



**SISAAP**  
Sport for Increasing Socialisation  
and Abilities of Autistic People

## The beginners guide on Sport on the Spectrum

Steps in developing a sports program for people with autism



Project led by:



with the collaboration of:



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## **Attribution, acknowledgement, and recognition**

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## 1. Introduction

Sport is one of ever present parts of our everyday lives. People all over Europe participate in sport activities, watch sports, use it as a way of connecting to their friends and to stay healthy. In the past decade the EU has also recognized the benefits of sports on health, economy and development of communities all over Europe. On the personal level it is easy to find people in every community that will proclaim how sports has been a pivotal part of their lives and how it contributed to their physical and mental development, connecting with their peers making them a better person in general.

With all this in mind it is easy to see how the community of people with autism has to be included in sport activities and needs to benefit from all the things that sports bring to the general public. Apart from the well known benefits of sport activities there is also a very valuable aspect of inclusion in communication that can be used in better understanding of autism in the general public and opening the doors for people with autism into the everyday lives of our communities.

Taking all this into account we come to the goal of this guide you are reading. A group of professionals from the fields of autism, sports, organisational development and innovative practises from three EU member countries has joined together on a Sport for Increasing Socialisation and Abilities of Autistic People - SISAAP project. This was a framework for developing a guide for developing sports activities for people with autism. The project has been funded by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ programme.

This guide/handbook has been developed with an intention to provide an easy to use tool that can be a starting point for developing sports programs, showing some important steps and factors in this journey. In two years that this resource was developed we met to discuss our experiences in this field and to exchange ideas and knowledge.

We hope that the reader will find the guide useful as much consideration was given to providing a resource that could be both used by a small group of volunteers as well as by a strong organisation that would like to open a new field of work.

Good luck and keep in mind that with both autism and sports you learn something new every day.

## 1.1 Structure of the handbook

The guide is structured into 4 parts:

**Part I - Introduction**, presents the Erasmus + project SISAAP, its goals and its main partners.

**Part II - Planning Sport & ASD Initiatives**, delves into the main areas and factors that need to be taken into account in order to design, organise, launch and manage effectively Sports Programs for people with ASD. The aim of this part is to provide organisations with solid knowledge about the foundations needed to start a Sport & ASD Initiative.

**Part III - Basic Competencies Framework**, explores the basic Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes needed by the different roles potentially involved in Sport & ASD Initiatives: from sports coaches and trainers to ASD educators and assistants, to volunteers and sport teammates.

**Part IV - Tips to start Sport & ASD initiatives**, proposes some useful tips based on the learnings gained throughout the project activities.



## 1.2 The SISAAP project

The SISAAP project – Sport for Increasing Socialisation and Abilities of Autistic People – aims to favour social inclusion and to ensure equal opportunities through sport for people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This disorder affects many children and adults and causes persistent deficits in social communications and social interactions. In Europe, there are only a few organisations promoting sports activities for people with ASD, and the majority are not sufficiently skilled to work with this target group who cannot simply be considered under any form of intellectual disability but require a specific organized approach.

The main objective of the SISAAP project is to bring together a European and complementary network of experts spanning the entire value chain for water sports in autism, including trainers and key actors dealing with ASD. This favours international mobility, the cross-sector and interdisciplinary cooperation, in order to exchange knowledge, working methods, skills and, as a consequence, the upskilling of people working within this field and the redesigning and update of their professional profiles. In this respect, the project provides a contribution to overcoming the lack of adequate training programmes for practitioners. Furthermore, findings that emerged within the three transnational meetings held in Croatia, Spain and Italy have been collected in a short video and in this mini-guide of sports opportunities for ASD people and the professional figures needed for their implementation. This mini-guide is a tool addressed to sports associations, coaches and trainers, alongside the families of ASD people, all to be shared at a transnational level.

The European added value of the SISAAP project is to foster the cooperation of relevant stakeholders through the exchange of good practices and the new and holistic forms of cooperation.

## 1.3 The partnership

### 1.3.1 The Coordinator

Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione (FTC) is a cooperative enterprise founded in 1895, based in Trento in the north of Italy. FTC groups together almost all the cooperative enterprises in the Trentino region (approx. 500), with 255.000 cooperative members (out of approx. 500.000 inhabitants). It provides assistance, consulting, supervision and auditing services in all business sectors and acts as a political representative giving support to the movement as a whole.

FTC is organized into 5 main sectors: agriculture, retail, credit, labour and services, social and housing. The social sector plays an important role in the economic and welfare field, counting about 56 social cooperatives employing about 800 people, with the contribution of thousands of volunteers assisting about 10.000 disadvantaged people. The social cooperatives provide support for care and assistance to people in difficult situations such as young people and adults who are going through social, personal and economic difficulties, individuals with psychiatric problems, the elderly, the disabled, and immigrants.

FTC is engaged through its social cooperatives with many years of experience in the field of social assistance and care work for people with intellectual disabilities. These cooperatives are active in the specific area of sports, providing physical activity and motor development designed to help people with disability acquire the skills and confidence needed to actively take part in sports, not only for recreation but also to create a culture of movement as a tool for training and transversal development. The physical activities provided are also used as means for increasing overall quality of life, helping to alleviate social exclusion of the weaker members of society by creating alternative support to the conventional methods offered, whilst also



providing educational activity, especially for younger people. These cooperatives, members of FIC, are also involved in research projects concerning sports, especially for those affected by ASD. They have links with many national organisations operating in the fields of sports and disability such as accredited organizations for the promotion of sports, sailing clubs for the disabled, sports federation for intellectually disabled people and the Paralympics Committee.

### 1.3.2 The Partners

#### 1.3.2.1 Autismo Sevilla

Autismo Sevilla is a non-profit organization founded in 1978 by a group of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis. Its mission is to improve the quality of life in people with ASD, and their families throughout the life cycle, offering specialized services guided from children to the adult stage.

Autismo Sevilla vision focuses on the commitment to a common project aimed at improving the quality of life, through responsible, ethical and excellence-guided management. The organization shares the strategic priorities defined by Autism Europe, that consider long term concerns about appropriate attention, education, the well-being of people with ASD, ageing, the lack of public support, care crisis and the role of the families and employment, following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities.

#### 1.3.2.2 Croatian union of Associations for autism (CUAA)

Croatian Union of Associations for Autism (CUAA) is a non-governmental organization that coordinates 12 member organizations all across Croatia with the same mission of improving the lives of children with autism and their families. With its member organizations, CUAA has around 2000 members but communicates with a wider public and helps parents all across Croatia. The mission of the CUAA is to improve care for people with autism in Croatia and support their parents and activists in their activities in the field of autism.

Croatian union of Associations for autism has a long history that goes back to 1979 when the first group of parents organized to improve care and system of support for their children with autism. CUAA regularly organizes education activities in Croatia on different topics connected with autism and has organized regular gatherings of representatives of member organizations from all over the country with the goal of exchanging good practices and developing new ideas.

The organization is recognized on national and European levels as a strong advocate for people with autism and their families and has developed over 30 different projects, programs and educational materials.

#### 1.3.2.3 Fundación Escuela Andaluza de Economía Social (FEAES)

Fundación Escuela Andaluza de Economía Social (FEAES) is a Private Not for Profit Foundation based in Andalusia (Spain) and constituted in 2002 by the Andalusian Confederation of Social Economy Organizations (CEPES) and the Federation of Work Co-operatives. FEAES has 20 years of experience in the area of training and development of social economy entrepreneurs, managers and professionals. FEAES organizes and delivers a variety of training and development programs aimed at the acquisition of the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to manage social organisations and social enterprises.

FEAES has professional competencies in the design of participative and dynamic activities that foster knowledge and experience interchange among professionals from different backgrounds, and in the systematization and sharing of the relevant information and knowledge emerged.

