How to Guide

Creating the right environment

active sussex

www.activesussex.org

Introduction

"These guides are based on real experiences from organisations working to get children and young people active. They highlight common challenges, share lessons learned, and offer practical tips from those already making a difference.

Every child's relationship with movement is different, and their needs can change over time. That's why it's important that, as deliverers and facilitators, we understand the challenges young people face in getting active. By listening, learning, and adapting, we can make sure every young person has the chance to take part in a way that works for them.

Sussex is full of incredible organisations working hard to create opportunities for children who might otherwise miss out. Through our Children and Young People Forum and Play Their Way Coaches Collective, we've seen just how much people want to share ideas, tackle challenges together, and support one another. These guides are here to continue that conversation.

This guide is for anyone working with children and young people – whether you're a project lead, a coach, or supporting sessions in any way. The insights and advice here can help make your sessions more inclusive, engaging, and successful.

We hope you find them helpful - whether it's a small tweak to how you run sessions or a new idea that sparks something bigger. However you use them, thank you for everything you do to help children and young people feel included, supported, and excited to move."

Andy Wright,
Strategic Relationship Manager for Children & Young People at Active Sussex.

Creating the right environment

When you're running activities for children and young people, the right environment can make all the difference. But what does that actually mean? It's more than just having enough space or sticking to your budget - it's about making sure every child feels safe, welcome, and included. If children know what to expect and can rely on a clear structure and routine during your sessions, they're more likely to feel comfortable, relaxed, and excited to join in.

Creating the right atmosphere is as important as the space itself. Small things, like the way you speak to young people or the flexibility you offer, can have a big impact. Choosing familiar venues, like a local youth club or a space in their own neighbourhood, can also help children feel like they belong - making them much more likely to keep coming back.

Common challenges: What can get in the way?

Imagine trying to run a session in a sports hall where every sound bounces off the walls. The echoes make it hard for children with sensory needs to focus, leaving them overwhelmed and struggling to join in.

Picture a club set up in a place that's too far to walk to and has no public transport links. Young people from lower-income families might want to take part, but without a way to get there, they're left out.

Think about a child who speaks English as a second language. They're excited about joining, but their parents or carers don't see any clear signs that the sessions are welcoming and inclusive. Unsure if their child will feel comfortable, they decide not to sign them up.

Things like location, accessibility, and how you communicate can play a part in helping children feel included and able to join. Small changes can go a long way in making sure your sessions work for everyone.

Solutions: How to make it work

Choosing the right space

- **Go with familiar places:** If there's a local youth club or community space where young people already feel at home, think about holding your sessions there. Being in a space they know can help with any nerves and make children more likely to turn up.
- **Make sure it works for everyone:** Check that your venue is easy to access - things like ramps, disabled toilets, and sensory-friendly lighting can make a big difference. Think about the layout too - large halls can be great for some activities but might feel overwhelming for others.
- **Keep the temperature comfortable:** If it's too cold, children might struggle to warm up properly, and if it's too hot, they could feel uncomfortable or overheated. For children with sensory needs, extreme temperatures can be especially tough. Aim for a comfortable middle ground and check in with everyone to see how it feels.
- **Think about noise and lighting:** The right lighting and sound levels can help children focus and feel more relaxed. Softer lighting or curtains can help young people with sensory sensitivities, and if your venue has windows facing busy areas, blinds or partitions can help block out distractions.

Transport and accessibility

- **Run sessions close to home:** Try to hold your sessions in the local community - ideally within walking distance for young people. This makes it easier for them to turn up without needing a bus ride or a lift from their parents/carers.
- **Work around public transport:** If your venue isn't close by, check local bus and train timetables. Even a slight change to your start or finish time could make it much easier for young people to get there.
- **Choose a safe location:** It's important to think about how safe it is to get to the venue. Check if there's good lighting on pathways, in car parks, and around outdoor spaces - especially for evening sessions. If the route to the venue feels unsafe, it could put young people off from attending.
- **Lift-sharing and buddy systems:** See if any parents/carers or volunteers can offer lifts, or if families can set up car shares. A simple buddy system can make transport easier and help children feel more comfortable joining.
- **Get help from local groups:** If transport is a challenge, reach out to local charities or community groups. Some may be able to provide a minibus or help connect families who can share rides.

