



ADAPTIVE LACROSSE STARTER GUIDE





LACROSSE IS FOR EVERYONE

3 million

More than 3 million children in the U.S. have a disability

15% of students

15% of U.S. public school students receive special education services

<1% of students

Less than 1% of students participate in adaptive sport programs at schools

Source: [Aspen Institute Project Play](#)

Introduction

Everyone should have the opportunity to play lacrosse and feel included, accepted, and valued regardless of their ability or disability. Some athletes with disabilities can and do participate in “mainstream” lacrosse programs at all levels of play. For many others, it is beneficial to participate in a modified version of the game that is designed specifically for the inclusion, safety, and enjoyment of people with disabilities. This is Adaptive Lacrosse!

The purpose of this guidebook is to help local organizations start their own adaptive lacrosse programming. The strategies highlighted here have been gathered from leading disability sport organizations as well as experienced adaptive lacrosse coaches and program administrators.

Thank you for embracing the opportunity to make your community more accessible to players with disabilities! Please reach out to us if you have any questions about supporting a new or existing adaptive lacrosse program or player (email: adaptive@usalacrosse.com).

Sincerely,
USA Lacrosse

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE LACROSSE?

Definition

Adaptive Lacrosse is any format of lacrosse that is designed for athletes with disabilities.

Who Can Participate?

Any player with a disability that prevents them from playing typical or “mainstream” formats of lacrosse can participate in an adaptive lacrosse program with appropriate support.

Can Family and Friends Play?

Yes! Family, friends, and peer players without disabilities may participate in some formats of adaptive lacrosse as adaptive teammates. Teammates provide support and may assist adaptive players in skills like scooping, throwing, and catching—but only as needed.

What Equipment Do I Need?

You just need a lacrosse stick and a soft practice ball or tennis ball. Stick checking and body checking are typically not allowed, and protective equipment is not required. (Note: full men’s lacrosse protective equipment is currently required for wheelchair lacrosse competitions that allow checking).

What Rules are Followed for Games?

The [Flex6 Lacrosse](#) Rules and Guidelines may be used as the basis for an adaptive lacrosse game—with the understanding that flexibility and adaptability are key elements of all types of programming. USA Lacrosse has also collaborated with wheelchair lacrosse leaders to develop rules specifically for the wheelchair game.

How Do I Get Involved?

This guidebook offers a framework for developing and delivering an adaptive lacrosse program. If you are interested in supporting a new or existing adaptive lacrosse program in your community, please send an email to: adaptive@usalacrosse.com

FORMATS

There are several different ways for people with disabilities to play lacrosse. Choosing the best format often depends on a combination of disability type, level of impairment, and personal preference.

Inclusive Lacrosse

Inclusive Lacrosse is designed to include players with a wide variety of disabilities. Any athlete with a disability may participate with appropriate support. Inclusive Lacrosse is often played in a station-based clinic format on natural grass, synthetic turf, or basketball court depending on the accessibility needs of the players.

Unified Lacrosse

Unified Lacrosse is designed to allow players with and without disabilities to play together on the same teams. Unified Lacrosse is often played by neurodivergent players and players with other cognitive or developmental disabilities in a station-based clinic or small-sided game format.

Wheelchair Lacrosse

Wheelchair Lacrosse is designed for players with disabilities that affect their mobility. Games are played 7v7 on a solid surface roller hockey rink using a no-bounce lacrosse ball and box lacrosse goals. A non-contact 3v3 version may also be played on a basketball court. Teams are often mixed gender and mixed ability. The same sport wheelchairs that are used for wheelchair basketball may also be used for wheelchair lacrosse.

Impairment-Specific Formats

Impairment-specific formats are designed to allow players with similar disabilities to play alongside and against each other. Some examples of impairment-specific formats include programs for athletes with amputations/limb differences, vision impairments, and hearing impairments.

Mainstream Formats

Players with disabilities may also participate in typical or “mainstream” formats of lacrosse at all levels of play. See [Mainstream Inclusion](#) for more info.

FINDING LOCAL PARTNERS

The first step to starting a successful adaptive lacrosse program is to develop partnerships with the people and organizations who are already serving athletes with disabilities in your area. Consider reaching out to the following community partners for support:

Adaptive Sports Organizations

Organizations which already offer sports programming for athletes with disabilities are a great place to start. [Move United](#) and [Challenged Players Foundation](#) both offer a state-by-state listing of adaptive sports organizations.

