

Building Inclusive Coaching Practices for Student-Athletes with ADHD

by

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Introduction

Imagine a 15-year-old male high school athlete standing on the soccer field waiting for the game to start. The whistle blows, and as everyone around him rushes to their positions, he is distracted by his untucked jersey and notices his shoelaces are untied. He bends down to tie them. At the same time, he gets passed the ball but misses it because he's not paying attention, and the ball goes directly to the other team. The coach yells out instructions, but the player is too far away, and with so many instructions just given, he starts to feel overwhelmed, embarrassed, and frustrated - he didn't mean to miss the pass. Teammates roll their eyes, some making comments under their breath, "not again, how does he keep missing it?" The coach means well but is untrained in how to support an adolescent with ADHD, interpreting the player's actions as a lack of effort or care. The player, embarrassed and dysregulated, then shuts down and withdraws from the game. By the end of the game, the athlete, coach, and other players are annoyed and slightly angry. The athlete leaves questioning whether he belongs on the team; the other players exchange knowing looks, and the coach leaves feeling frustrated, wanting to help but unsure of how. This everyday scene highlights the gap between adolescents with ADHD and the need for coaching knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

Adolescents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often face challenges in sports due to difficulties with emotional regulation, executive functioning, and peer relationships, which raises the question: How can coaches be supported to improve sports experiences for adolescents with ADHD? The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5-TR) defines ADHD as “a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development” (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, p. 70). ADHD is classified into three presentations: predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive/impulsive, and combined presentation, which includes symptoms from both categories (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Due to these deficits, it makes it difficult for adolescents to follow multi-step instructions, stay organized, and maintain focus, all of which are important skills for sport (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). Playing sports requires adolescents to possess executive functioning skills, including time management and organization. However, adolescents with ADHD often struggle with these skills, which can disrupt their ability to develop and participate in sports (Liang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). Emotional dysregulation is strongly associated with ADHD and can lead to frustration, withdrawal, overexcitement, or outbursts during practices, games, or discussions post games (Ontiveros et al., 2025). Being part of a team means having the skills to handle social challenges, interact with others, and take feedback from a coach. Often, adolescents with ADHD struggle with peer rejection and social challenges, which makes being a part of a team very challenging (Lopez-Williams et al., 2005; Staokova et al., 2013).

Those impacted by the question, ‘How can coaches be supported to improve sports experiences for adolescents with ADHD’ would include adolescents with ADHD, coaches, teams and their peers, schools and community programs. Coaches often lack the knowledge, strategies, and training to recognize or address ADHD related challenges, which can lead to frustration from both the adolescent and the coach (Ahmann et al., 2017). Adolescents with ADHD are at risk for negative sport experiences, low self-esteem, and peer rejection (Lee et al., 2014). While

much of the literature related to ADHD is academically focused, this capstone highlights a coach-centred approach that focuses on practical strategies and psychoeducation on the topic of ADHD.

Although there are many peer-reviewed journal articles that go into detail about what ADHD is and how to provide specific strategies for adolescents with ADHD in a sport setting, there are some key aspects that were not as easily researched. Most of the studies primarily focused on the academic struggles an adolescent may have if they have ADHD. The research samples tended to be small and lacked diversity, making it difficult to generalize findings across populations. There is also limited insight into how coaches can effectively implement strategies or collaborate with school counsellors in real-world settings to provide the best experience for a student-athlete with ADHD. Another underdeveloped area is research on ADHD for females, especially in sports. Conducting studies that examine gender differences in sport with a focus on neurodivergence would provide coaches and counsellors the opportunity to coach specifically to strengths rather than general un-specific strategies. Overall, these limitations highlight the need for broader, more inclusive, and practice oriented to support adolescents with ADHD in sports.

Research Question

This capstone is guided by research for the question: How can coaches be supported to improve sports experiences for adolescents with ADHD. The capstone will be coach-centred rather than athlete-centred. In short, the athlete needs to turn up to play, while the coach will be providing the structure, skills, and strategies. The research will focus on the role of support for coaches, recognizing that adolescents with ADHD often face challenges in areas such as emotional regulation, executive functioning, and peer relationships within sports. By using relevant research, this capstone aims to provide coaches with the knowledge, strategies, and

resources to support the needs and address the challenges faced by adolescents with ADHD while also providing practical, inclusive coaching practices. This capstone will have three main themes. Theme one explores how ADHD symptoms manifest in adolescent athletes and the impact it has on sports. Understanding these challenges provides context for developing targeted coaching strategies. Theme two examines evidence-based coaching strategies and practical tools that can empower coaches to effectively support adolescents with ADHD in sport settings, focusing on approaches that promote inclusivity and engagement for neurodiverse adolescents. Theme three explores the role that the school counsellor can provide, highlighting different interventions that could be used for student-athletes with ADHD.

Positionality Statement

My capstone encompasses many aspects of my life, including my career choice, passion for sports and coaching, and my personal connection with ADHD. With a background in Physical and Health Education and Special Education, I now work in Kamloops where I integrate these areas and experiences into my teaching practice at a local secondary school. This experience directly informs the focus of my capstone to discover ways to better support adolescents with ADHD and their coaches in sport. Prior to teaching in Kamloops, I taught in a variety of school settings in Victoria, Vancouver, and overseas in the Middle East. These settings include: public and private schools, alternative educational facilities and in elementary and secondary schools across both rural and urban areas. This has exposed me to a wide range of diverse cultural and educational environments. When I worked in Abu Dhabi, I observed different cultural expectations around education, neurodiversity, and coaching, which has shaped how I now interpret challenges for ADHD athletes and the importance of inclusion. My

experience as a teacher in diverse cultural and geographic settings has provided me with a broad, comparative perspective, which I apply to this capstone and my research.