#### 1.3.2.4 Nuove Rotte (ANR)

The sport and social promotion association NuoveRotte (ANR) is a non-profit organization founded in 2009. ANR mission is to carry out activities of social value, for its members and third parties, in the sectors of sport, culture, education, tourism, social aggregation and solidarity with full respect of members' freedom and dignity. NuoveRotte operates in the province of Trento and it has about 20 members. ANR is a member of CONI – National Italian Olympic Committee. Therefore, it is formally authorized to promote and implement sports events.

So far, the association has organized inclusive sailing and inclusive mountain trekking (e.g. for 5 years, "Walk in progress" has created inclusive trekking in Trentino mountains, where volunteers, educators and people with cognitive disability spend some time together, outdoor, involved in an inclusive, accessible, activities; "Sailing Campus", an inclusive, sailing training, organized in partnership with Lo spirito di stella ONLUS, from 2012 to 2015). ANR has also organized projects aimed at raising awareness on the inclusion of disabled people (e.g. "Without obstacles: sport and disability workshop" organized in 2014 in collaboration with Arché – a social cooperative – and with the support of the Voluntary Service Center, INAIL and Trentino Alto Adige Region – the event combined a theoretical session, including a conference and a round table with experts and national para-athletes, and a practice one, in which various local associations were invited to show the various sport possibilities for people with disabilities). Moreover, the association has organized projects meant to raise awareness of environmental issues and active citizenship (e.g. "Arco a Ruota Libera" in 2017 worked on sustainable mobility, fixing old bicycles, creating a bike-sharing point (free for young people), sharing good practices during workshops; "Happening Park" in 2016 worked on urban spaces renewal, creating a community of people taking care of a city park in Arco, Trento).

Finally, ANR operates thanks to its volunteers' work. Among them, the founding members have competencies in the field of social inclusion of disabled people, management of non-profit organizations, communication, sports and education.

## **1.2 What is the purpose of the Guide/Catalogue?**

### **1.2.1 Objectives**

The objective of this guide is to understand the main areas and factors that need to be taken into account to design and start-up sports initiatives for people with ASD that are effective, consistent, participatory and sustainable for the community.

### **1.2.2. Target Public(s)**

- Associations and organisations willing to start sports initiatives for people with ASD in their local communities, that will find the fundamentals of how to design them and numerous examples and experiences to inspire themselves.
  
- Practitioners in the field of ASD, that will encounter guidance and examples of how to adapt their competencies to the specific domain of sport.
  
- Practitioners in the field of sport, that will discover the basic principles and guidelines to facilitate sports practice to people with ASD.
  
- Volunteers, sport mates and other people interacting with people with ASD in sports activities will be easily introduced to the basic principles and guidelines to orient their behaviours and participation.

## **1.3. ASD and Sport.**

### **1.3.1 What is ASD**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition of neurobiological origin that is present from the first years of life. All individuals share difficulties in the development of social and communication skills and exhibit repetitive behaviour and interests. However, these difficulties occur with varying degrees of intensity along a "spectrum". In addition, individuals with ASD may have other conditions associated with them that make their presentation very diverse. It is currently considered that up to 50% of individuals may have an associated Intellectual Disability. It occurs in 3 males for every female.

This condition is maintained throughout life regardless of how well it evolves, which is why it is considered a disability. Early detection and early specialised care, as well as individualised support adapted to their needs in the different contexts and moments of life, are fundamental to improve their Quality of Life and achieve the maximum degree of personal development.

Socio-emotional skills:

Although they can show affection in an appropriate way, people with ASD show alterations in the development of appropriate behaviours to relate to others, put into practice basic skills for relating to

people and understand the behaviours and emotions in others, so they show limitations in empathy and socio-emotional reciprocity and a limited interest in sharing their interests with others.

But within this area, we find people with great social isolation, people who respond to interaction with others but have limited social initiative and people with great social initiative who fail in their relationships because they do so in a socially ill-adjusted way and do not understand social norms.

Communication and language:

There is great variability within this area, from people who do not develop any spoken language, people who show repetitive and poorly functional language, to people with good formal language who use it in a maladjusted way.

All individuals show limitations in the use and understanding of elements of non-verbal communication, such as the use of gestures, gaze or emotional expressions, difficulties in maintaining conversations and impairments in the social use of communication.

The restricted repertoire of interests and behaviours:

Individuals with ASD show significant impairment in the development of imagination, which developmentally implies a problem for the development of symbolic play and imaginative activity. These limitations involve the appearance of repetitive behaviours, stereotyped body movements, resistance to changes in their surroundings, as well as intense interest and preoccupation with specific topics. In addition, many cases may show unusual sensitivity to sensory stimuli (auditory, visual, tactile, etc.).

There is currently no cure for ASD, but there is evidence that early detection and early intensive specialised care significantly improve development and the quality of life of the person and their family, which should be the ultimate goal of any support programme. What is common to all intervention programmes is that they must be individualised, structured, must intensively involve all the person's environments and must include the family of the person with ASD, both in the detection of needs and in the development of skills.

It is important throughout the life cycle to use the strengths of the person with ASD (e.g. visual skills) as well as his or her interests to create support resources. Structuring their environment to make it more understandable helps people with ASD to be more independent and to reduce the anxiety that the environment can create for them. Support and intervention programmes should focus on the development of communication and social skills by structuring activities, teaching and the environment. People's needs change throughout their lives and support resources must be adapted to the different stages, so it is essential to ensure individualised educational support throughout the person's life, support for families and professionals and community services to enable inclusion.

### **1.3.2 Sport as a right of people with ASD**

Sport is an integral part of our everyday lives and to the majority of people, it is normal to participate in sports activities in their communities. However, we have to take into consideration that a great number of people are excluded from many sports activities because of some form of disability and this can be especially the case for people with ASD.

It is clear that this should not be acceptable, especially if we look at one of the key documents regarding the rights of people with disabilities, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) that was signed by 164 countries worldwide. Article 30 of this Convention clearly states in paragraph 5:

- With a view to enabling persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure and sporting activities, States Parties shall take appropriate measures:

- a) To encourage and promote the participation, to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels;
- b) To ensure that persons with disabilities have an opportunity to organize, develop and participate in disability-specific sporting and recreational activities and, to this end, encourage the provision, on an equal basis with others, of appropriate instruction, training and resources;
- c) To ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourism venues;
- d) To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system;
- (e) To ensure that persons with disabilities have access to services from those involved in the organization of recreational, tourism, leisure and sporting activities.

### **1.3.3 Sport as a tool**

The treatment for people with ASD has proven effective when it includes the presence of many different professionals who help the youths to develop and generalize their abilities in different contexts of life and with different social and interactive partners.

During childhood, it is crucial to work on motor skills in order to help the development of different abilities and at the same time increase body awareness which is essential during adolescence for good development of social relations.

The professionals who work with ASD children and teens identify the necessity to plan educational, playful and recreational interventions to strengthen different developmental areas. In particular, enjoyable and motivating activities can support the growth of a relationship of trust between the young person and the instructor. Doing motivating activities can be the preferred context for children and teenagers in which to develop communication and social skills with their peers and educators.

With these premises, sports activities can really be a tool for people with ASD to work on different goals and to allow them to grow up to their full potential in a more inclusive society.