Special Olympics

The Special Olympics were created specifically for athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities and offer over 30 individual and team sport options for all ability levels. Research your local Special Olympics chapter and reach out for support.

Parks and Recreation Departments

It is increasingly common for local Parks and Recreation Departments to offer programming for people with disabilities. These programs may offer accessible facilities, volunteers, and athletes. Try searching for “Therapeutic Recreation” or “Inclusive Recreation” programs near you.

Schools, Teachers, and Support Groups

The Special Education department within your local school district is another valuable resource for finding experienced volunteers and promoting your events to local students. Start with your personal network and then branch out to see what support groups exist in your community.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

One of the most important strategies for developing any adaptive sport program is to collaborate with, listen to, and learn directly from the local disability community. Collaboration with the following groups is often essential for gaining trust and removing barriers:

People with Disabilities

Consult with and include people with disabilities in all areas of the program.

Experienced Athletes

Engage experienced athletes with disabilities to serve as coaches, mentors, and role models.

Volunteers with a Background in Disability

Recruit volunteers who have a strong background in youth development and/or disability. Volunteers with experience in special education, adapted PE, occupational therapy, or physical therapy may all be good candidates.

Volunteers with a Background in Lacrosse

Recruit volunteers who have a strong background in lacrosse and are patient, flexible, and passionate about sharing the game with new players. Specialized training in disability is fantastic, but it is not required to get involved in adaptive lacrosse.

Parents of Youth with Disabilities

Host parent meetups to help families find resources and connect with other members of their community. Recognize that some caregivers may be hesitant to enroll their child in sports due to fear of injury or exclusion and try to address those concerns upfront.

Local Teams and Leagues

Organize events or scrimmages with local youth, high school, or college lacrosse programs so that they can share the experience of inclusion.

KEYS TO ACCESSIBILITY

When designing an adaptive lacrosse program, it is important to thoughtfully consider and communicate each of the following factors:

Field or Court Surface

Explore different playing surfaces. Solid surfaces (such as a basketball or tennis court) tend to be more accessible and inclusive of various disabilities.

Accessibility of Facilities

Investigate whether the facility has accessible entryways, elevators, restrooms, and parking lots before hosting an event in a new location.

Equipment Availability

Provide clear instructions about whether any specialized equipment such as lacrosse sticks or sport wheelchairs will be provided at each session.

Transportation Options

Consider how players and their families will travel to and from your session, including proximity to public transportation and major roadways.

Level of Challenge

Let participants know ahead of time if the session will be tailored to beginner, intermediate, or advanced players, and whether new players are welcome.

Relevant Coach Qualifications

List the relevant certifications and experiences of your coaches and volunteers to build trust and confidence in your program.

Safety Considerations

Disclose any risks or safety concerns, including whether stick checking and body checking will be allowed and what equipment will be required.

MAINSTREAM INCLUSION

Athletes with disabilities can and do participate in typical or “mainstream” formats of lacrosse at all levels of play—from youth to the pros. Anyone with the desire and ability to play a mainstream format of lacrosse with reasonable accommodations should be allowed to do so.

What's the Policy?

In the United States, school districts must provide an equal opportunity for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular sports. At a minimum, schools must try to determine if modifications or adaptations would allow an individual student to participate alongside their non-disabled peers. See here for more info: [Students with Disabilities in Extracurricular Athletics](#)

Accommodate or Create

Importantly, these guidelines do not require schools or other organizations to change essential elements of the sport, give students with disabilities an unfair advantage, or compromise safety in any way. Students with disabilities still need to qualify and compete with everyone else to earn their place on a team. Some examples of reasonable accommodation may include:

- Utilizing an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, printed collateral, and hand signals to assist a player with a hearing impairment.
- Allowing a player with an amputation or limb difference to play with modified protective equipment that does not compromise safety.
- Providing glucose testing and insulin administration to a player with diabetes.

In some cases, students with certain disabilities may not be safely included in existing sport programs. If reasonable accommodations cannot be made, then school districts may create new adaptive sport programs specifically for disabled students. For example:

- **Inclusive Lacrosse:** programming hosted in an accessible space that offers station-based skills or small-sided games for players with a wide variety of disabilities.
- **Unified Lacrosse:** programming that allows students with cognitive or developmental disabilities to play alongside non-disabled students as teammates.
- **Wheelchair Lacrosse:** programming that combines eligible students from several different school districts into one regional wheelchair lacrosse team.