On a personal level, ADHD is close to my heart as my four-year-old son was diagnosed with ADHD when he was three years old. From a young age, he was always on the move, and I see daily how beneficial sports and physical activity are for him, but also how hard these structured activities can be because of his ADHD. While my personal connection may make me more empathetic, it may also make me biased towards advocating so strongly for more support for children with ADHD. The world was not made for neurodivergent people, and they are often left struggling. In my role as an educator and by surrounding myself with other coaches, I see too often a player shutting down or coaches feeling frustrated because they do not know how to help or what to do. Coaches have busy lives, and many lack specific training; they volunteer their time and without these volunteers the sports teams would not be able to continue. There is a disconnect between coaching and working with children and adolescents who are neurodivergent. I approach this research with the belief that knowledge comes from lived experience. I see ADHD and sport through a personal lens as a parent, and a professional lens as an educator and coach.

This capstone is significant because it addresses a real gap in both education and sport: the lack of resources for coaches to support athletes with ADHD. In schools, educators and coaches alike can often perceive the actions of neurodivergent youth as lazy or defiant, failing to recognize the challenges these adolescents face. The primary focus of this capstone is to give coaches practical, evidence-based strategies to support them while working with children with ADHD. This will ideally lead to more inclusive sport experiences, a reduced risk of sport dropout, improved peer relationships, and self-confidence. In the field of education and

counselling, this capstone highlights the importance of collaboration between counsellors, educators, and community coaches to support neurodiverse youth. Ultimately, by combining the research from the literature review with my professional experience as a coach and educator, I created a coaches pamphlet that details strategies and techniques for supporting students with ADHD in sport. The goal of the resource is to help improve organized sporting activities to ensure that they are inclusive environments where all students can thrive.

My personal and professional experiences inform the perspective I bring to this research. As a parent of a child with ADHD, I am particularly sensitive to the associated challenges and am strongly inclined to advocate for appropriate support. I acknowledge that this may inadvertently lead to an emphasis on difficulties rather than strengths, despite my intentional commitment to a strength-based approach in my roles as an educator, parent, and counsellor. With 15 years of teaching and coaching experience, including seven years as a learning support teacher, I prioritize practical strategies for schools and teams over clinical applications. Because of my lifelong love and involvement in sport, I tend to assume that sports will always be a positive outlet, even though this may not, and often is not, true for every student. Finally, I bring a strong belief in the importance of adapting for and accommodating neurodivergent students. This reflects my advocacy stance but has also guided my research. I aim to be reflective and transparent throughout this capstone.

This capstone was inspired by my son, whom I hope will grow to love sports as much as I do; as well as by all the students I see struggling to participate in sports daily. I recognize both the value sports bring and the frustration felt by coaches who volunteer their time to support young athletes. At its core, sports teach teamwork, cooperation, belonging, pride, and ultimately,

we want those experiences to be accessible to all children and adolescents, while ensuring that we are also supporting coaches in the process.

Significance of the Capstone

The significance of this capstone is valuable for many reasons. ADHD is a common neurodevelopmental disorder affecting adolescents, yet coaches often lack the training to support these athletes. Sports provide the opportunity to develop skills not only physically but socially and emotionally as well, a skill that is very important to all adolescents, but especially those with ADHD. Without proper support, athletes are at risk of peer rejection, sport dropout, and negative self-esteem (Lee et al., 2014; Lopez-Williams et al., 2005; Staikova et al., 2013; Wolfe & Madden, 2016). This capstone fills a gap by shifting the focus from athlete deficits to empowering coaches; it is coach-centred, and all the athlete needs to do is show up willing to learn and grow as an athlete. The people who could benefit from this research would mainly be coaches, but it would also encompass adolescents with ADHD, as well as teams and peers of these individuals. By coaches implementing the strategies and using examples from the resource, teams and their peers will benefit from stronger team cohesion, less conflict, and an inclusive team culture. Counsellors and educators can collaborate with coaches and use the findings to help with strategies. The implications of this research center on equipping coaches with targeted strategies to support athletes' executive functioning, emotional regulation, and peer relationships. It also advocates for the integration of psychoeducation into coaches' professional development, enhancing their capacity to foster mental health awareness within athletic environments. By promoting understanding and reducing stigma surrounding ADHD, these efforts aim to cultivate more inclusive and supportive sports communities

Review of Research Literature

Theme One- Understanding the Impact of ADHD on Adolescent Athletes

ADHD in Adolescents Overview

Adolescents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) face many challenges in their daily lives. There is a great deal of research that references the academic struggles that face adolescents with ADHD, and less on how the symptoms of ADHD affect adolescents who participate in extracurricular activities, especially when looking at sports (Sobanski et al., 2010). Much of the current literature tends to focus on the educational implications of ADHD, such as difficulty sustaining attention in the classroom, incomplete assignments, or challenges with organization. However, less attention is given to how ADHD impacts students in other environments where cognitive, emotional, and social demands are equally high, such as on the field, rink, court, or in the pool. These environments also require sustained focus, social cooperation, and behavioural regulation, skills that are often compromised by the symptoms of ADHD.

