



ACEing Autism

FirstServe:Community Programs





Dear Future Program Director,

Thank you for your interest in bringing ACEing Autism to your community! The following information will familiarize you with our organization and outline the process of launching a new ACEing Autism program location.

Our History

In 2008, ACEing Autism was founded by Richard Spurling, a tennis professional with an MBA in entrepreneurship, and Dr. Shafali Jeste, a pediatric neurologist. They saw an opportunity to help address the lack of quality recreational programs available to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ACEing Autism was founded with the mission to make the sport of tennis accessible to children with ASD. Their goal was to use tennis as a means to enhance health and fitness, hand-eye coordination, motor development, and social skills of children with autism, while ensuring that each child has fun in the process. They enlisted the help of autism professionals, tennis enthusiasts, and parents of children with ASD to form the foundation of the organization. The first program began with Richard working one-on-one with just a handful of Shafali's patients. By the fall of 2009, ACEing Autism had grown to serve over 100 families at two locations in the greater Boston area. In early 2010, Shafali accepted a position at the Center for Autism Treatment (CART) at UCLA and Richard began building the program in Los Angeles. Since that time, the program has continued to expand. As of 2024, there are 145+ ACEing Autism programs running nationwide.

OUR MISSION

ACEing Autism is on a mission to help individuals with autism to grow, develop, and benefit from social connections and fitness through affordable tennis programming, uniquely meeting individual needs while filling a national void for this growing and underserved population.

OUR VISION

ACEing Autism aims to be the preeminent thought leader on how tennis and sport develop individuals with autism spectrum disorder by reaching 50% of the 1M+ families in the autism community and helping them become aware of ACEing Autism and impact a greater percentage of the population reached with ACEing's unique programming.



Section 1

Role Description

Lead Contacts:

Justin Belisario
Director of Program Operations

Caitlin Shoemaker
Program Manager

Rachel Miskei
Program Manager

The Role of Program Directors

The Program Director Team is responsible for running a successful weekly tennis program using the ACEing Autism curriculum, volunteer and participant recruitment, as well as finding a location for the clinics. They are in charge of delegating and orchestrating the following components: leading volunteers and participants on-court, setting the schedule, and communicating with parents, volunteers, and the ACEing Autism National Team. Oftentimes, Program Directors have an interest in tennis, experience with autism, or both.

Time Commitment & Requirements

Session Planning & Maintenance

Launching a new program typically requires 3-6 months of planning. ACEing Autism has limited capacity to launch new programs each season, and prioritizes opportunities where the location, leadership team, and community needs align best.

The responsibilities of a Program Director require a time commitment of roughly 5-10 hours per week during and leading up to the session, and <1 hour per week in the off-seasons.

Because of the leadership skills, dedication, and responsibilities required for this role, it is recommended that the Program Director Team consists of a **minimum of two individuals**.

We ask new Program Directors to make a minimum of a two-year commitment, consisting of at least two sessions per year. Each session should last 6-8 weeks and each clinic day should run for 2 hours total, with athletes participating in one of the hourlong clinics.

Additional Requirements

- Those wanting to launch a program in their community are required to volunteer at an existing program location for **at least one full session** prior to starting the launch process. This will provide an opportunity to see how our programs are run, gain important experience working with our participants, and allow you to meet other Program Directors.
 - If there is not an existing program within 40 miles of you, we can make an exception to this requirement.
- At least one Program Director must complete the USTA Safeplay Certification to ensure safety of all participants and volunteers.
- *High School students are required to have at least one [Adult Advisor](#) in order to serve as a Program Director.*

Program Director Launch Responsibilities:

- Securing a venue
- Promoting the program
- Enlisting participants and volunteers
- Devising a long-term strategy for its sustainability

ACEing Autism Support Provided

- ACEing Autism Curriculum, which includes instructions on how to effectively run each clinic of the session, modifications for activities, and strategies for dealing with challenging behaviors and situations.
- Equipment, shirts, and other necessary program supplies.
- Access & training to use participant and volunteer registration systems.
- Materials and support for admin, marketing, and fundraising.
- Virtual training leading up to launch & ongoing check-in opportunities.
- In-Person training on launch day & visits every 1-2 years from Regional Program Directors to provide additional support and guidance.

General Program Information

Program Cost

Our goal is to maintain affordability for our families. The majority of our programs are priced at to \$20 per clinic, with variations based on court rental fees. ACEing Autism also provides program scholarships for families in need of financial support.

Insurance

All ACEing Autism programs are covered by a USTA general liability insurance policy. The policy covers commercial general liability on damages to rented property and personal injury. Copies of the ACEing Autism insurance policy can be provided to the host location of your program.





Section 2

Program Launch Logistics

Lead Contacts:

Justin Belisario
Director of Program Operations
Caitlin Shoemaker
Program Manager
Rachel Miskei
Program Manager

Finding a Location for Your Program

The first step to launching an ACEing Autism program is to establish a convenient, universally accessible location. This venue must be willing to accommodate our program, which meets once per week, typically on weekends, for 1-2 hours to start.

The process for securing courts can vary depending on the venue, but be sure to obtain approval and any necessary paperwork that identifies the dates and times that you will be using each court. In most locations, your first step will be to meet with the Director of Tennis or a Tennis Pro. While researching potential locations, keep in mind that we strive to keep costs low for our families, and court fees directly affect the total session fee. Many locations will donate court time to ACEing Autism, or offer us court time at a reduced rate given our nonprofit status.