#### **1.3.4 Specific benefits of sports practice for people with ASD? Evidence and examples**

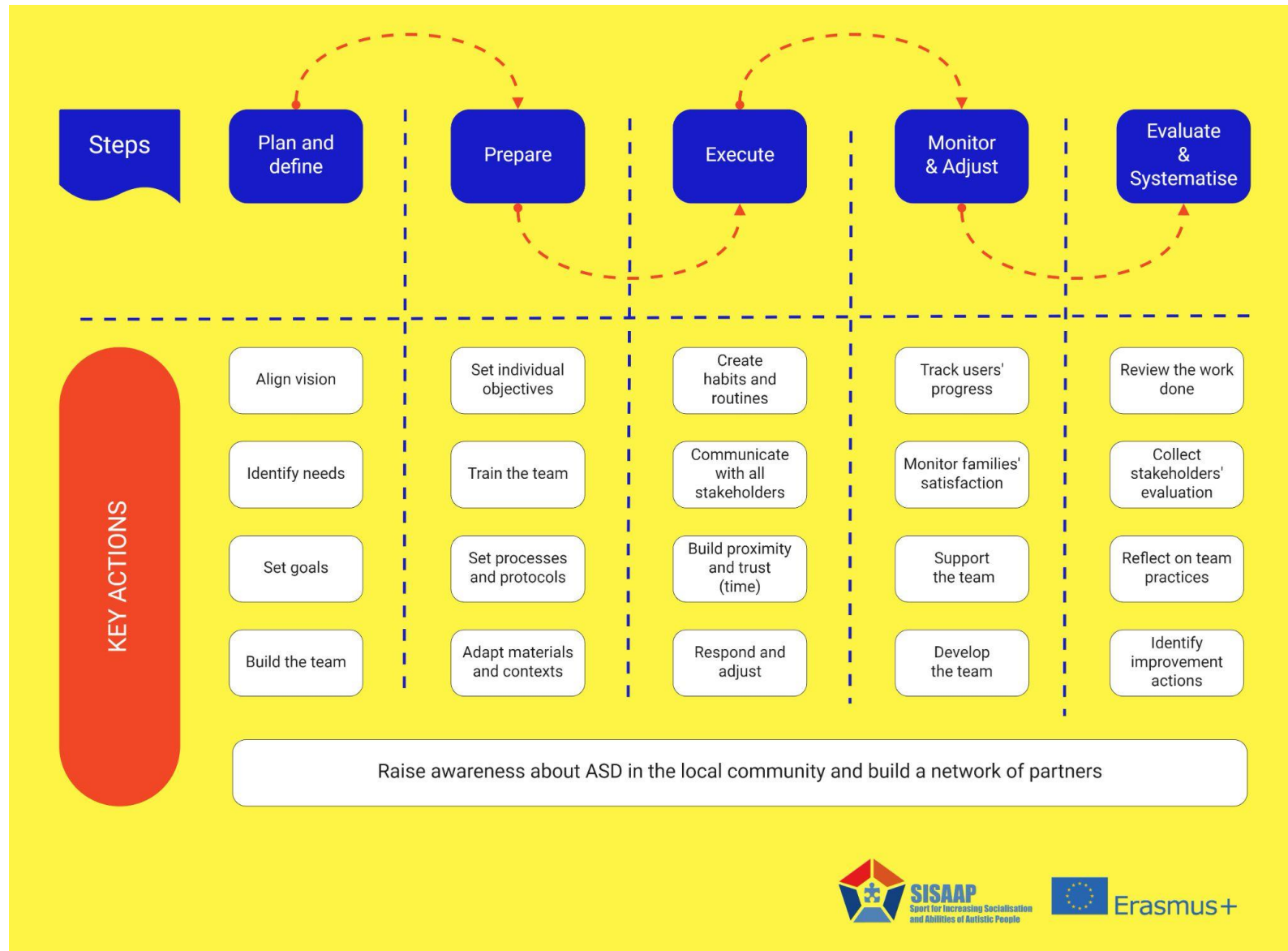
López (2004), cited by Rivas and Vaíllo (2012), develops a series of benefits that can be achieved in people with autism through physical-sporting practice. For this, it refers to three areas: physical-hygienic (improvements in neuromuscular coordination, postural control, breathing patterns and muscle relaxation), psychic (sharing the experience of the practice spontaneously, expressing their achievements to other people and empowerment of self-esteem) and socio-relational (integration in daily life, understanding that the body is a means of relating to others, promoting the enjoyment of sports practice).

Vázquez (2011) indicates the influence that movement has on people with autism, in an increase in spatio-temporal organization, the acquisition of the body scheme, an increase in interaction with the outside world, being able to increase knowledge about it, creating a real contact and from an early age.

Vázquez (2011) also conveys the great importance of physical activity in this population, not only from a motor point of view, but also from a psychological point of view, since this practice is an escape valve for them from their routine, which on many occasions can lead to being very stressful.

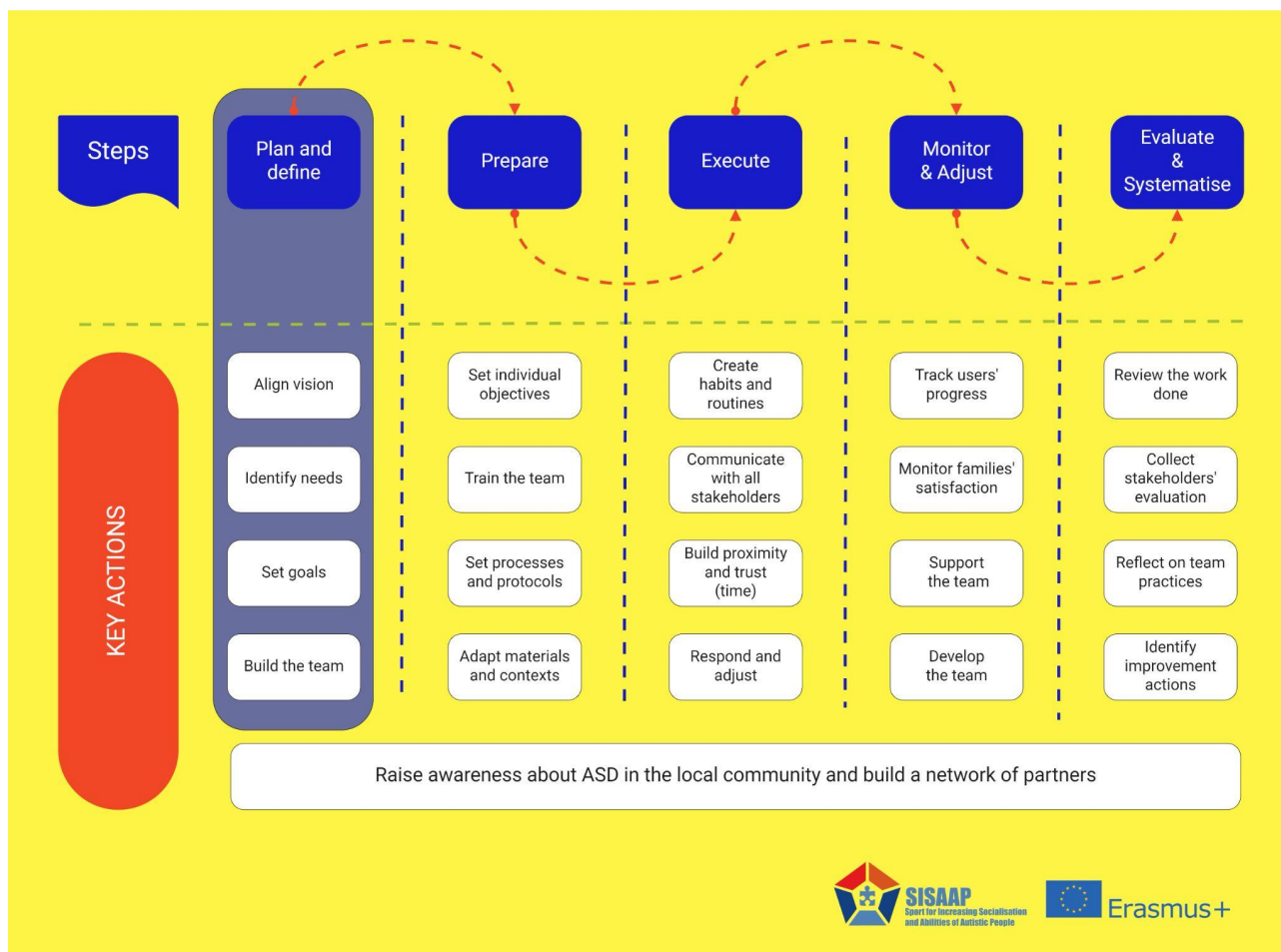
In conclusion, Urbaneja and Calle (2015) citing other authors (Potvin, Sanider, Prelock, Kehayia and Wood-Ocuphinee 2013) conclude that the practice of physical activity from the recreational field has, as a result, a positive impact on physical and mental health. It also influences behavioural disorders, reducing them and promoting an increase in socialization and life satisfaction in the family and social environment.