ADHD is classified into three presentations: predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive/impulsive, and combined presentation, which includes symptoms from both categories (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Symptoms of ADHD include a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity that interferes with functioning and development (Sobanski et al., 2010). These symptoms often manifest as difficulty paying close attention to details, a struggle to stay focused and follow through with directions, forgetfulness, disorganization, and difficulty managing tasks. In addition to cognitive challenges, emotional symptoms such as frustration, irritability, and poor regulation are also common (Sobanski et al.,

2010). These symptoms are not isolated to the classroom and can significantly influence how adolescents function socially and emotionally in other settings.

In order to meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD, there must be a range of symptoms present before the age of 12, observed in at least two different contexts, such as school and home, and cause clear interference with social, academic, or occupational functioning (Sobanski et al., 2010). These criteria are important because they underscore the idea that ADHD is not simply about struggling in school; it is a condition that can impair daily functioning across multiple environments. When adolescents participate in structured group activities like sports or clubs, they must navigate rapidly changing expectations, teamwork, instruction-following, emotional stress, and interpersonal feedback, all of which may be more difficult for individuals with ADHD. Sports, in particular, are high-demand environments where social belonging, emotional control, and quick decision-making are essential. These demands can amplify some of the most challenging aspects of ADHD, such as impulsivity, emotional reactivity, and difficulty interpreting social cues. Coaches and instructors must be aware of the potential challenges these children may face and have the necessary resources to help them achieve success. Using the data presented below from the literature review and drawing from external sources, the next chapter will provide a handbook for coaches to use to support athletes who have ADHD.

By recognizing how ADHD manifests outside of academic settings, particularly in its impact on attention, executive functioning, emotional regulation, and social interactions, educators, coaches, and support staff can develop a more comprehensive understanding of adolescents with ADHD. This awareness enables the creation of inclusive environments where students are empowered to succeed in all areas of life, including sports and extracurricular activities. For coaches, this understanding opens the door to empathetic practices, targeted

interventions, and collaborative strategies that address the diverse needs of each child. As this review will demonstrate, addressing the effects of ADHD in sports settings is an important step toward fostering equity and inclusion for adolescents with diverse cognitive and emotional needs.

Executive Functioning Challenges and Sports

Adolescents with ADHD frequently experience significant executive functioning challenges that can severely impact their participation and performance in sports and other extracurricular activities (Liang et al., 2021). Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, requires developed executive functioning skills. Executive functioning involves abilities such as planning, organizing, and self-monitoring (Liang et al., 2021). Core executive functions needed for cognitive success include inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Liang et al., 2021). When looking at brain development, the leading cause of cognitive deficits in adolescents with ADHD is the lack of development of the frontal lobe (Chen et al., 2023). This can impact attention during drills, understanding complex instructions, and the processing speed necessary for transitions during sport (Chen et al., 2023). These executive functioning difficulties not only impact individual performance but can also interfere with communication and coordination in a team environment. Adolescents with ADHD may struggle to follow multi-step instructions from coaches, remember plays, or transition quickly between drills. This can result in missed cues, delayed reactions, or a perceived lack of effort, potentially frustrating coaches and teammates and could ultimately lead to the child having negative self-esteem, quitting sports, or exacerbating their ADHD symptoms (Chen et al., 2023). When athletes consistently appear forgetful or disorganized, it can damage team trust and affect

cohesion during gameplay (Chen et al., 2023). Executive functioning plays a significant role in many aspects of life, including sport.

According to Feng et al. (2023), there are two types of activities to look at when discussing these core executive functions. The first, open-skill activities, such as tennis, soccer, football, or hockey, require athletes to make quick decisions and adapt to situations on the fly (Feng et al., 2023). These sports require athletes to rapidly respond to external stimuli, such as other players' movements or equipment like balls or racquets. Adolescents who play these types of sports ideally need a high cognitive ability and a strong inhibitory control (impulsiveness) in order to make rapid decisions and succeed in an environment that is constantly changing (Feng et al., 2023). For example, an athlete with ADHD playing soccer may impulsively chase the ball out of position, fail to delay a pass, or interrupt a coordinated play. These small moments, driven by impulsivity or poor inhibitory control, can shift the outcome of a game and lead to blame or conflict with peers. As noted above, those with ADHD often struggle significantly with executive functioning skills such as sustaining attention, impulse control, and slow adaptive responses. According to Feng et al., deficits in inhibitory control may lead adolescents with ADHD to make impulsive mistakes during critical moments in a game or struggle to sustain their focus on the constantly shifting demands of open-skill sports (2023).