Matching the venue to the activity type and group size

- **Room size and setup:** Big halls can feel overwhelming if your activity only needs a small space or if only a few children are taking part. Smaller spaces can feel more welcoming, especially for children with additional needs, but too many exit points can be a challenge. If needed, you can block off some exits - just make sure there are still safe ways to get in and out.
- **Indoor vs outdoor:** Think about whether your sessions will work best indoors or outside. A lot of young people feel more comfortable indoors, where you have more control over things like temperature, noise, and layout. Outdoor sessions can be great fun, but sudden weather changes can be tricky and muddy fields can cause activities to get cancelled, which can be challenging for children who prefer a consistent routine. If you do choose outdoor sessions, artificial surfaces or more solid surfaces may be a less risky choice.
- **Adapt for additional needs:** Some children feel more at home in smaller groups or quieter spaces. If you're working with young people who are sensitive to noise or distractions, try keeping the space as simple as possible - clearing away extra clutter and only having out what's needed. Small changes like this can help everyone feel more comfortable and ready to join in.

Creating a welcoming culture

- **Make every child feel like they belong:** A warm welcome can go a long way. Greet each child with a smile and a simple 'Hi, how are you?' - little gestures like this can help settle nerves. If you remember something they mentioned last time, even better - it shows you're paying attention and that they matter.

- **Create a supportive and inclusive space:** Every child should feel valued, no matter their background, ability, or experience. Encouraging kindness, teamwork, and respect between young people helps sessions feel safe and welcoming. Keep in mind any barriers that might make it harder for some children to join in - things like cost, cultural differences, or additional needs - and look for ways to make it easier.

- **Use positive, encouraging communication:** The way you talk to children matters. Focus on effort rather than just results, use uplifting language to build confidence, and adapt how you explain things based on their age and ability. Giving young people a voice - whether that's letting them share ideas or simply checking in on how they're feeling - helps them feel listened to and included.

- **Keep things predictable:** Let children know what to expect in your sessions. A familiar structure and routine can help them feel comfortable and reassured, especially if they struggle with change.

- **Support different needs:** Some children, especially those who are neurodiverse or anxious, may find new environments overwhelming. A quiet corner, a simple visual timetable, or even a short visit before their first session can help them feel more at ease. You could also try sharing a walkthrough video beforehand to give children a better idea of what to expect.

- **Prioritise safeguarding and well-being:** Children should always feel safe - physically and emotionally. Look out for signs of bullying, exclusion, or distress, and step in if needed. A positive, pressure-free atmosphere helps young people enjoy sessions without feeling overwhelmed.

- **Make sure your team feels confident:** Your staff play the biggest role in making children feel welcome. Inclusive training helps them understand different needs and how to adapt sessions so everyone can take part. Let parents/carers know about this in your communications - it reassures them their child will be supported.

- **Celebrate progress, big or small:** Whether a child learns a new skill, makes a friend, or just turns up and gives it a go, it's worth celebrating. A quick 'Well done!' or a bit of encouragement can boost confidence and help them feel good about themselves. Constructive, supportive feedback is the best way to help them grow.

- **Make it fun and engaging:** Keeping things fun and varied helps make sure children want to keep coming back and builds a love of movement that can last a lifetime. Letting them try different activities or even take on small leadership roles - like leading warm-ups or setting up equipment - can keep things fresh and exciting.

- **Be a role model:** Coaches and volunteers set the tone. Show respect, kindness, and patience, and young people will follow your lead. Set clear expectations for behaviour, encourage fairness, and help children develop good sportsmanship - whether that's learning to celebrate wins or handle setbacks with resilience.

- **Be open to different cultures and needs:** Children and families come from all backgrounds, and it's important they feel seen and included. Small things, like offering translated materials, providing a space for prayer, or making sure everyone feels comfortable in their kit, can help children and parents feel more at ease.

- **Be clear in your marketing:** From the first flyer or message, make sure families know your sessions are open to everyone. If you offer things like a sensory-friendly space or quiet area, highlight it. A simple contact email also makes it easier for parents/carers to ask questions.

- **Let children take the lead:** Every child has a right to play, develop and be heard. The key thing to consider is giving young people more voice, choice and journey within your sessions. Examples could be letting them choose background music, or decide on activity stations. Involving them gives them a sense of ownership and makes sessions more fun and relaxed.

> **"If we play their way, more children and young people will enjoy being active, with the potential to lead happier and healthier lives."**
>
> *– Play Their Way campaign*

"We want every young person to feel welcome before they even walk through the door. That's why we highlight our inclusive training and share details about venues in our marketing i.e. sensory spaces and breakout rooms. If parents or young people have questions, we encourage them to reach out - we're always happy to chat and help them feel reassured before they come along."

