How to Guide

Tailoring approaches for underserved audiences

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.

Tailoring approaches for underserved audiences

Not every young person gets the same chance to join in with sport and physical activity. Some face extra barriers - whether due to inaccessible environments, financial concerns, or simply feeling like it's not for them. Girls, disabled children, LGBTQ+ young people, children from diverse backgrounds, and those experiencing deprivation are often the ones missing out

But every child deserves the chance to move, play, and feel part of something. It's up to all of us to make sure sessions feel open and welcoming, so no one is left on the sidelines. For some young people, this might be the only place where they feel included or get to spend time with friends.

Small changes go a long way. Tweaking activities, asking young people what they actually want, or keeping sessions free or low-cost can help remove barriers and create a space where everyone feels like they belong.

Common challenges: What can get in the way?

A coach sets up a new club but notices no girls or children from diverse backgrounds are showing up. It turns out the posters and messages used, haven't really spoken to these groups or made it clear that everyone's welcome.

Another group realises some children with additional needs aren't coming back each week. Maybe the sessions feel too fast, the rules too strict, or the space too overwhelming. Finding out why a child isn't coming back and asking them what they need could let you make a few small changes - like offering a quieter area or making activities more flexible - that help them feel more comfortable.

In another case, a coach assumes getting to sessions won't be a problem, only to find some families are struggling with transport. Without an easier way to get there, those young people miss out on something they'd love to be part of.

Solutions: How to make it work

Deprivation

- **Keep sessions free or affordable:** Cost shouldn't be the reason a child misses out. Try to keep fees as low as possible or offer free spots where you can. If funding is tight, consider setting up a small fund from fundraising, crowdfunding or local grants that can cover costs for families who need extra support. Make sure parents/carers know who to speak to if they need help - this could be a Club Welfare Officer or Safeguarding Lead, if they don't want to share their concerns with the coach - the most important thing is having a friendly point of contact to help lower-income families feel included. You can also look into Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) funding through the county or local council to help cover session costs.

Funding

Visit our Funding page to explore different ways to raise money and support your sessions:

https://www.activesussex.org/insight-and-funding/funding/

- **Choose easy-to-reach locations:** Travel can be a big hurdle for some families, so try to run sessions in familiar places like schools, community centres, or parks. Check how accessible the venue is by public transport - look at the nearest bus stops, train stations, and whether there are safe, well-lit pathways for walking.

- **Think about other transport options:** If getting there is tricky, see if things like bus vouchers, car shares, or volunteer drivers could help. If setting up a car share, make sure to follow best practice - check your sport or activity's NGB guidance or use the CPSU's safeguarding recommendations to make sure all travel arrangements are kept safe.

- **Bring sessions to where young people live:** If travel is a challenge, take the sessions to them. Working with local housing communities and their spaces, like a MUGA (multi-use games area), can make it easier, safer, and often free to run. Holding sessions right where young people live removes extra costs and makes it more likely they'll come along.

Street Games

Check out the ingredients of Street Games Doorstep Sport:

https://www.streetgames.org/what-we-do/about-doorstep-sport/

- **Ask young people what works for them:** If you want them to show up, they need to have a say. Check in with them - what times, locations, and activities would make it easier for them to take part? Sometimes, a quick chat can give you a better idea of how sessions can fit their needs.

Disabilities or long-term health conditions

- **Help your team feel confident:** If your staff are supported to consider and make small adjustments, it can really help how they deliver sessions. Give them simple, practical tips on how to communicate with children with different needs and ways to tweak activities so everyone feels included. Disabilities can vary hugely, so it's important to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and stay open to adapting things based on individual needs. Most National Disability Sports Organisations offer resources and training on supporting people with specific impairments, which can be a great starting point. You can also use the Activity Alliance STEP tool (Space, Task, Equipment, and People) to help make sessions more accessible.
- **Build relationships with special education schools:** Schools are busy places so sometimes it can be hard to connect to special education schools, but it's worth it. These schools can help you reach children who'd really benefit from your sessions, though it's important to keep in mind that many students travel in from different areas. That means after-school sessions might not always be the best fit. Finding a time and place that works for them - and their families - can help them feel included.
- **Help parents/carers feel at ease:** Parents and carers just want to know their child will be safe, supported, and understood. Let them know what to expect - like smaller group sizes, staff who understand different needs, or a friendly, welcoming space - to really help build trust. When they feel confident their child will be looked after, they'll be much more likely to give your sessions a try.
- **Think about hearing and visual impairments:** Small adjustments can help deaf children and those with visual impairments feel more included. Learning a few basic signs or using clear visual cues can make instructions easier to follow. For children with a visual impairment, making sure the space is well-lit, keeping pathways clear, and using bold, contrasting colours can help them move around with confidence. Every child's needs are different, so checking in with them (or their parents/carers) is the best way to find out what works.
- **Make the space feel welcoming:** Little things can have a big impact. A quiet corner, softer lighting, or clear signs can help neurodiverse children feel more at ease. If you're in a big, noisy hall, having a smaller breakout area can give them a place to step away if they need to.
- **Take the pressure off:** Not every child enjoys strict rules or competition. Focus on play, exploring new skills, and making friends so sessions feel fun and relaxed.
- **Pair up:** A buddy system can help children feel more comfortable, build friendships, and make trying something new feel less intimidating.
- **Go at their pace:** Some children like knowing exactly what to expect, while others are happy with a bit of variety. Checking in with them can help you shape sessions in a way that makes them feel safe and included. A simple way to do this is by using emotion cards at the start and end of a session - this lets them show how they're feeling without having to say much. It can help you understand their mood, offer support if needed, and see how the session has impacted them.