In comparison, closed skill activities such as running, swimming, weight-lifting, and gymnastics are all very predictable sports that have more of a controlled environment (Feng et al., 2023). There are fewer external distractions and changes, and often the adolescent participating in the activity chooses to make the changes rather than it being a result of the game itself. Closed-skill activities necessitate a large cognitive demand and often use skills and techniques that require a strong working memory and quick processing of new information (Feng

et al., 2023). These types of skills typically involve an individual focusing their attention on a repetitive task, such as swimming lengths or running on a treadmill. In general, there are fewer environmental changes, which in turn creates lower demands placed upon an individual. Because these tasks require a strong working memory, the challenge arises because adolescents with ADHD find these tasks overly repetitive, leading to boredom, a struggle to stay motivated, or a lack of interest (Feng et al., 2023). Difficulties with working memory can result in adolescents frequently forgetting routines, misremembering sequences, or quickly becoming disengaged with repetitive tasks. However, the structured nature of closed-skill sports can also offer therapeutic benefits. These activities may serve as a calming outlet for adolescents who feel overwhelmed in chaotic team environments. For some, repetitive movements like swimming laps can provide a sense of rhythm and focus that promotes emotional regulation and self-confidence. The best practice, ideally, would be to match the sport to the individual's executive functioning profile. Closed skill activities are an excellent opportunity for an individual with ADHD to strengthen their working memory, provide a sense of routine, and partake in an activity that has a predictable structure (Feng et al., 2023).

These executive functioning difficulties can significantly affect athletic performance, particularly in sports settings where following multi-step processes, managing complex instructions, and responding to coach guidance are required. As a result, adolescents with ADHD may require additional support such as visual schedules, verbal prompts, or breaking down drills into smaller steps. Coaches who understand executive functioning deficits can help create more inclusive environments that reduce frustration and increase engagement. Moreover, challenges in cognitive flexibility are linked to inefficient problem-solving and lower academic performance (Liang et al., 2021), further complicating their ability to succeed in sports.

Overall, executive functioning challenges in adolescents with ADHD can undermine both performance and social belonging in sports. By understanding the different cognitive demands of various sports and the specific areas of executive difficulty, adults working with these youth can foster more positive, productive experiences in athletics.

The Dynamics of Emotional Dysregulation

Adolescents with ADHD can often struggle with intense emotions such as frustration, irritability, anger, disappointment, and overexcitement, particularly in high-pressure situations like sports and extracurricular activities. Physical activity can play a large part in regulating adolescents with ADHD, but it can come at a cost of emotional dysregulation. Ontiveros et al. explain that emotional dysregulation (ED) entails an individual's emotional hyperactivity and poor control over their emotions (2025). ADHD has the most significant association with ED compared to other mental health disorders (Ontiveros et al., 2025). This can lead to lower quality of life and higher executive functioning impairments. Emotional dysregulation can manifest differently in each individual, but many symptoms observed during sports include outbursts, shutting down, or overexcitement (Ontiveros et al., 2025). These behaviours can include yelling, feelings of anger, frustration, emotional withdrawal, silence, quitting a team or the game. It can also include overexcitement, where an adolescent has less impulse control and demonstrates inappropriate behaviour.

Although emotional dysregulation is not part of the DSM-5 definition, according to Drechsler et al., it should be part of the definition when looking at ADHD as a whole (2020). It is estimated that 50–70% of children with ADHD also have symptoms of emotional dysregulation, including anger, frustration, irritability, and emotional outbursts (Drechsler et al., 2020). The

struggle in managing emotional responses becomes highly problematic in settings where the pressure to succeed can heighten dysregulation, leading to many disruptive or withdrawn behaviours. Adolescents with ADHD may struggle with frustration tolerance when they make a mistake on the court or field, which can lower their self-esteem (Ontiveros et al., 2025). These adolescents may also start avoidance behaviour and stop playing sports due to the inability to regulate during games. Some of the specific emotional stressors they may face include receiving negative (even if constructive) feedback, feelings of letting others down, or performing under scrutiny (Ontiveros et al., 2025). The other primary symptom of ADHD, inattentiveness, can also contribute to missing cues or rules, which in turn increases stress levels and further triggers dysregulation (Ontiveros et al., 2025). The implications of this are significant for team dynamics, as these individuals are often perceived as overly emotional or disruptive.

Emotional dysregulation can also affect how teammates perceive and respond to adolescents with ADHD. According to Salerni & Messetti (2025), struggling to regulate emotions is a strong risk factor for peer rejection; those who cannot regulate are more likely to face exclusion and negative peer experiences. In sports contexts, emotional overreactions can be misunderstood by teammates as selfishness, a lack of sportsmanship, or poor self-control, further straining team cohesion. These peer reactions may result in social exclusion and decreased participation over time. Emotional dysregulation can be described as a core factor in shaping peer and acceptance/rejection behavioural functioning (Salerni & Messetti, 2025). It can be linked to both externalizing the problems, shown through aggression, defiance, impulsivity and internalizing the problems, shown through anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression (Salerni & Messetti, 2025).

Connecting to emotional dysregulation is the internal and external pressure placed on adolescents with ADHD. Some individuals express their feelings through overexcitement or silliness during moments that require focus and composure (Drechsler et al., 2020). Alternatively, some internalize their emotions and withdraw from the activity or event, ultimately quitting or dropping out of the sport (Drechsler et al., 2020). According to Liu et al. (2025), adolescents are at a higher risk for internalizing problems, which can lead to depression, anxiety, and a perceived elevation in stress. Emotional dysregulation can impair cognitive functioning, self-regulation, and the ability to adapt under performance demands (Liu et al., 2025). These feelings are often tied to a deficiency in self-regulation, where an individual has little control over the intensity and duration of emotional experiences and may struggle to return to baseline once emotionally activated.