– Jade Hand, *DanceHub CIC*

Keeping everyone safe

- **Risk assessment:** It's essential your organisation has an up-to-date risk assessment in place before the start of any project. If you're unsure what needs to be included, please contact your NGB, UK Coaching or NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU).
- **Go over exits and safety plans:** It's always good to have a fire evacuation plan in place. A lot of venues will already have one as standard, so familiarise yourself with any existing plans, or create new ones if needed. Then at the start of each session, point out the exits and where everyone should go in an emergency. Even children who come every week can forget this kind of information.
- **Check your equipment:** Before each session, take a quick look at all the equipment to make sure it's safe to use. A quick demo at the start can also help children understand how to use things properly and avoid accidents.
- **Tidy up any hazards:** A quick tidy-up before children arrive can be helpful. Move any extra equipment or objects that could cause trips or distractions - especially in spaces used for other activities. Keeping things in the same layout each session also helps children know what's safe to use.
- **Make it easy to ask questions:** Let children and parents/carers know they can always ask if something feels unsafe or unclear - no question is too small. Creating a space where they feel comfortable speaking up makes sessions safer for everyone.

Develop your skills

UK Coaching's **Creating a Successful Coaching Environment** e-Learning course will teach you practical strategies to help you create a positive environment.

Case study: A real-life example

The Russell Martin Foundation

The Russell Martin Foundation noticed that large school rooms with multiple exit points, noisy acoustics, and cluttered equipment could be overwhelming for children with additional needs. To make the space feel calmer and more manageable, they cleared away anything unnecessary, closed off extra exits, and made sure the same friendly faces were there each week. Having a consistent setup and familiar coaches helped the children feel safe, settled, and ready to enjoy the sessions.

"Safety is always our starting point. We clear or block off anything that might feel confusing or distracting. Keeping the same staff for sessions also really made a difference. This has helped children feel safe and secure enough to just be themselves and have fun."

Jess Barnes, The Russell Martin Foundation

Useful tips straight to your inbox

Small changes can really help you create a safe and welcoming space for young people. Sign up for our newsletter to get simple tips, fresh ideas, and useful resources straight to your inbox.

Sign up: activesussex.org/email-newsletter

Recommendations: Quick ways to improve

Environment audit:

Use this quick checklist before each session to make sure your space feels safe, welcoming, and easy for everyone to enjoy.

Accessibility

Can children with mobility challenges get in easily (for example, ramps, step-free access)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Are toilets and changing areas easy to reach and use?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Transport and timing

Is the venue in your local community, ideally within walking distance?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Is it close to public transport, or are there carpool/ buddy options?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Does the session time work with local bus schedules or school timetables?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Space and layout

Is the room the right size for the number of children taking part?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Are the exits easy to manage, with no hidden corners?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Is there enough space for the activity you're running?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Noise and acoustics

Does the space have minimal echo, or can you reduce it

Yes ☐ No ☐

(for example, using curtains or partitions)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Is there a quiet or breakaway area if needed?

Safety and emergency

Yes ☐ No ☐

Have you completed a risk assessment?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Has all equipment been checked for wear and tear?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Are emergency exits clear and explained at the start?

Inclusivity and culture

Does at least one team member personally greet each

Yes ☐ No ☐

child as they arrive?

Are activities adaptable for neurodiverse or anxious

Yes ☐ No ☐

children (for example, using visual schedules)?

Have you thought about any cultural or language needs

Yes ☐ No ☐

(for example, translated signs or materials)?

Help through buddle

Are you looking for somewhere to host your activities? Check out buddle to discover more information on everything from hiring a hall to running your own venue.

Visit buddle.co/learning-and-support-resources/facilities-and-spaces

Try this:

Run through the environment checklist before your next session. If anything isn't quite right, make small changes where you can to help everyone feel comfortable, supported, and happy to come back.

Top three quick wins:

1. **Set up a quiet space:** This can give children somewhere to take a break if they need to.
2. **Share details before the session:** Things like lighting, venue size, noise levels, and staff training - so families know what to expect.
3. **Pick a space that feels right for your activity and group size:** Too big can feel intimidating, too small can feel cramped.

Need help creating a welcoming space?

Making sure every child feels safe, comfortable, and included takes planning, but you don't have to figure it out alone. If you need advice on choosing the right venue, adapting for different needs, or setting up your sessions, the Active Sussex team is here to help. Get in touch - we're always happy to chat: activesussex.org/contact