and coach at the Croydon School of Gymnastics

"Written in a friendly voice that is readily accessible to both professionals and families, *Getting into the Game* offers concrete suggestions for including people with autism in sports and other physical activities. The authors clearly understand both the challenges faced by individuals with autism and the need for clear, visually supported teaching strategies that lead to success. This is a 'must-have' book for parents, teachers, and coaches who are dedicated to the eradication of 'couch potato syndrome' as a side effect of autism!"

— Dr. Pat Mirenda, Professor in the Department of Educational and
Counselling Psychology and Special Education, University of British Columbia

"Getting into the Game is an essential reference for any parent or professional considering the opportunities and benefits sport can bring to children with autism. Over the past two decades, I have witnessed many thousands of profoundly disabled children participate in sailing around the UK. Without exception, there are benefits to be gained for all involved in any sport; the child, the providers and the family. You don't need any special qualification to see those benefits, but it is useful to have a reference like this book that explains the process of accessing and participating in different sports."

– *Geoff Holt, MBE, ex-professional yachtsman
and disability sports ambassador*

"Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) would like to express its support and enthusiasm for the authors' expertise in writing *Getting into the Game*. This book reflects what we believe to be the important, key messages regarding increasing the activity levels of kids. We believe this work assists the way professionals lead and deliver sport and physical activity in Canada and other nations, and will contribute to its overall improvement, resulting in a healthier population."

– *Richard Way, Project Lead, Canadian Sport for Life*

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FOREWORD

Finally, a book about the possibilities of sports for children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)! Although involvement in team and individual sports plays an important role in children's lives and well-being, children with ASD often avoid rather than engage in such activities. Such avoidance could be due to their intensive therapy schedules, the noisy, chaotic, and unpredictable nature of the sports environment, or the lack of coaches with the skill set to teach them. Thus, for families of children with ASD the possibility of adding a sport to a child's already busy life may seem more trouble than it's worth.

Getting into the Game: Sports Programs for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders uniquely addresses these issues for children with ASD, and convincingly argues that adding sport to a child's busy schedule can be an enhancement rather than a bother. Veronica Smith and Stephanie Patterson tell personal stories of the importance of sports in their lives, and of successful sports instruction for children with autism. Particularly noteworthy is that the book focuses on how to start playing a sport, as well as on the basic skills, strategies, and adapted programs necessary to excel in the sport. Each of the chapter authors provides a cogent account of why their sport is great for children with ASD, along with specific suggestions on how to develop basic skills and to achieve successful sports literacy.

The book is organized in two parts. Part 1 introduces basic information about sport, strategies for choosing a sport, working with coaches and volunteers, and adapting educational strategies for use in the sport environment. This part provides critical information and tools to help families make informed decisions, and gives coaches ideas to help them improve the sporting experience for children with ASD. I would venture a guess that this part may help parents or coaches with teaching *any* child who is a first-timer in a sport, or who is deciding they would rather be watching their favorite cartoon than running the bases.

Part 2 walks readers through six different sports (biking, skating, swimming, martial arts, tennis, and soccer). Readers are introduced to the benefits and potential challenges presented by each of these unique sport

environments and provided with tips and strategies for successful first experiences in each sport. Basic foundational skills are presented in a step-by-step fashion for each sport, with photos and diagrams as well as charts and organizers to help families to make a plan and support the new athlete appropriately. Each chapter also highlights an existing and successful adapted community sports program for students with ASD in North America, and includes the personal story of a family that has used the program.

This book comes at a timely juncture for children with autism. The Centers for Disease Control recently announced that 1 in 88 children are now diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, and about 60 percent of children test without intellectual impairment (below 70 IQ; see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Thus, there should be many more children with ASD who are educated in general education classrooms alongside their neurotypical classmates. Playing individual and team sports will become more and more essential to the overall education of children with ASD and will offer them opportunities to increase their feelings of inclusion and belongingness in both general education and community settings.

Another reason for the timeliness of this book is the increased risk of obesity among children with autism (Curtin *et al.*, 2010). Their tendency to play alone, or to engage in sedentary activities (such as playing video games), puts children with ASD at risk of negative health and developmental outcomes. Interventionists may unintentionally contribute to more inactive means for engaging with other children by concentrating social skills interventions on board games at school rather than more active playground games. According to recent reports, approximately a third of children with autism are overweight or at risk of being overweight, in large part due to inactivity (Curtin *et al.*, 2010).

Beyond the obvious benefits of sport involvement to physical health and well-being, children can gain immense social benefits both with family and community peers. Sports can offer the child with ASD activities to share with siblings, and parents and children can widen their social circles by meeting other families on the team. For children with ASD, feelings of marginalization and loneliness at school increase with age (Bauminger and Kasari, 2000; Kasari *et al.*, 2012). Younger children are less aware of feeling lonely but tend to have infrequent peer interactions at school and often do not know how to play the games in the playground (Kasari *et al.*, 2012). One approach to helping these children to engage more with other children, and thus increase the likelihood of developing friendships, is to involve them in sports, whether at school or in the community. Children

can gain physical literacy and confidence, which will provide them with the motivation to engage in activities with other children. Beginning early may stave off the intense feelings of loneliness and isolation that adolescents feel at school. Physical literacy is important to develop, whether at school or in the community, in order to increase the potential for generalizing skills and confidence across settings.

This is a book for families, clinicians, coaches, and anyone who wants to improve both children's sports literacy and ultimately their developmental outcome. Families will feel encouraged to try a sport with their child, and clinicians and coaches may find their trepidation dispel. Smith and Patterson provide excellent detailed strategies translating what we know about effective instruction in the classroom into creative uses in sport environments – for example, utilizing a moving visual schedule which uses simple language so as to not overwhelm a child who may be learning a new physical skill; or providing specific prompts to teach a skill, which creates structure and encourages and motivates children. Tips are provided to deal with such sensory related issues as the too-tight helmet, scratchy uniforms, uncomfortable shoes, and noisy gyms or rinks. Importantly, this book includes strategies for children who range in their ability to communicate, and provides supports to teach and include not only children who can use spoken language but, rather, children of all abilities.

Getting into the Game exposes much of the “hidden curriculum” in sports etiquette and behavior, providing very specific information about the language, the first steps, how to practice, and troubleshooting challenges that may be encountered. This book will be most helpful to those children and families who are yet to have a positive experience in sport, or those who may feel that they are not ready to give sports a try. Sports do not need to pose a risk to children with autism, but can instead be a means to develop “physical literacy,” peer relationships, inclusion, and, above all, to have fun while doing so!

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