When adolescents with ADHD become emotionally dysregulated, their ability to interpret tone, sarcasm, or constructive criticism may also be impaired (Staikova et al., 2013). This misinterpretation can escalate frustration, defensiveness, or even withdrawal during coaching instruction, particularly if the feedback feels overly critical or poorly timed. As Staikova et al. (2013) explain, these pragmatic communication challenges, such as interrupting, dominating conversations, or going off-topic, can contribute to peer conflict, especially when paired with emotional impulsivity. When these difficulties arise during games or team practice, they may further reinforce negative social perceptions and increase the risk of exclusion by teammates or coaches.

The emotional responses of adolescents with ADHD in sports can vary widely. Faraone et al.'s (2019) model of emotional dysregulation explains three prototypes that describe how an individual may react: impulsively, internally, or with adaptive regulation. Prototype 1 is

characterized by high emotional impulsivity and poor self-regulation, where adolescents with ADHD show intense, quickly escalating emotional responses followed by prolonged behavioural outbursts (Faraone et al., 2019). These individuals are typically those diagnosed with hyperactive or combined-type ADHD. Prototype 2 includes adolescents with ADHD who experience a slow onset of intense internal emotions, which are not expressed outwardly but linger due to deficient regulation (Faraone et al., 2019). These adolescents are more often described as having inattentive ADHD, and their internal stress may go unnoticed. Prototype 3 describes individuals who still experience intense emotional responses but can effectively return to baseline quickly; however, their high emotional impulsivity may still leave them vulnerable to future stressors (Faraone et al., 2019). Individuals with this profile are typically diagnosed with hyperactive or combined-type ADHD.

When working with adolescents in sports settings, it is important to understand these prototypes, as emotional control, peer dynamics, and performance stress will affect each individual differently. By looking at these profiles and how they impact emotional well-being, coaches, educators, and parents can respond more effectively to the needs of adolescents with ADHD in emotionally demanding athletic environments.

Exploring Peer Relationships

Adolescents with ADHD are often faced with significant challenges when it comes to building and maintaining peer relationships and communicating effectively within sport settings. Difficulties with social cues, emotional regulation, and pragmatic communication can negatively impact an adolescent's sense of belonging and success within athletic environments. Pragmatic language refers to the social rules of communication, including how individuals manage

conversations and interpret meaning in context. This includes the ability to take turns, maintain topics, provide relevant feedback, adjust speech to the listener, repair communication breakdowns, and respond to social intention (Staikova et al., 2013). Adolescents with ADHD often struggle with pragmatic communication due to impulsivity, interruption, and poor emotional regulation, which in turn can strain peer interactions. These challenges are particularly evident in team sports, where expectations around turn-taking, rule-following, and situational awareness are central to team cohesion. When these expectations are unmet, due to off-topic comments, excessive talking, or interrupting, teammates may become frustrated or perceive the adolescent as disrespectful or uncooperative (Staikova et al., 2013).

Lopez-Williams et al. (2005) found that athletic performance alone is not sufficient for peer acceptance; instead, social behaviour and cooperation play a critical role. Adolescents with ADHD who display impulsive, aggressive, or disruptive behaviour are more likely to be rejected by their peers, particularly when combined with low athletic skill. Conversely, those who demonstrate prosocial behaviour alongside athletic competence tend to be better liked by teammates. Emotional dysregulation further contributes to peer conflict and strained relationships with coaches, especially when adolescents react poorly to instruction or struggle to manage frustration during competition or team drills. These difficulties may result in withdrawal, defensiveness, or outbursts that isolate the athlete and reinforce negative social perceptions. Peer acceptance in sport-based settings is influenced by how well an individual can follow group norms, maintain emotional control, and engage respectfully with others (Lopez-Williams et al., 2005). Although much of the literature attributes peer rejection among adolescents with ADHD to individual social skill deficits, it is important to notice that exclusion often happens from a bigger group dynamic. Lopez-Williams et al. (2005), noticed that “rejection from peers is not

always a direct result of poor social skills but can follow from misunderstandings and inconsistent expectations in group settings such as sports” (p. 513). This allows the focus to shift from the individual athlete to the team environment which can also be fostered by the coach.

Although Staikova et al. (2013) did not specifically examine sport settings, their findings on pragmatic language deficits have important implications for athletic environments, where adolescents must interpret social cues quickly, communicate clearly, and coordinate with others under pressure. They explain that an athlete with ADHD may misread tone or sarcasm, fail to clarify misunderstood instructions, or appear self-focused when dominating conversations, leading to misattributed blame or social exclusion. Peer frustration can also escalate when the individual struggles to interpret intent or regulate emotional responses, contributing to breakdowns in team communication. The authors go on to explain that while individual sports may present fewer peer-related demands, athletes with ADHD still rely heavily on coach communication, structured practice routines, and self-regulation during competition. Ultimately, difficulties with pragmatic language, behavioural regulation, and social perception help explain why many adolescents with ADHD experience peer rejection and conflict in sport contexts. These challenges often lead to reduced participation, social withdrawal, or even exclusion, highlighting the importance of informed coaching, peer education, and supportive environments for neurodiverse athletes.