> **"For children with additional needs, flexibility is everything. Removing the pressure of rules, scoring and competition helps them focus on fun, build confidence, and enjoy the activity at their own pace."**
>
> *– Jess Barnes, The Russell Martin Foundation*

Ethnically diverse communities

- **Representation matters:** Young people feel more at home when they see people like them in leadership roles. If your coaching team isn't diverse, you can still make connections - work with community leaders who already have trust in local groups and can help spread the word.
- **Respect different needs:** Religious holidays, food restrictions, and dress codes can all play a role in whether a child feels comfortable joining in. If you're not sure about something, just ask! Parents/carers and young people will appreciate you making the effort.
- **Make it easy to get involved:** Not all families get their information the same way. A simple flyer in different languages, a bilingual volunteer, or even sharing details through trusted community spaces can help make sure no one feels left out.

Girls

- **Help them see it's for them:** Girls are more likely to join if they see others like them taking part. Use photos of girls enjoying your sessions in posters, flyers, and social media. Sharing real stories - whether from role models or other girls in your group - can also help them feel inspired and included.
- **Create a space that feels comfortable:** Some girls, especially teenagers, might feel more at ease starting with girls-only sessions before joining mixed groups. The best way to get it right? Ask them what they want. Finding out what excites them - and what puts them off - can help shape sessions where they feel safe, confident, and happy to take part. Women in Sport also has useful advice on what helps girls stay engaged, from the types of activities they enjoy to the environments where they feel most comfortable.
- **Support female coaches and build awareness:** It's important for both male and female coaches to understand how to support girls in ways that make them feel comfortable. Periods, for example, can affect how some girls take part, so having sanitary products available and safe, private changing spaces can really help. Not every girl will feel the same, so the key is to listen, be understanding, and let them decide what works best for them. Giving coaches the right training can help make sessions more supportive, and getting involved in national campaigns like This Girl Can is a great way to show that your sessions are welcoming and inclusive.
- **Get boys and male coaches involved in making sessions fairer:** Boys and men can play a big part in making sure girls feel just as welcome. That might mean calling out unhelpful comments, making sure everyone gets a fair turn, or simply recognising and celebrating girls' progress as much as boys'. A small shift in attitude can make a huge difference in making sure girls feel valued and keen to come back.

Non-binary and LGBTQ+ young people

- **Make sessions welcoming:** A young person's gender identity or sexuality can shape how they feel about taking part in sport. Some might worry about fitting in, feel uncomfortable with gendered teams or kit, or be put off by past negative experiences. A few small changes can help make your sessions a space where they feel safe, included, and able to enjoy getting active.
- **Think beyond 'boys' and 'girls':** Sport is often divided into boys' and girls' teams, but that doesn't work for everyone. Some young trans and non-binary people may feel excluded by gendered kit, changing rooms, or how activities are split. Offering mixed-gender options, flexible kit choices, and using inclusive language can help more young people feel comfortable.
- **Listen to LGBTQ+ young people:** The best way to make your sessions welcoming is to ask. What would make them feel more at ease? What barriers have they faced before? Checking in with them helps you understand what works and what might need changing.
- **Show that your sessions are a safe space:** A simple sign, a visible LGBTQ+ ally on your team, or making sure coaches are confident in using inclusive language can really help. It's also important to set

clear expectations that everyone is treated with respect. Coaches and leaders should feel comfortable calling out any homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic language or behaviour - bullying and discrimination have no place in sport. By creating a culture where young people feel valued and supported, you help make sure that every child can be themselves, have fun, and feel like they belong.

Keep in mind intersectionality

Everyone's experience is different, and barriers to getting active can overlap. A young person might face challenges not just because they're a girl, but also because of their ethnicity, sexuality/gender identity, a disability, or financial struggles. For example, Asian and Black girls are often less active than their peers, so it's important to think about how gender and ethnicity can combine to affect participation. The more we understand these layers, the better we can create sessions where every young person feels welcome and included.