## 2. Planning Sport & ASD Initiatives





## 2.1 Plan and define



### Key actions

Usually, ASD & Sport initiatives start with conversations inside ASD organisations to align members' visions of Sport and ASD. It is important to dedicate time and effort to create consent about the vision of sport as a right and an important activity for people with ASD and about its priority among other needs and aspirations.

It is equally important to set realistic expectations about what can be achieved and the efforts needed.

This conversation shall be carried out also outside the organisation, including the users and their families to identify more precisely their needs and aspirations regarding sports activities. What are their expectations? What obstacles are they facing? What is their commitment to the initiative?

Once the organisation and the families are aligned, it is time to start exploring the possible allies and collaborators in the local community that can help things to move ahead.

### Resources

The key resources in this phase are the competencies of the team leading the initiative: their capacity to shape a shared vision of what can be achieved, to involve and commit relevant stakeholders and allies and to promote cohesion.

The budget is often a constraint, but do not get obsessed with it: it is a good practice to start counting on a limited but secure budget, sufficient to ensure the work of the key persons needed to get the initiative rolling. Then, you can build on it.

Moreover, small donations and non-monetary contributions are equally important to get things started and commit people and organisations to contribute to the common project.

### *Constraints*

The obvious constraint is the lack of economic resources most organisations have to face, but equally relevant are the fears and worries of ASD people's families. As already mentioned, it is vital to extend the partnership to other organisations and stakeholders from the beginning, to compensate for the scarcity of human resources dedicated to the initiative with a strong network of collaborators.

### *Strategies*

Best practices point towards developing a strong and motivated team of promoters and devoting time and efforts to awareness-raising in the community. It is very important to address from the very beginning the communication strategy that supports the initiative and makes it visible and attractive to potential partners.

Finally, always have a Plan B at hand: things will never occur as you planned.

# PLAN AND DEFINE

## 1. Need analysis

- Speak to all the relevant people: users, users' families, relevant stakeholders.
- Analyse the resources available both in the organisation and in the local community
- Review the legal framework and the associated policies.

## 2. Set goals

- Define the professional profiles you are looking for
- Identify the benefits of your initiative

## 3. Draft a communication plan

- Design a awareness raising campaign towards civil society
- Involve users and reference people
- Involve media (Social networks, web, Tv)
- Improve "talk to talk"

## 4. Prepare a budget

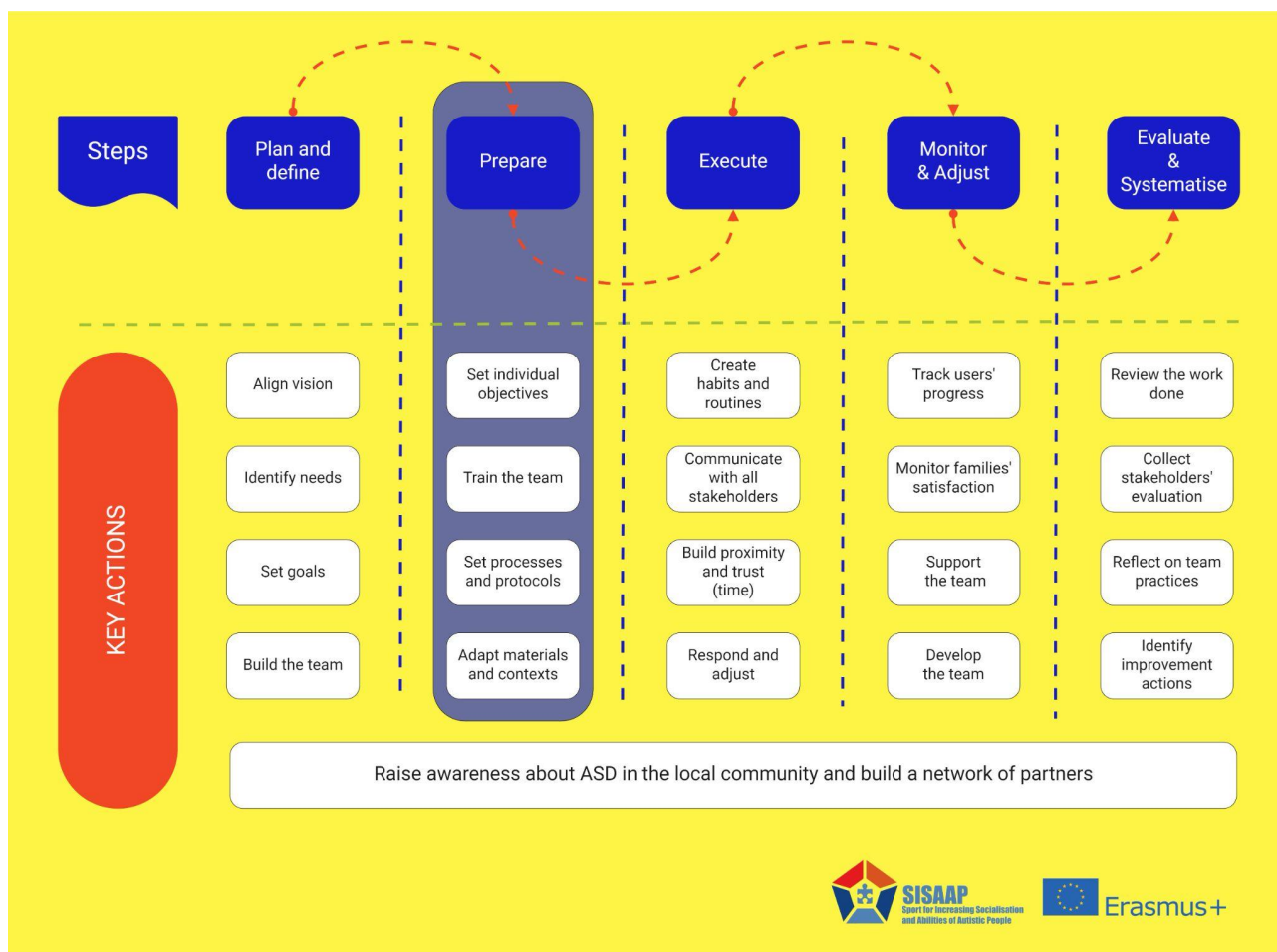
## 5. Build a Business Plan

- Identify possible sources of income
  - public funds
  - private donations
  - sponsorships
  - Partnerships
  - Non monetary contributions (equipment, infrastructures, etc.)

## 6. Assign a team to the project (Human resources)

- Define the competences of the team (Skills, Knowledge, Attitudes)

## 2.2 Prepare



The key actions in this phase continue and expand the ones previously identified:

- In terms of stakeholders' analysis, it is important to resume the main needs of all stakeholders, possibly in a synthetic grid. This will be a necessary starting point to set specific individual objectives for each participant with ASD to the sports initiative.
- Train and develop a proper team, not just considering the professional profiles but involving also volunteers and collaborators.