Additional Factors to Consider:

- A hard-court surface is more practical than a clay court.
- Is it convenient for you, parents, and volunteers (i.e. close to public transportation, etc.)?
- Is there space for parents/caretakers to watch?
- Are the courts secure and safe enough for a children's program?
- Are there restrooms accessible and nearby?
- Is there parking convenient to the location?
- Our program can be large and sometimes noisy; will it be disruptive to others playing nearby?
- Are the courts located in a relatively quiet and distraction-free environment?

The following are suggestions for host locations:

- K-12 Schools and Universities
- Country Clubs / Tennis Clubs
- Public Tennis Courts

Determining Your Program Time & Dates

The ACEing Autism program must be offered at the same time and on the same day each week. Consistency is key, especially for families with autism. Our goal is that our weekly tennis program will become a part of the family's routine. Most children with autism have other therapeutic services during the week, leaving the weekend as their best option for a recreational program like ours.

You should aim to host your program during the mid-morning or afternoon hours. To start, our clinics run for 2 hours with 10 participants in each hourlong clinic, spanning ages 5-18+ years old. As the program grows, we can offer more clinic times and break up groups by age or ability. Most of our programs run for 6-8 weeks during the fall and spring seasons, with a few running in the winter and summer. The dates and times that you host your program will largely depend on your availability as Program Directors, as well as court availability at your desired venue.

Additional factors to consider:

- Weather
- Typical Holidays/Vacation Seasons
- Local School Schedules

Marketing a New Program

Once you have confirmed your location, the next step is getting participants to register! The latest CDC report shows that about 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with autism. While there is a huge demand for play-based programs such as ACEing Autism, it is the collaborative responsibility of the local Program Directors and ACEing National Office to help market the program and reach those in your community that will benefit from our program.

To recruit participants, we recommend that you reach out to the following:

- Programs/Organizations serving the autism community:
 - Therapists (ABA, Speech, OT, PT, etc.)
 - Pediatricians
 - Other adaptive recreation programs
 - Autism organizations
- Schools
- Connecting with the autism parent community
- Your Network (word of mouth is very powerful!)

Recruiting & Training Volunteers

It is essential to have an adequate number of volunteers on the court each week to support the various needs of your athletes. The recommended volunteer to athlete ratio is 2 to 1. Most of our programs serve 10-15 participants, which requires a total of 15 to 25 energetic and committed volunteers.

Volunteer Roles: Depending on the volunteer to athlete ratio each week, there are different roles a volunteer can take on. Some volunteers can expect to work one-on-one with an athlete, feeding balls, setting up/tearing down activities, leading a court, talking to parents, taking photos, and working together to create a happy, relaxed, and engaged environment. **Experience is helpful, but not required.**

We provide volunteer orientation, a training manual, and online video resources to help volunteers prepare for their role. Having some volunteers who play tennis is a helpful resource, as they know what the strokes and activities of the program look like, and can successfully model these skills for others. Likewise, having volunteers with autism experience can help higher support needs athletes.

To recruit volunteers, we recommend that you reach out to the following:

- College/Universities
- High Schools
- Tennis Teams/Clubs
- USTA
- Your Network (again, word is mouth is very powerful!)

Volunteer Registration Process: To help manage your volunteers qualifications and availability, each volunteer will create an account through our volunteer registration system. All volunteers will be asked to complete a Liability Waiver and Photography Waiver prior to joining us on court. Volunteers 18 years or older will also be asked to complete a background check, at no cost to them. After these steps, volunteers should sign up for clinic dates through your program's session opportunity listings. Volunteers are representatives of our organization, and we strive to create a safe and welcoming environment for all. Completing these requirements helps to ensure we are able to do just that.

Communication

As a Program Director, it is expected that you communicate weekly with your community of families and volunteers. We provide an ACEing Autism email address for your team to utilize for program communication purposes, which will also serve as your login for our registration systems. Supplemental modes of communication (text, phone calls, group chats, etc.) are welcome depending on what works best for your community.

It is important that you take the time to develop relationships and proactively communicate with parents and volunteers. Keep an open mind about new ideas for the program, and always ask for feedback from the parents about how to work with the participants. Feel free to contact the national office if you require assistance. We value both positive and constructive feedback, as it helps us to enhance our program delivery and fulfill reasonable expectations. Nothing can replace a face-to-face conversation with a parent. Whenever possible, please choose this form of communication before a phone call or email. Parents are our greatest resource when learning about each child's interests, behaviors, challenges, preferences, etc. The more questions you ask the parents about their children, the better prepared you will be for working with each child. It is good practice to send a weekly email summarizing the previous week's program and outlining the upcoming week's activities to parents and volunteers. As always, please stay in close contact with the national office about your successes, challenges, and anything we may do to support you.

Next Steps

Want to get started with launching a new program in your community? Complete these next steps!

1. **Volunteer**
 - a. No location within 40 miles? Or already completed? Continue to Step 2.
2. **Determine Program Director Team**
 - a. 2+ individuals committed to leading.
 - b. Adult Advisor required for high school students.
3. **Explore Community Engagement & Needs**
 - a. What are potential venues? Who are potential volunteers? Where can I recruit athletes?
4. **Complete our [Program Director Application](#)**

The ACEing Autism team strategically prioritizes and reviews Program Director Applications on a monthly basis, and will reach out to schedule an introductory meeting should we decide to move forward at that time.

CONTACT US

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Thank you for your interest and support in
ACEing Autism!