Useful tips straight to your inbox

Want to reach more young people and break down barriers to taking part? Subscribe to our newsletter for advice, success stories, and practical ways to make your sessions inclusive for all. Sign up: **activesussex.org/email-newsletter**

Case study: A real-life example

Active Hastings

Active Hastings runs outdoor street sports sessions in local housing association spaces, removing venue costs and making it easier for young people to get involved. Using Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs) in these communities means sessions are right on their doorstep, getting rid of travel costs and creating a safe space where they can play, build confidence, and form healthy habits. They often work with sports clubs that run kit donations, making it easier for families to access sports gear without worry, and work with local groups to provide food for children who may not always have access to fresh meals at home.

> **"We bring sport to where young people are, so they don't have to find a way to get to us. Running sessions in the heart of communities means kids can just step outside and get involved. It's amazing seeing generations come back – parents who took part as kids now bringing their own children, knowing it's a safe, welcoming space where they'll be looked after."**
>
> *– Sarah Ruusuvuori, Active Hastings*

Recommendations: Quick ways to improve

Practical tools:

Some children and young people face more barriers to getting involved in activities, but small changes can help you reach them and encourage them to take part. Whether it's how you promote your sessions or how you set them up, these easy tweaks can help more young people feel included.

Making sessions more inclusive checklist:

For children facing financial challenges or limited resources:

- Offer free or low-cost spots and let families know how to access them discreetly.
- Choose session locations within walking distance or provide transport support (bus vouchers, car shares).
- Partner with housing associations to use local community spaces, making sessions more accessible and cutting venue costs.
- Run a kit donation scheme so children can access sportswear and equipment if needed.

For children from ethnically diverse communities:

- Use images and language in your promotion that reflect diverse backgrounds so young people can see themselves in your sessions.
- Check if cultural or religious needs impact participation, such as dress codes, dietary needs, or prayer times.
- Offer translated materials or have a contact person who can support non-English-speaking parents/carers.
- Work with local community leaders, faith groups, and cultural organisations to help build trust and spread the word.

For children with physical disabilities:

- Check the venue has step free access options, accessible toilets, and enough space to move around.
- Adapt activities where needed - like offering seated versions of sports or adjusting equipment heights.
- Have a rest area for those who might need a break.
- Be deaf-aware - learn a few simple signs or gestures to help with communication.
- Make sure instructions are clear, use visual aids where possible, and face children when speaking.
- Check the space is well-lit, and avoid sudden bright lights or deep shadows that could make it harder to see.
- Keep pathways clear and use bold, contrasting colours to help children with visual impairments navigate the space more easily.

For children with learning disabilities:

- Keep instructions short, simple, and hands-on rather than just explaining.
- Repeat key points and give extra time for them to process or ask questions

For children with anxiety or mental health challenges:

- Let them arrive early so they can settle in before the session starts.
- Provide a quiet space where they can take a break if needed.
- Keep things low-pressure - focus on fun, not competition.
- Give lots of encouragement and celebrate small wins.

For girls:

- Speak to the girls attending to see what would make them more comfortable.
- Have free period products and period product disposal options available.
- Try to have female leaders and coaches to help with representation.
- Focus on girls' achievements just as much as you do for boys attending.

For LGBTQ+ young people:

- Use inclusive terms like 'everyone' instead of gendered terms like 'boys and girls'.
- Offer flexible kit choices and mixed-gender options and changing rooms where possible.
- Show visible support, such as a small LGBTQ+ inclusion sign or a trained ally in your team.
- Make sure all staff feel confident challenging homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic language or behaviour.

Check out our Community of Learning

Every child should feel like they belong in your sessions. Our Community of Learning has real-life examples, simple adaptations, and practical guides to help you support a wider range of young people. activesussex.org/insight-and-funding/community-of-learning

Top three quick wins:

1. **Reach the right people:** Connect with local groups, like housing associations, faith communities, or disability organisations, to help spread the word. They can be a great link to families who might not hear about your sessions otherwise.
2. **Keep things flexible:** Not every child learns the same way, so try to loosen strict rules, let them go at their own pace, and celebrate small wins along the way.
3. **Make it clear that everyone's welcome:** Use friendly, inclusive language, real photos of diverse young people, and a warm, open invitation that makes it easy for families to say 'yes'.

Try this:

Think of one group that isn't attending your sessions yet and take a small step to change that. Maybe it's running a free taster session, switching up how you promote your activities, or making small adjustments to help more children feel comfortable. Even little changes can help more young people feel like they belong.

Develop your skills

Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment goes beyond just adapting sessions - it's about making sure every young person feels safe, respected, and supported. UK Coaching's Duty to Care Hub offers useful guidance and training to help coaches build knowledge in areas like safeguarding, inclusion, and mental health, to deliver sessions that are a positive space for everyone.

https://www.ukcoaching.org/duty-to-care

Looking for ways to make your sessions more inclusive?

If you're unsure how to reach more young people, adapt sessions for different needs, or create a space where everyone feels welcome, you're not alone! The Active Sussex team is here to help. Get in touch – we're always here to help: **activesussex.org/contact**