Specifically, we recommend focusing on the following:

- Devote time to build together with the team a shared mission, vision and values about the service and about "how" to translate them into team practice.
- Once they are clearly set, communicate them constantly to all the other people involved: families, collaborators, allies, public organisations, etc.
- Offer training opportunities on a regular basis to team members, modulating them according to the role. Professionals might need more frequent training and development, for volunteers short workshops and training events might work better. Newcomers need to be inducted into the team, not just in terms of technical issues, but most importantly in terms of mission, vision and values.

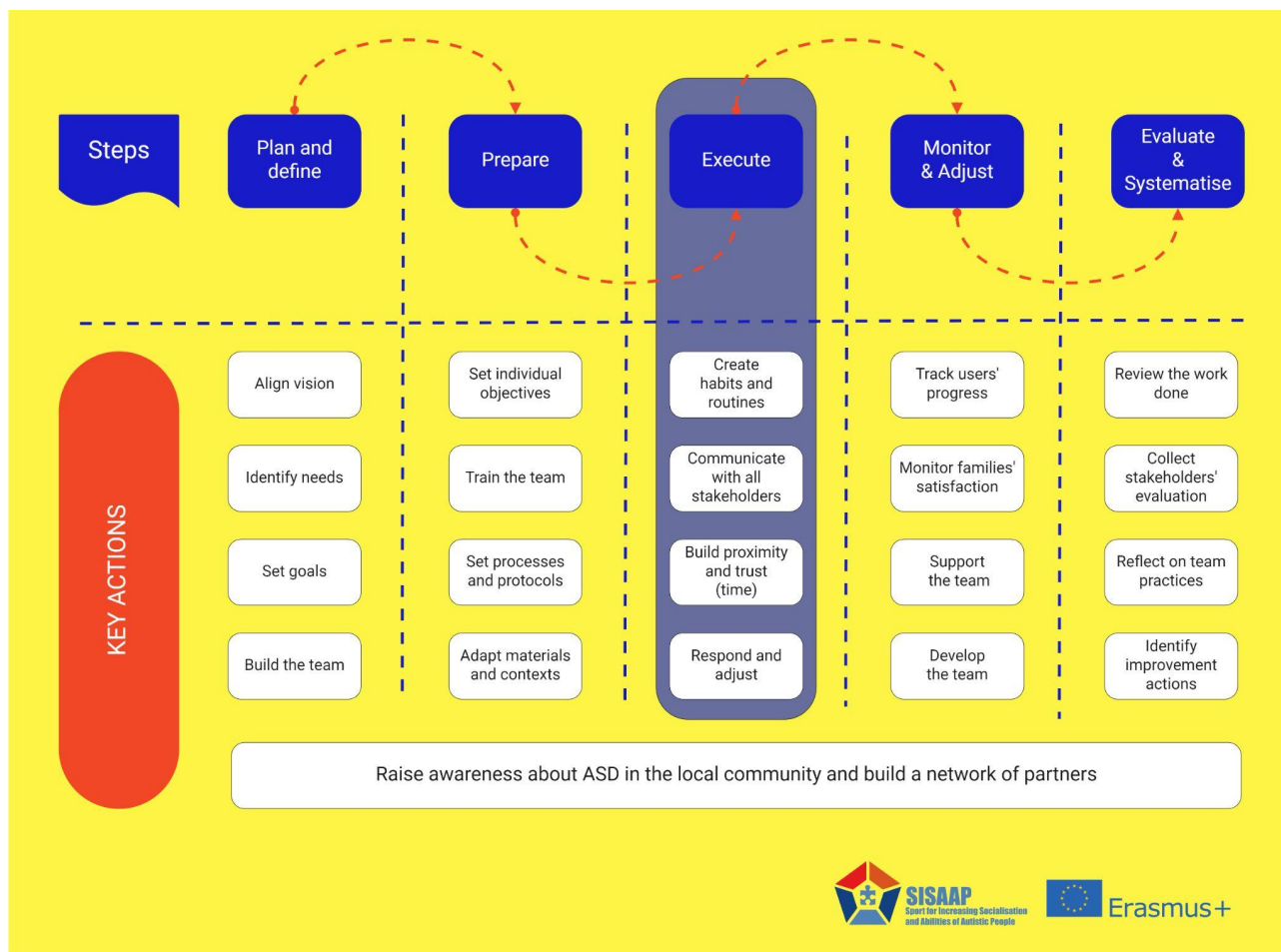
- Elaborate simple and clear processes and protocols to systematise the services and make them consistent and easy to be communicated to other team members. It is important to make explicit the most of the knowledge and learning the team gathers, while offering the service and gaining experience. The main deliverables are:
  - A simple organisation chart with clear roles and responsibilities
  - Group protocols - specific group/activity briefings
  - A team program that allows to monitor the team itself and the activities delivered.
  - A specific methodology to progress gradually in the activities and check their consistency with the individual objectives set for each participant.
  
- Adapt materials and context. Think empathically from the user's point of view and identify how you can facilitate his/her experience and make it more meaningful and enjoyable. Moreover, it is a good practice to elaborate a list of risks that you can foresee for each sports activity you plan to organise. This will help the team to anticipate, if possible, problems and to cope better with them when inevitably, they occur.
  
- Dedicate efforts to communicate and disseminate your initiative. A few good practices that revealed to be pretty effective are:
  - Meet the family in the context. It is important to get them acquainted with the space and the people they will be dealing with.
  - Offer trial lessons to experience the sports initiative.
  - Organize an "open day" to show your activities, explain your vision and values, meet the professionals, the volunteers and the other participants and their families.
  - Name a communication manager to plan and deliver the communication strategy and make sure you assign proper and exclusive work time to this responsibility.
  - Have an updated website / social media channels.

# PREPARE

1. Need analysis
  - Stakeholders' needs analysis
  - Structure Individual Objectives for each participant
2. Train the team (both professional and volunteer)
  - Professionals
  - Volunteers (short trainings and workshops)
  - Induction for newcomers
3. Create processes and protocols
  - Clear organisation chart with clear roles and responsibilities
  - Have a specific methodology to progress gradually in the activities (propedeutic)
  - Group protocol - specific group/activity briefing
  - Team program to monitor the team itself and the activities
4. Adapt materials and context.
5. Communication and dissemination
  - Meet the family in the context
  - Offer trial lessons
  - Organize an "open day"
  - Name a communication manager to plan communication strategy
  - Have an updated website / Social Media channels



## 2.3 Execute



Sound and appropriate project coordination is crucial to succeed in the execution phase.

This implies maintaining smooth communications with all the stakeholders involved: the team, the families of persons with ASD, the institutional and support partners, etc. both in terms of promoting project dissemination and visibility and in terms of good coordination for the activities.

It is important, especially at the very beginning, to respect the timing of the activities, in order to create a shared routine among operators, users, families. It is important that users get acquainted with the routine of their activities, understand and transform them into habits. To achieve this, we recommend to hold briefings with the users, in order to include them actively in the preparation and execution of the actions necessary to carry on the sports activities.

Nevertheless, we must take into consideration that the variables that influence the activities of persons with ASD are almost infinite. Unexpected events are constantly occurring and the team needs to be very flexible and ready to adjust continuously. To do that, team members need to have technical competencies, experience and social and emotional skills to work together well. Time plays a fundamental role in shaping the team abilities: offering team members opportunities to know each other and create proximity and mutual trust through development activities in and out of their job is a strategic action.



Hence, the ideal team needs, on one hand, to design and stick to a simple and well-defined activities' structure; on the other, within this framework, to be able to respond continuously to external and internal challenges.