Navigating Communication Challenges

Adolescents with ADHD not only face challenges with peer relationships and communication, but these difficulties can also lead to long-term impacts such as exclusion from sport, lowered self-confidence, and, in some cases, a complete withdrawal from athletic

participation. There are many reasons why an adolescent with ADHD might struggle in a sporting environment. According to Lee et al. (2014), misunderstanding verbal instructions can feel overwhelming. When this is coupled with misinterpreting constructive criticism as a personal attack, it may lead to outbursts or withdrawal. Without clear directions, adolescents can feel lost, and many are uncomfortable asking for clarification. Delayed processing time, a common challenge in ADHD, can make it difficult to respond quickly to cues, especially when inattentiveness is also present (Lee et al., 2014). This can be frustrating in fast-paced settings like drills or games, leading coaches and teammates to perceive the individual as not listening or not trying, which can increase conflict.

As mentioned earlier, adolescents with ADHD who display disruptive behaviour, even if they are athletic, are still likely to be socially rejected by their peers (Lopez-Williams et al., 2005). This highlights yet another reason why ongoing conflict with coaches or teammates can contribute to disengagement or dropout. In fact, peer rejection often creates a negative cycle where students with ADHD are excluded for behaviours tied to their diagnosis, which then decreases their motivation to participate, increases feelings of failure, and eventually leads to them stepping away from team environments altogether (Lopez-Williams et al., 2005).

Lee et al. (2014) also noted that negative coaching approaches, particularly those involving yelling, singling out, or authoritarian control, can trigger heightened emotional dysregulation. For adolescents with ADHD, emotional dysregulation can quickly escalate in these high-pressure environments, especially when they are not given the space to regulate or are misread as disrespectful. When emotional reactions are misunderstood, particularly in the intensity of competitive sports, adolescents are often mislabelled as defiant, lazy, or uncoachable, rather than recognized as struggling with regulation or processing.

Many adolescents with ADHD also experience social and sensory challenges such as difficulty interpreting social cues, pragmatic language deficits, and sensory overload (Engel-Yeger & Ziv-On, 2011). Sporting environments often involve loud noise, strong smells, physical contact, crowded spaces, and rapid transitions, all of which can be overstimulating and result in fatigue, shutdown, or avoidance. Engel-Yeger & Ziv-On (2011) found that these combined challenges significantly increase the risk of sport dropout among neurodivergent youth. Sensory overload can also contribute to irritability or withdrawal during practices, which may be misinterpreted by coaches or teammates, resulting in further isolation.

Coaches play a critical role in shaping these experiences. Those who provide structure, offer individualized support, and emphasize relationship-building over punishment are far more likely to keep adolescents with ADHD engaged and thriving (Engel-Yeger & Ziv-On, 2011). Creating predictable routines, clear communication expectations, and positive reinforcement strategies can help athletes feel more competent and connected. Sports have the potential to be powerful tools for mental health and social development, but only when inclusion and understanding are present. Without this, repeated experiences of failure, misinterpretation, and exclusion can shape a long-term identity of “not being good at sports,” reducing self-worth and decreasing motivation.

According to Lee et al. (2014), adolescents with ADHD often face a cycle of low confidence, poor movement skills, and difficulties with self-regulation, interoception, and executive control, all of which are significant barriers to sport participation. These cumulative barriers often have nothing to do with interest or effort, but rather stem from misunderstanding and misalignment between the athlete's needs and the sport environment. As shown above, there are many reasons an adolescent with ADHD may withdraw from sports even while still wanting

to be involved. With greater awareness and coach education, the narrative around coaching neurodivergent youth can shift toward empathy, inclusion, and long-term engagement.

Adolescents with ADHD face a range of challenges that extend far beyond the classroom and significantly impact their ability to participate meaningfully in sports. Emotional dysregulation, executive functioning deficits, peer relationship struggles, and communication difficulties all contribute to a sporting environment that can feel overwhelming or inaccessible. Even highly skilled athletes with ADHD are at risk of social rejection or exclusion if their behaviour is misunderstood or misinterpreted by coaches and teammates. The pressure to perform, difficulty regulating emotions, and inability to respond quickly to verbal cues or transitions can create ongoing frustration that, over time, leads to disengagement and even dropout. Despite these barriers, sports have the potential to be a powerful source of confidence, connection, and emotional regulation for adolescents with ADHD. For this to happen, however, adults in athletic settings must develop a deeper understanding of ADHD and its unique impact on performance and behaviour. When coaches and teams respond with empathy, flexibility, and structured support, adolescents with ADHD are more likely to thrive both on and off the field. This highlights the importance of psychoeducation and informed coaching strategies, which will be explored in the next section.

Theme Two: Empowering Coaches to Support Athletes with ADHD

Building on the challenges explored in Theme 1, which examined how ADHD symptoms impact adolescents' participation in sports, this section will explore how psychoeducation and principles from sports psychology can be used as practical tools to support coaches in creating more inclusive, responsive, and supportive environments for neurodiverse athletes, specifically

those with ADHD. Theme one focused on the challenges adolescents face in sport, including emotional dysregulation (Ontiveros et al., 2025; Drechsler et al., 2020), social struggles and peer rejection (Lopez-Williams et al., 2005), communication difficulties (Staikova et al., 2013), and executive functioning deficits (Liang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). Without appropriate support, these difficulties can lead to miscommunication, conflict, and ultimately sport dropout (Lee et al., 2014).

