



ACEing Autism
VOLUNTEER
MANUAL

“

Connecting kids
through tennis”



INTRODUCTION

Welcome, ACEing Autism Volunteer!

We are very excited to welcome you to the ACEing Autism team. It is volunteers like you that keep our program running and provide such an invaluable experience for our participants. We thank you for your interest in ACEing Autism, and we hope that you will have a lot of fun in your time with us. This manual covers the steps that you need to get started with us, outlines what you can expect during the session, and also provides you with valuable information about working with our participants.

ON-BOARDING AND TRAINING CHECKLIST

ONCE YOU HAVE DECIDED TO JOIN OUR TEAM AS A VOLUNTEER, THERE ARE A FEW VERY IMPORTANT STEPS THAT WILL HELP YOU GET STARTED.

- **Registration:** First and most importantly, please make sure to register online. This is an essential step for each and every one of our volunteers. Please visit our website's "**Volunteer**" page to learn more, and follow the link to complete your registration.
 - www.aceingautism.org/volunteer/

- **Background Check:** Once we have received your registration, we will send you a link to a background check. Since we are a program which serves children, the safety of our participants is of great importance. For this reason, we ask all incoming volunteers ages 18 and older to complete a basic background check as soon as they have registered with us. This process takes about 10 to 15 minutes, involves no cost to you, and the information you provide will not be shared with anyone outside of the firm which conducts the check. Results are usually returned to us within 3 to 10 business days. Please note that per our policies and state laws, volunteers cannot step on to the court with us until the background check is complete.

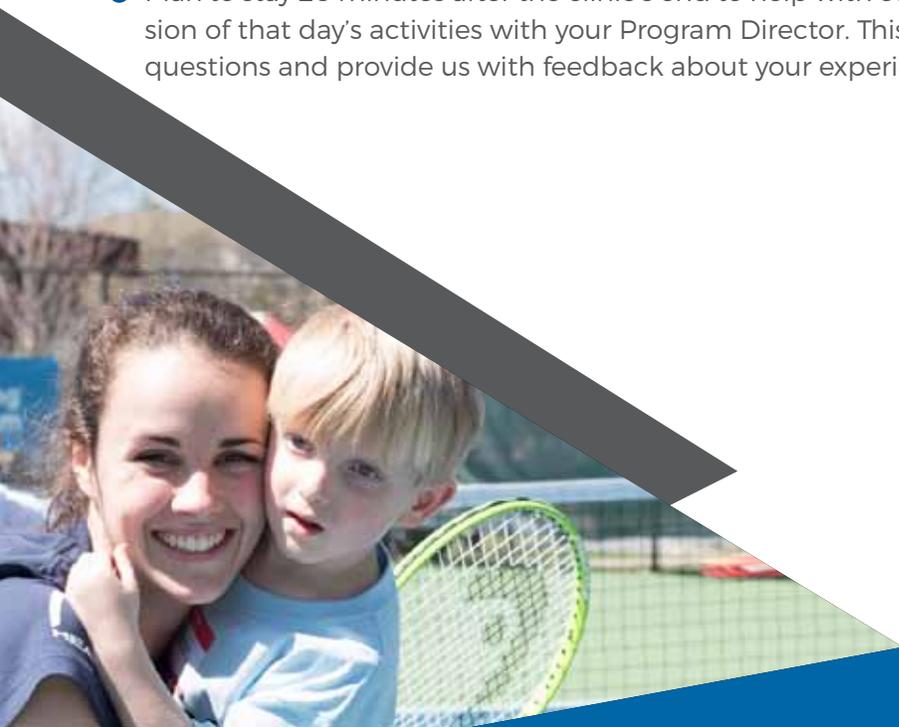
When your background check is returned to us, our Home Office will send you confirmation. Once completed, your registration and background check are good for two years. If you decide to continue with a second session, please let your Program Director know that you have previously completed both the registration and the background check, and they will verify this with the Home Office.

- **Orientation:** First, please read the curriculum and watch the corresponding online videos to see what our clinic looks like. A volunteer training session will be held prior to the first session date and will familiarize you with our mission and the curriculum. At this time, you will also receive your ACEing Autism t-shirt, which we ask you to wear at every session. You will also have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have for your Program Director or our staff.
- **Connect With Us!** Be sure to "like" our Facebook page and follow us on Instagram and Twitter for news, updates, and stories from the ACEing Autism community.