# EXECUTE

## 1. Coordination

- Good coordination is key
- A good team has experience, motivation and technical knowledge
- Involve families at every step
- Create opportunities for social gathering

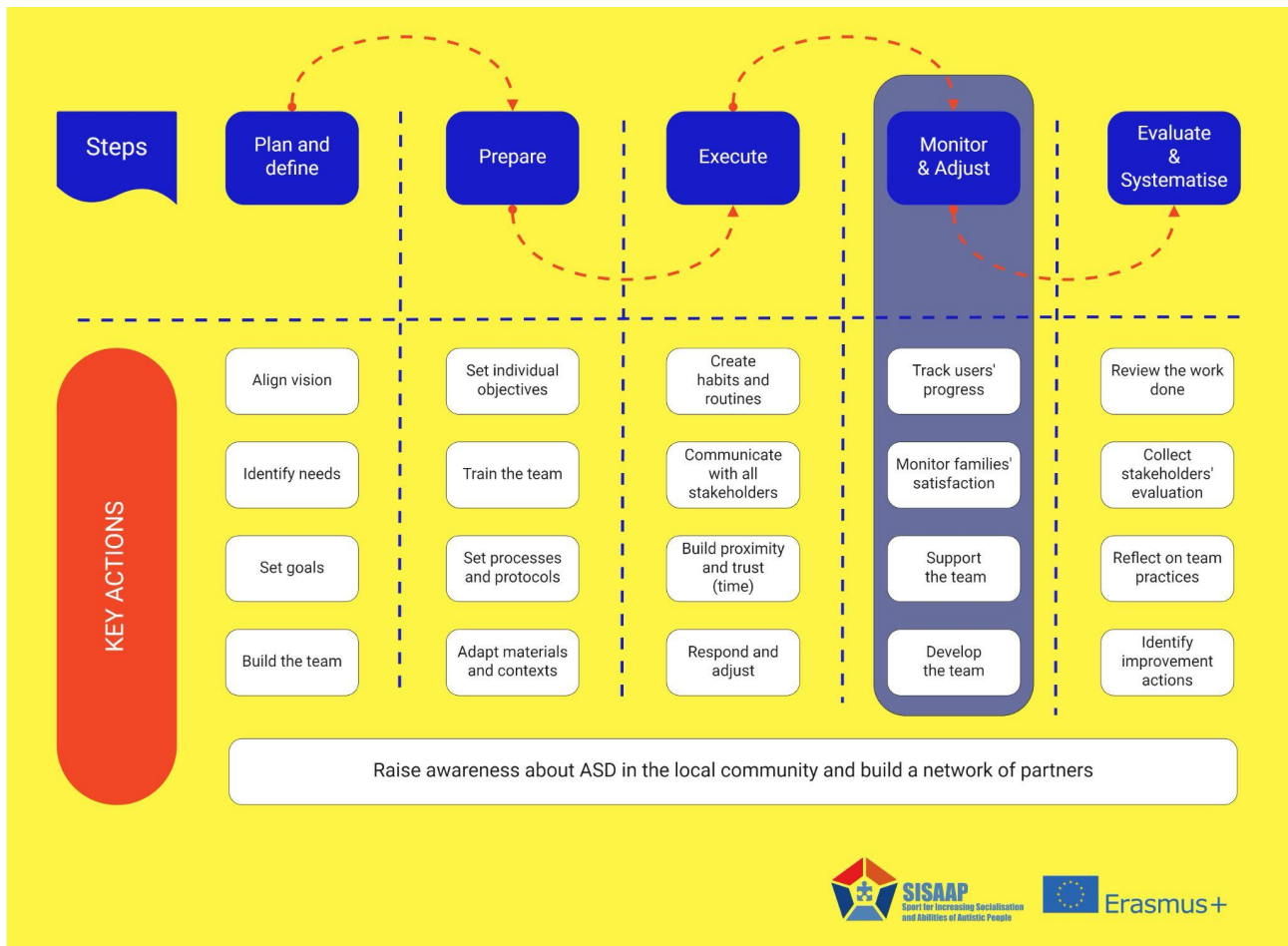
## 2. Communication

- Keep a smooth and continuous communication with everyone involved (partners, families, supporters, sponsors, etc.)
- Promote project visibility (Media, TV, etc.) and dissemination

## 3. Deliver

- Respect the timing of actions
- Prepare different briefings for different users
- Give a test run of the activity to the users
- Respect administration
- Monitor the activities constantly
- Be flexible

## 2.4 Monitor and adjust



In our experience, monitoring the execution of sport initiatives for people with ASD should encompass three different perspectives:

- The users
- The users' families
- The team delivering the service

For what concerns the users, it is important that team members observe the development of the skills addressed by the activities and are able to track their evolution against the individual objectives set in the preparation phase (see point 2.2. Prepare). These signs of progress shall be properly communicated to the families and other relevant stakeholders to encourage and reinforce them. Hence, counting on a specific methodology to progress gradually in the activities and check their consistency with the objectives set for each participant results of special value, enabling the team to adjust the activities according to users' evolving capabilities.

It is important to collect users families' feedback about their satisfaction, as they are clients of the service as much as the users themselves (simple satisfaction questionnaires work well) but also to update them on a

regular basis about the difficulties and the achievements of the users, since they can play a major part in reinforcing the positive effects of sports activities, encouraging users to overcome difficulties and offer relevant information about the possible implications of sports activities on other areas of users' lives.

Finally, it is of the utmost importance to take care of the team itself, both in terms of technical development and psychological well-being.

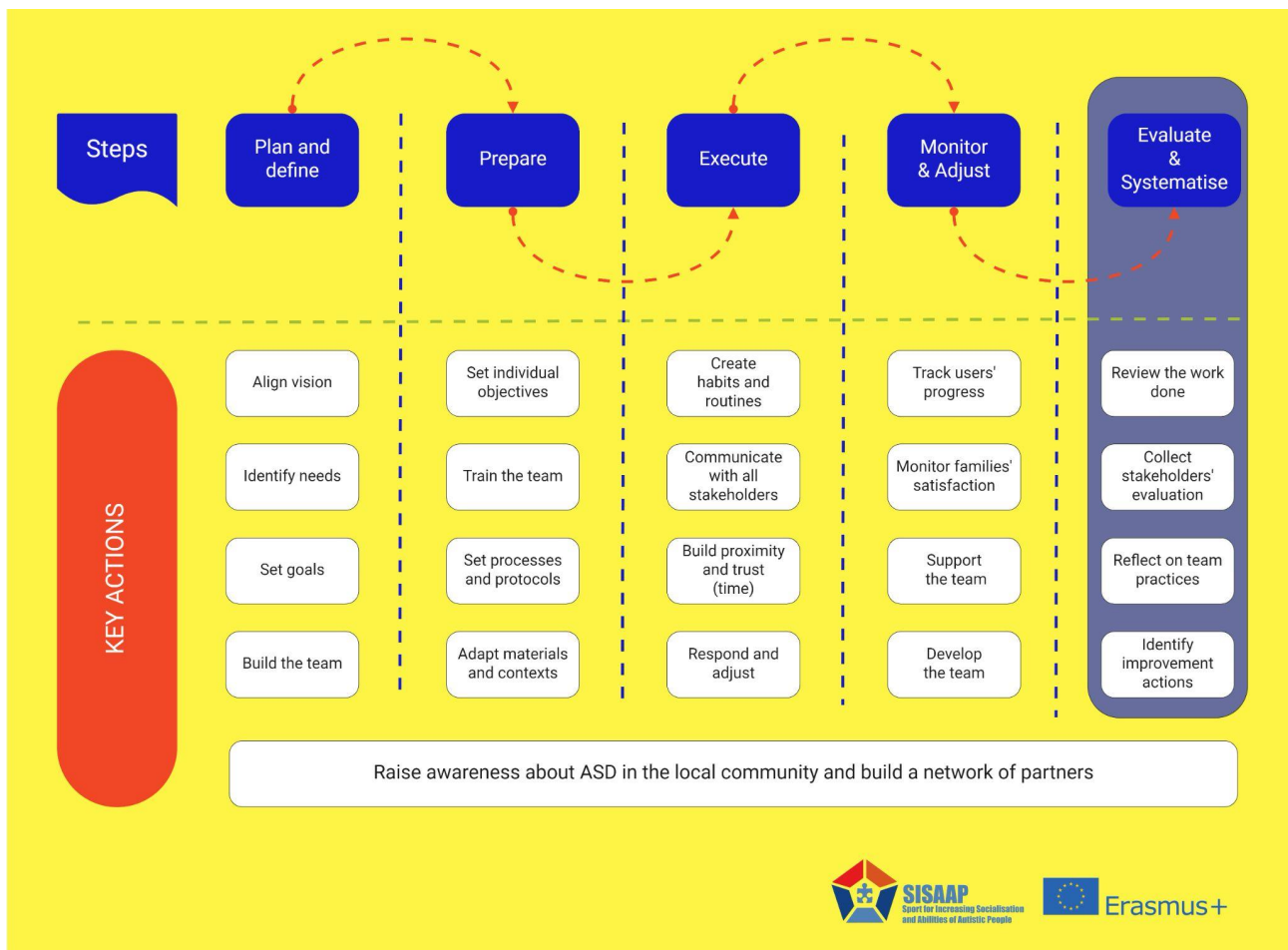
Good practices are:

- plan periodical meetings of all staff with the team leader to receive and give feedback about activities development;
- offer psychological supervision to team members;
- organise expert or structured team meetings open to all topics to allow team members to share their difficulties and challenges, to ask for expert help and to reflect on their practice. This kind of meeting promotes a culture of openness in the team and fosters a culture of mutual trust and continuous improvement;
- promote team building activities periodically (twice a year would be ideal) involving leaders, experts, staff, volunteers;
- finally, when expert support is accessible, it is valuable to organise case-oriented education with experts on ASD, as part of development programs that can help both sports professionals to better understand ASD issues and, vice versa, ASD professionals to better understand sports issues.

# MONITOR

1. Users' progress and fulfilment
    - Basic observation of the skills that are targeted by the activities
    - Importance to set individual objectives for each participant to measure her/his progress
  2. Family satisfaction
    - Simple satisfaction questionnaires
    - Involve and communicate frequently with families
  3. Team work and team wellbeing
    - individual feedback from team leader every three months
    - questionnaires about well being of the team and activities.
    - offer psychological supervision
    - expert or structured team meeting open to all topics
    - Team building twice a year (leaders, experts, staff, volunteers)
- Emphasize open communication in the team with the goal of having good feedback and adjust the program
  - Case oriented education with experts on Autism at least twice a year.

## 2.5 Evaluate and Systematise



The final step in the process is evaluation and systematisation. The key steps at this moment are:

- Review the work done ("what" we achieved)
- Reflect on the team practices ("how" we worked)
- Plan the new initiative/ project

### Review the work done

At the end of the project or initiative it is important to focus on what we have achieved, that it is not just what we did, but which results we were able to achieve.

When a proper identification of objectives is done both at individual and project level, it is quite straightforward to identify the gap existing between estimated and actual results. Nevertheless, it is important to identify and acknowledge also those results that were not expected, since in each project (and more in the field of ASD and Sport) many results (both positive and negative) simply emerge from people's interactions and cannot be planned.

Hence, it is a good practice to gather the feedback and evaluation of different stakeholders. Among them we consider the following are essential:

- the users, adjusting the evaluation tools to their capabilities

- the users' families
- the sponsors and partners involved in the delivery of the initiative

Evaluations can be collected by many means, from simple questionnaires to focus groups and specific meetings and interviews. Still, we suggest not to subestimate the high value provided by informal talks with stakeholders in more relaxed settings, that may bring different and sometimes more sincere information.

Once all the evaluations are gathered, it is a good practice to systematize the information in a synthetic format and share it with all the team during a review session. In this session, apart from making sense of the information collected, it is important for the team to review the project's objectives in the light of the results achieved and to identify the adjustments needed to improve the initiative in its next edition.

Least, but not last, the team review is an opportunity to celebrate the work done: this is key in terms of team motivation, cohesion and emotional well being. Too often teams leave behind the celebration of their achievements.

### **Reflect on team's practices**

This part focuses on "how" the team worked together, not on what was achieved. The focus should be on all those transversal elements that enable the team to perform at its best: leadership, communication, cooperation, mutual-help, trust, conflict resolution, capacity to respond to unusual, unplanned situations. It is important to identify and analyse both those things that worked really well and those that showed weaknesses in the team. Furthermore, it is vital to spot all the impediments that hinder the team's capacity to be more effective and more healthy.

This reflection should be carried out in appropriate space and time, allowing team members to be open and honest. It should provide an opportunity to pause, reconnect and reflect about "how we are" as a team and "in which direction" we want to move.

When it is done properly this retrospective process allows the team to:

- identify gaps in knowledge, skills and attitudes and possible areas for training and development, both at individual and team level.
- identify weaknesses and blind spots in the team organisation, creating opportunities to adjust and experiment alternative ways to work together.
- identify proposals for improving the project/initiative and innovate it, that enable the team to move forward.

It is a good practice to include at least one practical, specific action for each of the previous categories (competences, team organisation, improvement suggestions) in the planning of the next year activities.

### **Plan the new initiative/ project**

Finally, it is important to systematise all the relevant conclusions of this process and to take them into account in the planning and designing of the new projects or activities, so that all the learning of the previous steps, the improvement actions, innovations and recommendations do not get lost and forgotten in the time that usually passes from the closure of one initiative to the planning of the next.

Moreover, it is important to design actions to maintain the stakeholders connected and informed about the future activities and to activate them as the best promoters and prescriptors of the Sport & ASD initiatives



to other possible users. Maintaining the relationship with the users, their families, the other organisations that support and collaborate to Sport & ASD activities, allows to keep the network alive and willing to cooperate, creating solid foundations to grow the initiatives and scale them.

# CLOSE AND SYSTEMATISE

## 1. Review the work done

- Assess the results achieved in the light of objectives.
- Collect stakeholders' evaluation:
  - users
  - users' families
  - partner organisations
  - sponsors
- Identify adjustments and improvements needed
- Celebrate the achievements as a team

## 2. Reflect on the work done

- Focus on transversal competences and team work
- Identify opportunities for individual and team training and development
- Identify possible changes and innovation in team self-organisation and management
- Identify improvements in the service

## 3. Plan the new initiative/project

- Include improvement actions into the design of the new project
- Design a strategy to maintain the connection with stakeholders and keep alive the project network.



## 3. Competences Framework

### 3.2. Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes

In this section, we aim to explore the essential, important and desirable competencies that people working in sports initiatives with persons with ASD should develop.

Competences are constituted by three main elements:

- **Knowledge** is what we know. According to UNESCO-UNEVOC<sup>1</sup>, it is the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning, the body of facts, principles, theories and practices related to a specific field of study or work.
- **Skills** are what we do, our knowledge and experience in action. Skills are the acquired and practised abilities to perform a task, solve problems or carry out a job<sup>2</sup>.
- **Attitudes** are how we are, our stable, long-lasting, learnt predispositions to respond in a certain way, formed on the basis of our beliefs, feelings and intentions<sup>3</sup>.