Coaches work very closely with adolescents and often, by no fault of their own, have not been trained to support the needs of neurodiverse athletes, specifically athletes with ADHD. Integrating psychoeducation with sports psychology concepts, including motivation, goal setting, and mental and physical training, provides a framework for coaches to understand ADHD-related challenges. It also gives coaches the education needed to implement strategies that enhance team belonging, resilience, and performance by combining structured mental health knowledge with sport psychology coaching techniques. By doing so, this will allow for a greater opportunity for adolescents with ADHD to be successful, remain engaged, and build confidence while participating in sport.

While psychoeducation can be a helpful tool for educating others about specific disorders, its effectiveness may vary depending on individual factors. Psychoeducation uses research-based information, covers symptoms, impacts, and coping strategies and is presented in an accessible format (Ekhitari et al., 2017). To explain psychoeducation for this context, it could be seen as an intervention that integrates structured knowledge with emotional and motivational support, aiming to help individuals better understand and manage their condition (Ekhitari et al., 2017). However, it may not benefit everyone the same way, and alternative approaches may be necessary. Psychoeducation should be provided in different modalities such as visuals, stories,

and practical activities to give participants a well-rounded program and include active participation. When this is paired with sports psychology practices, it can become more than just informative and instead impactful. Coaches can not only learn what ADHD is and looks like, but also specific tools on how to help adolescents with ADHD by building confidence in different environments. By building supportive relationships and recognizing the strengths of adolescents with ADHD, coaches can play a pivotal role in helping them succeed in both sports and in other areas of life.

Benefits of Sport and Physical Activity

There is significant evidence surrounding the benefits that sports and physical activity have for an adolescent with ADHD. In terms of one's general health, it can reduce mortality, lower coronary heart disease risk, and decrease risk factors for type 2 diabetes (Kiluk, Weden, & Hoza, 2009). The mental health benefits include an increase in self-esteem and elevated feelings of well-being (Kiluk, Weden, & Hoza, 2009). Even short amounts of physical activity can improve mood, with long-term effects of physical activity that include fewer depression symptoms overall (Kiluk, Weden, & Hoza, 2009).

Specifically related to adolescents who have ADHD, physical activity and sport can be a great outlet and provide many benefits. Adolescents with ADHD are at risk for social rejection, poor peer relationships, and emotional dysregulation, all of which can increase during sport settings (Kiluk, Weden, & Hoza, 2009). Sport settings can create important social environments for making peer connections by decreasing peer isolation and offering a structured place for learning and practicing the social skills needed to feel connected (Kiluk, Weden, & Hoza, 2009). Doing physical activity can also impact executive functioning processes by improving working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Montalva-Valenxuela et al., 2022), all of

which can be challenging for children with ADHD. Sporting environments also offer individuals the chance to make tactical decisions, quick attention shifts, and self-regulation (Montalva-Valenxuela et al., 2022). According to Ng et al. (2017), vigorous aerobic exercise showed an increase in sustained attention, working memory, and executive functioning. Running, skipping, and sport-based therapy all showed benefits for attention and a decrease in inattention symptoms (Ng et al., 2017). Exercise programs can be linked to a reduction in hyperactivity, impulsivity, moodiness, and emotional dysregulation, all of which are prominent symptoms of the disorder, at both home and school (Ng et al., 2017). Adolescents with ADHD often struggle with behavioural regulation, but through sport, especially cooperative games, yoga, and tai chi, there can be an improvement in social interactions and cooperation among adolescents (Ng et al., 2017). In general, sports also enhance motor skills, physical fitness, balance, and coordination (Ng et al., 2017). Sports and physical activity can have a positive impact on self-esteem and social skills, which in turn help develop teamwork, persistence, and self-confidence (Ng et al., 2017). There are many benefits of playing sports, especially for those individuals who have ADHD. By encouraging the participation of sports paired with coaches who understand what ADHD is and how to support it, these athletes will be able to use sports as a positive aspect of their lives.

In addition to sports providing many benefits to athletes with ADHD it is equally important to recognize the strengths that athletes with ADHD bring to their teams and the sporting environment. Many athletes with ADHD have above average energy levels which can be translated into hustle, stamina, and intensity (White & Shah, 2011). Athletes with ADHD often have to overcome barriers in their day to day life and as such are very resilient (Ontiveros et al., 2025). As such, they are able to persevere through hard situations in sport settings and have the confidence to know they have done it before. Wolfe & Madden (2016), highlight the

capacity for athletes with ADHD being able to hyperfocus in stimulating contexts such as competition and think outside the box which can lead to problem solving approaches different than the rest of their team. Lastly, athletes with ADHD bring a different sense of determination, energy, and creativity to their teams which can foster an inclusive team culture, especially when coaches are there to support this in the process.

The Role of Sports Psychology

To begin with, sports psychology explores the mental and emotional factors that influence an athlete's ability to perform and compete. Adolescents can struggle in a sporting setting, but by helping them build confidence, focus and resilience, these athletes will have much better outcomes. According to Zhang et al., sports psychology is the study of how psychological factors affect athletic performance and participation (2025). Sport psychology includes goal setting, motivation, emotional regulation, resilience building, and mental preparation (Zhang et al., 2025). When thinking about competition and sport, it is important to remember that mental preparation is just as important as physical preparation. Coaching styles play a large role in how successful an athlete can be. An autonomy supportive coach will help adolescents have a healthy mindset, emotional resilience, and long-term development that promotes psychological safety (Zhang et al., 2025). Adolescents are often more likely to learn how to push through challenging situations if they have a coach who is on their team and willing to be supportive. Autonomy supportive coaching increases optimism, an increase in confidence, and commitment to a team or sport (Zhang et. al, 2025). Mental skills, such as discipline and emotional regulation, are crucial during competitive pressure. These traits can help both athletes and coaches achieve success. Although Zhang et al. do not refer to ADHD in their article, it can be inferred that adolescents with ADHD will be more successful with a coach who is mindful of sports psychology.