VOLUNTEERING With ACEing Autism

Once you have completed our registration, cleared a background check (if over 18), watched the online videos, and completed the training session, you are ready to begin volunteering with us. The following will help you to understand how your session will run and what to expect.

- Please plan to arrive 20 minutes prior to the start of each clinic to help with equipment set-up, and for your Program Director's briefing on that day's game plan.
- It is very important that you always follow your Program Director's instructions.
- During the clinic, be sure to engage with your assigned participant and interact with parents when possible before and after the clinic and, as needed, during the clinic. We try to pair a volunteer with the same participant each week to foster a connection. This familiarity is comforting for our participants and helps with relationship-building. Make sure to introduce yourself by name each week, or if you are working with the same participant as in the previous clinic, remind him or her of your name. Always reinforce good social skills! If the parents at your program observe from nearby, make sure they know your name at the beginning of each clinic as well. There is a good chance that the child will look at his or her parent or go to the parent during the clinic, and it is helpful for the parent to be able to redirect them back to you using your name.
- Safety is always our first priority, so be aware of your safety and that of our participants at all times. This includes being mindful of balls rolling by the feet of participants, people standing in close proximity, racquets being swung wildly, people standing in the line where a ball could be hit, and participants trying to leave the court.
- During the session, we ask that you please refrain from using your cell phone.
- When the clinic has ended, please walk your participant to his/her parents. This gives you an opportunity to engage in discussion and connect with our families.
- Plan to stay 20 minutes after the clinic's end to help with equipment storage and participate in a discussion of that day's activities with your Program Director. This will also give you the opportunity to ask any questions and provide us with feedback about your experience on the court.



WHAT TO REMEMBER WHEN WORKING WITH OUR PARTICIPANTS

All of our participants are different, and have unique abilities, skills, and challenges. The majority of participants that join our program have never played tennis before. Some participants will learn tennis skills with ease, whereas others will require much more time and there will be a slow progression to their learning. It is always okay to work at the participant's pace in order to help the participants be successful. Conversely, you may be tempted to "go easy" on the participants, but some may respond better to more structure and higher expectations. Parents should be able to give you a sense of what works best for their participant. It will definitely not be the same for each participant.

In addition to taking advantage of the adaptive tennis equipment we have, volunteers are responsible for teaching that week's activities and skills to the participants they are working alongside. Stand next to them and model a stroke, or stand with them and give short, clear directions. While some of the participants may want more space, others might prefer you to stand behind them and practice swings with them. Do not be afraid to be hands-on; most of the participants, especially the younger age group, need help practicing the motions and motor skills it takes to hold a racquet or hit a ball before they are able to do it on their own. It is important to be receptive to the participant with whom you are working. Do not be afraid to ask for advice from your Program Director, or the participant's parent.

Remember to give a lot of positive reinforcement to our participants. Let them know when they are in the correct "ready position," kept their eyes on the ball, or hit a good shot, for example. Since one of the major goals of our program is to encourage social interaction, look for natural opportunities that may present themselves. For example, if you are in close proximity to other participants, have them high five and cheer for each other when someone does something great. "Josh ... Miles hit a great shot, give him a high five!"

Be mindful to gently reinforce skills such as waiting, eye contact, taking turns, sharing, and good listening. This can be as simple as "Josh ... great job looking at the ball!" or "Sara ... nice job waiting for Jaden to finish!" If your assigned participant is having trouble waiting their turn, feel free to keep them engaged in a physical activity such as jumping jacks, toe touches, stretching, etc.

Consistency is absolutely critical. Be mindful to set the same expectations each time. Most of our participants thrive on a consistent structure and routine. Please follow our 9 step curriculum every time!

Remember to be patient, as it can take time to learn about what works best for each child. If you are mindful to work together as a team with your Program Director, fellow volunteers, and the participants, your experience and theirs will be tremendously rewarding. Stay excited, be enthusiastic, and have fun!

ENGAGING WITH PARTICIPANTS

Retaining quality volunteers and expressing our gratitude for their time and good work are very important to us at ACEing Autism. We feel that one of the most rewarding things we can offer you, as a volunteer, is a sense of personal investment in and relationship with our participants. Here are a few strategies we suggest to help foster this connection:

- Throughout the session, we will assign you with a specific participant. An index card with important information about the participant will be provided so that you may familiarize yourself with the participant's abilities, likes, and dislikes. This will not only foster a relationship, empower you as a volunteer, and contribute positively to your experience, but it will also benefit our participants. Working with the same volunteer for the duration of the session provides valuable familiarity and routine to our participants
- Get to know your participant by discovering his/her hobbies and interests. Help build their self-esteem and make sure to have fun with them too!