Our analysis takes into consideration 4 different roles that are usually present in sports activities with people with ASD:

1. Coordinator
2. Instructor
3. Support Person
4. Expert Trainer

These roles are not always present in all the initiatives and sometimes one person plays more than one role. Nevertheless, we consider it relevant to have a clear framework of the competencies people need in order to select the persons that offer the best fit when appointing workers or volunteers and, most importantly, to help the team to evaluate and develop these competencies continuously.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary>

<sup>2</sup> Unesco - Ibidem

<sup>3</sup> Unesco - Ibidem

### 3.2.1. Coordinator

Coordinators are responsible for ensuring high quality of the activity, defining goals and tasks, monitoring them, evaluating their accomplishment and finding innovative solutions to problems.



## Coordinator

### Responsibilities

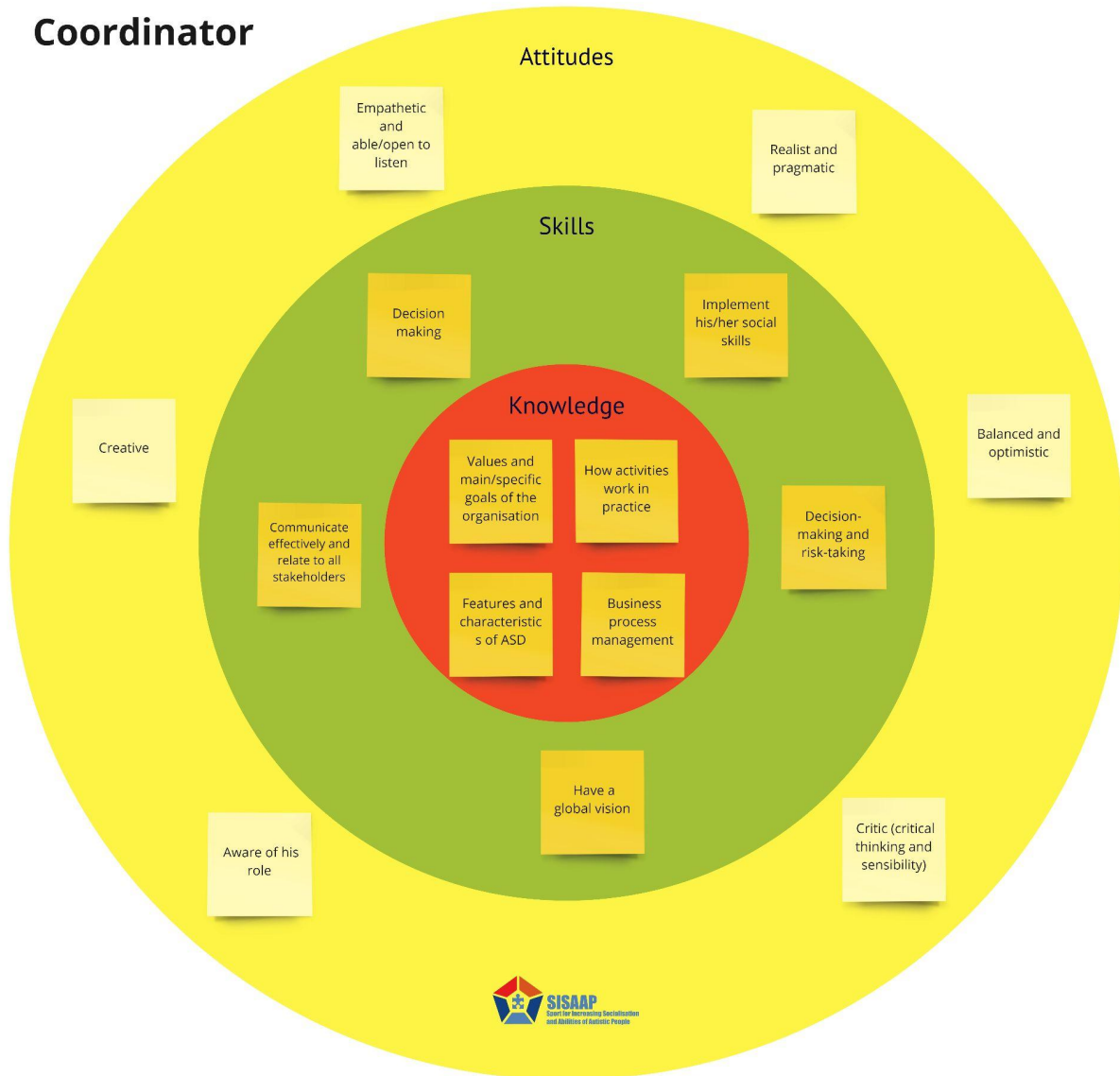
To ensure the implementation of services and their quality

### Tasks

- Design activities (in collaboration with instructor)
- Set main goals for activities (in collaboration with instructor)
- Oversee logistic (equipment, spaces, economic resources and people)
- Manage relationship (inside and outside the organisation)
- Evaluate and/or innovate
- Manage problems (both with problem-solving strategies and practically)
- Manage training opportunities and necessities

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## Coordinator



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### 3.2.2. Instructor

An instructor is responsible for leading the work team and defining the learning activities, determining objectives and tasks based on the users' support needs, and coordinating with family members and stakeholders.



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## Instructor

### Responsibilities

- To ensure security and quality of activities
- To ensure fun/satisfaction, socialisation and improvement for users

### Tasks

- Design activities (in collaboration with the coordinator)
- Set main goals for activities (in collaboration with the coordinator)
- Set specific objectives for each user
- Lead activities
- Evaluate and monitor
- Coordinate team work
- Maintain day to day relationships with families and stakeholders
- Manage context, materials, etc.


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## Instructor



### 3.2.3. Support person

Participants with different support needs are accompanied by a support person who follows instructions, ensures that they develop to their full potential, prepares materials and aids and understands the rules.



## Support person

(Intern, volunteer, co-worker, independent contractor, etc.)

**Responsibilities**

- Be aware of his/her role and of the activities rules and norms
- Follow instructions

**Tasks**

- Support the instructor and coordinate with him/her
- Prepare context, materials, equipment, etc.
- Help and active collaborate
- Facilitate activity and participation of users

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**Support person**



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### 3.2.4. Expert Trainer

An expert trainer provides training in the development of activities with extensive pedagogical and educational knowledge, as well as tools to intervene effectively and critically.



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## Expert trainer

(Recommended)

### Responsibilities

- Improve activities' quality
- Improve employees' and support staff well-being
- Provide practical and emotional tools to solve problems and critical situations

### Tasks

- Provide pedagogical and educational support
- Improve quality and effectiveness of all actions
- Promote a questioning approach
- Provide practical and emotional tools

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## 4. Tips and recommendations

Here are 10 tips and recommendations to never forget when you are working with a person with Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

### 1. Be predictable

- It means to plan and to organize as much as possible of the activities before and to let the participants know what you are going to do
- It means to structure the activity so that is predictable and stable from lesson to lesson

### 2. Organize and structure time

- It means to plan the time of the activity and inside the activity, and mark the time accordingly during the course, lesson or specific task

### 3. Organize and structure context

- it means to have an organized space and workplace with less distractions as possible

### 4. Clarity of roles

- Everybody should know what their and everyone's role is

### 5. Clarity of the instructions

- Be sure the instructions are understood
- Communicate with images, AAC and or PECS, Show things

### 6. Help with social interaction

- Be ready to explain social interactions and behaviors and to point out the best way to communicate

### 7. Respect safety rules and equipment

- If someone is injured no one is happy so explain and respect safety measures
- If the equipment is broken no one else can do the activity so respect and care for it

### 8. Take care of your team

- A good program or a successful activity needs a well coordinated team that can communicate well and be open to improving their work on a regular basis

### 9. Learn from others

- Try to find some other professionals, enthusiasts or experienced people around you in your community and ask them for feedback. It is easy to miss some good ideas when you are very focused on your day to day work.

### 10. Don't be too hard on yourself

- Every new beginning is hard, even when you are only expanding some program. Take one step at the time and focus on improving and growing.

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