

AUTISM & KARATE

Practical guidance for clubs and instructors



A culturally inclusive club does not need to know everything about every community. It needs to listen, remove avoidable barriers and make belonging visible.

Insight

No one-size fits all

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference. Every autistic person has their own strengths, communication style, sensory profile and support needs.

Karate can work well for some autistic people because it can offer clear routines, repetition, visual demonstration and individual progression.

Karate-specific research contributed to the EKF also highlighted fitness, self-defence, friendship, structure and routine as reasons autistic children and their parents valued karate.

Do not coach the diagnosis. Get to know the karateka.

NHS, National Autistic Society, Access Sport | Karate research: Sensei Goodbarn, Northumbria University

Barriers

- **Unclear instructions**
Long explanations, figurative language or several instructions at once can make it harder to understand what is being asked.
- **Not enough processing time**
Some people need longer to process spoken information. Repeating or rephrasing too quickly can add more information, not clarity.
- **Unexpected change**
A different coach, room, partner, activity or session order can create uncertainty if the change is not explained.
- **Sensory load**
Noise, lighting, smells, heat, crowding, clothing or touch may be distracting, uncomfortable or overwhelming.
- **Contact and partner work**
Physical contact, rapid partner changes or unpredictable movement may need clearer explanation or a more gradual introduction.
- **Assumptions about behaviour**
Eye contact, movement, stimming, facial expression or tone should not automatically be treated as disrespect, inattention or poor attitude.

ASK THIS INSTEAD

“What helps this karateka learn, take part and feel comfortable here?”

FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE

Use these prompts as a starting point. The right response will always depend on the individual and the activity.

Breaking down barriers

Ask what works

Speak to the karateka. For children or people who want support, parents or carers can add useful information without speaking over the individual.

Keep communication clear

Use concise, direct language. Give one instruction at a time where helpful and avoid relying on metaphor, sarcasm or implied meaning.

Show as well as tell

Demonstrate techniques, use floor markers or a simple visual session plan where useful. Do not assume every autistic person learns visually.

Give processing time

Pause after an instruction. Avoid immediately filling the silence with more words. Check understanding through the activity, not eye contact.

Make change predictable

Use a recognisable session structure and give advance notice of changes where possible. Explain what is changing and what will stay the same.

Adapt the environment

Consider noise, lighting, smells, crowding and touch. Allow safe sensory aids and introduce contact or partner work progressively where needed.

Put it into practice

“They are not looking at me when I explain.”

Do not demand eye contact. It is not a reliable measure of attention. Check understanding by asking them to show you the movement or seeing how they begin the task.

“The session plan changed at the last minute.”

Tell them as early as you can. Explain the new order and what will stay familiar. A quick written or visual sequence may help.

“They do not want partner contact.”

Ask what is difficult about it. Explain what contact the activity involves and consider a gradual introduction or reasonable alternative where it can be done safely.

“They seem overwhelmed and step away.”

Reduce demands and stimulation, give them space and use any agreed quiet option. Support them to return when ready rather than treating distress as bad behaviour.

Quick club check

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| ☐ We ask what helps the individual take part. | ☐ New members know what to expect before their first session. |
| ☐ Instructions are clear and not unnecessarily long. | ☐ Demonstrations or visual information are available where useful. |
| ☐ People are given time to process information. | ☐ Changes to routines are explained where possible. |
| ☐ Sensory needs and physical contact can be discussed openly. | ☐ We judge learning and safety, not eye contact or body language. |

If something is not working, change the environment or the delivery before assuming the karateka is the problem.

Further resources

Sport - guide for coaches and clubs

[Open >](#)

Neurodivergence Learning

[Open >](#)

Inclusive Club Resources

[Open >](#)

A Guide to Inclusion

[Open >](#)