INTERACTING WITH PARENTS

If you have not yet met them, we encourage you to introduce yourself to participants and their parents once they arrive. It is very important to establish clear communication and a good relationship with parents, and very important that they know your name. Parents will be able to share what areas their child is strong in, what motivates them, what upsets them, what triggers discomfort or bad behavior, and their own behavioral strategies in working with their children.

Many of the children in our program may not have the expressive language to be able to report back to their parents about what happens in a clinic, so many parents will not know of a success or challenge unless you tell them directly.

Parents love to take photos at our clinics, but getting good photos can be difficult, as they are usually not on the court and they do not want to intrude. If you have enough volunteers on hand, it is a great idea to designate one person to take photos each week and email them to parents. It can also be helpful to write what the participant did well that week and that you are looking forward to seeing them in the next clinic.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What are some things I can do to make the program a success?

A. The best thing to do is to keep an open mind and stay engaged. Ideally, the atmosphere on court should be fun, light, and energetic. If you are having fun, our participants will pick up on that, and they will enjoy themselves all the more. Always remember to communicate with the participant and his/her parents after each clinic. This will allow for you to establish rapport and adapt the session to the needs of the participant. Lastly, if you follow the curriculum and the direction of your Program Director, the program will be a success for all involved.

Q: What do I need to be mindful of in helping to ensure everyone's safety?

A. Always monitor the space between participants as they are practicing their swings, and be mindful of their aim so that no one gets hit in their follow-through or with a tennis ball. Always be sure to close the gate when entering or leaving the court (bolting). Also, because some of our participants tire more easily than others, please encourage rest or water breaks in between activities if you feel they are needed. Keep in mind that for some participants, it is hard to get their attention back after a break, so try to use them only as necessary. If you feel that you are working with too many participants for you to safely keep track of, please let your Program Director know.

Q: How should I use my time on the court between activities?

A. If you have not received specific instructions from your Program Director, you can use the time in between drills and activities in a few constructive ways:

- As participants are picking up tennis balls, try to target their fine motor skill development. Challenge them to see how many tennis balls they can balance on their racquet before walking them to the hopper.
- During breaks, some volunteers can begin setting up the materials for the next activity while others are interacting with the participants.
- Keep participants engaged by social interaction, attention, direction and keeping them on task.



Q: Can I volunteer if I don't have much tennis experience?

A. Absolutely! Our initial training will cover the tennis skills needed and in this case we pair the volunteers with tennis experience with those who have less tennis knowledge. Here are a few basics for you to reference throughout the session:

- Keep the participants busy and engaged as much as possible. Be energetic and animated! If the participant wants to run around for a little, that is fine. Try to get them to come back around to the schedule as best you can.
- Focus on the **“ready position”** before feeding the ball:
 - Stand on designated place markers
 - Facing the net for volleys, sideways for groundstrokes
 - Racquet up
 - And most importantly, eyes on the ball!
- When feeding a ball, always use an underhand toss. Over time, you will learn which participants can handle a more difficult feed either with increased distance or feeding with a racquet.
- Become familiar with the following tennis terms (see online videos for more information):
 - Ball toss/feed (underhand): If you do not have good accuracy, this would be a great skill for you to practice prior to feeding balls in a session. The accuracy of the feed can be a huge determinant of the participant's success.
 - Volley: A shot close to the net in which the ball is blocked (no swing) before it bounces.
 - Groundstroke: A forehand or backhand shot that is executed after the ball bounces once on the court.
 - Drop Hit: The participant drops the ball slightly in front then hits ball with forehand groundstroke.
 - Serve: Toss the ball above your head (with non-dominant hand) and swing upward and outward toward target (with dominant hand).
- To orient yourself, please refer to the Lines of the Court Diagram (See Appendix)

Q: I have little to no experience working with children with autism. What are some more detailed guidelines I can implement to help me be successful?

A. Here are some good practices to keep in mind:

- **Structure and routine** are very important for people with ASD. Having a clear and consistent sequence of activities each week will help participants gain familiarity and comfort. Our curriculum has been designed for this purpose.
- **Processing delays** are very common. Children with autism often present with delays in expressive and receptive language. Be patient!
- **Lead with the child's name** when attempting to gain their attention. Saying their name first and giving a 2 or 3 second buffer helps them to recognize that you are specifically speaking to them.
- **Try to gauge the participants' expressive/receptive language skills** in the first week or two. If they appear to be confused, or are having difficulty following complex instructions or two-step commands, then limit the amount of language you are using. A child with deficits in receptive language paired with a lot of verbal instruction can create confusion and frustration. However, do not assume that because a child has limited ability to speak, that he or she has similarly limited ability to understand. Very often, a child with ASD who cannot speak may be able to understand at a higher level than a child who can speak, and vice versa. Make sure to communicate with the parents. They are a great resource in knowing the best methods to connecting with the child.
- Many people with autism pick up a lot of context based on the **speaker's tone**. Vocal tone can be very helpful for students with receptive language delays in terms of recognizing when instructions are being given, and when they are being praised for a great shot. Use an upbeat tone of voice when reinforcing, and a neutral tone when giving instruction. If you react with too much excitement when the participant does not achieve the desired outcome (swings and misses), you may be inadvertently reinforcing the idea that you want them to swing and miss. A neutral tone would work better in this situation.
- When possible, **explain** the number of balls that are going to be hit. "Four more, three more."
- **Be clear** about what the activity is and what comes next. "First we do volleys, then we get water." When speaking with participants try to position yourself in their line of sight; lower yourself to their height, to naturally establish eye contact.
- **Recognize the participants' areas of strength** and work on developing those before their deficits. An uneven learning profile (very strong in some areas but very weak in other) is often associated with ASD. Parents are a great resource for helping to identify these.
- **Communicate with parents early and often!** They know their child best and will be able to share strategies, reinforcers, and rewarding techniques that they use at home, which can be utilized on the tennis court.
- When working with participants, think "**least intrusive but most effective.**"
- Children on the spectrum tend to be concrete/tactile learners, so **physical prompting** may be more beneficial than verbal explanation.



- Remember that **sensory processing disorders** are often associated with ASD. Severe sensory processing deficits can lead to a mixing of visual, auditory and other senses, especially when tired or upset. These deficits range in severity and can manifest themselves in a multitude of ways, including but not limited to:

- Touch: Be aware of how a child responds to touch. In some, the nervous system does not have time to process the sensation and they withdraw at first
- Auditory: Keep an eye out for participants' reactions to sudden and unpredictable noises. Some will have difficulty screening out background noise, or when two people are talking at once. People with ASD often have hearing that is similar to a microphone picking up everything with equal intensity, as opposed to typical hearing, which picks up sounds in a more focused and directional way.
- Visual: Many people with autism have depth perception challenges. This can be difficult to detect. An indication of this may be if the participant has a difficult time watching the ball flying at them.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

As always, please let us know any feedback, ideas, successes, or challenges you may have during your time with us, and how we may support you. Establish a method that works for you to check in each week with your Program Director, in order to communicate to him or her how your experience is progressing, and what you may need. If you have any questions, concerns, or feedback that your Program Director cannot address, please feel free to reach out to our staff at ACEing Autism's Home Office. We would love to hear from you. The Programs Coordinator in our Home Office will be your best point of contact. You can reach them at 310.401.0544. Our Home Office is located at 9064 Nemo Street, Los Angeles, CA, 90069.

We hope that you will find your time with us to be rewarding, educational, and fun. We hope that after participating in ACEing Autism, our volunteers will:

- Appreciate the challenges faced by a child with ASD and his or her family, while simultaneously celebrating their strengths, and become an advocate for children with ASD within their communities.
- Serve as a role model to our participants, and help them to foster social relationships.
- Learn how to communicate effectively and problem-solve by working with children with a range of skills and challenges.

Please consider sharing your experience by submitting an essay or article for our "Volunteers" section of our website. Please send to info@aceingautism.org.

Thank you for your time and your contribution to ACEing Autism.

Welcome to the team!



ACEing
Autism

TEEN
CAMP

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Our mission is to connect children with autism through unique tennis programs, and to develop and advance proven methods to positively impact the children, families and communities we serve.



Contact Us

aceingautism.org



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