Adolescents with ADHD struggle with frustration tolerance, impulsivity, and performance control. This is where the resilience piece would come through. If the environment is safe, emotionally, adolescents are more likely to succeed. Sports psychology aligns with these traits as well because those with ADHD function better when there is predictability, encouragement, feedback loops, and visualization or mental clarity in a coaching setting.

In a study done by Phrathep et al. (2022) that looked at a 15-year-old male athlete who was diagnosed with ADHD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), the study examined the effectiveness of a sport-specific Performance Optimization Program (POP). The program was based on sports psychology and cognitive behavioural techniques, particularly during the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. The POP is aimed at increasing athletic performance and personal development by teaching athletes how to apply mental skills both on and off the field or court (Phrathep et al., 2022). The program lasted 14 weeks and included skills such as goal setting, self-talk, imagery, mindfulness, emotional regulation, and performance routines all of which were tracked across his their baselines, throughout the program, and in the follow up phases using both coach and parent observation as well as self-reporting by the athletes (Phrathep et al., 2022). The outcome of the program revealed an improvement in focus, emotional regulation, confidence and a greater ability to focus during practices and games. The athlete also learned strategies that are helpful in other aspects of his life unrelated to a sports environment (Phrathep et al., 2022). Although this is a specific example and was done during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is an interesting part of research that links sport psychology with athletes who have ADHD. Overall, these findings highlight how sports psychology principles, when applied through supportive coaching, can equip adolescents with ADHD to build resilience, regulate emotions, and thrive both on and off the field.

Psychoeducation for Coaches

Psychoeducation can serve as a bridge between awareness and action, helping coaches move beyond observation to informed, compassionate responses that help athletes succeed and grow both as athletes and individuals. Psychoeducation gives more than just simple information; it can provide cognitive, emotional, and motivational components to an individual to help them understand their specific condition (Ekhtiari et al., 2017). If psychoeducation is delivered correctly, it is done in context and interactively with the individual. When looking at adolescents, coaches who have psychoeducation training in how to respond to an athlete with ADHD can be invaluable. Some of the goals of psychoeducation are to increase knowledge and provide up-to-date information on the condition and reduce the stigma and misconceptions that may exist (Ekhtiari et al., 2017). Coaches are often working on the front lines with adolescents with ADHD but may lack the knowledge and understanding of what the disorder actually is. Psychoeducation can be used to help teach skills and learn strategies on how to respond appropriately, which promotes growth instead of punishment (Ekhtiari et al., 2017). In a study by Sebbens et al., a sport-specific psychoeducation training program was examined to improve mental health literacy and early intervention confidence among coaches (2017). In this study 166 sport staff (coaches, trainers, and administrators) were put through a four-hour interactive session that included identifying common mental health problems, how to approach and communicate if an athlete is struggling, how to refer to the appropriate support, and strategies to provide support in a sporting environment (Sebbens et al., 2016). The results showed a significant improvement in depression, anxiety, and confidence, and after six weeks, the positive effects were still happening (Sebbens et al., 2016). The questionnaires used were the Depression Literacy (D-Lit) and the Anxiety Literacy (A-Lit), in which confidence was measured through four different skills: recognizing,

approaching, referring, and supporting an athlete (Sebbens et al., 2016). This is one example of how psychoeducation provided coaches with an understanding of mental health and practical sport-specific strategies to support and refer out for help if athletes need it.

The components of psychoeducation would be providing a scientific explanation of a condition, while still using appropriate language without taking away the significance, thus making it relevant to the person it is intended for (Ekhtiari et al., 2016). Hence, the learner feels engaged and able to problem-solve (Ekhtiari et al., 2017). Although not stated by Ekhitari et al. (2016) or Sebbens et al. (2016), this information about psychoeducation and mental health can be applied to coaching adolescents with ADHD. Coaches need to be given the knowledge of what ADHD is and how to understand the symptoms. Although challenging, if coaches can change any preconceived notions or negative attitudes towards ADHD, it can reduce frustration and punitive reactions, which will provide a better outcome for the athlete with ADHD. By breaking down skill development targeted explicitly for an individual with ADHD, such as reinforcing effort and slowing down instructions, the results will be more effective. Finally, leading with empathy will help a coach understand emotional challenges during training and games. In conclusion, providing coaches with psychoeducation, specifically regarding ADHD, adolescents will be able to be more successful in a sporting environment.

Tools and Strategies for Coaches

By understanding psychoeducation and sports psychology, coaches can be equipped to translate this knowledge into practical and evidence-based coaching tools. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that causes inattention, impulsivity and or hyperactivity, which, in a sport setting, would make following multi-step instructions and managing emotional regulation during games and practices very challenging (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). Understanding what

ADHD is and how to support athletes with ADHD allows coaches to foster team belonging, skill development, and enable adolescents to have positive sport experiences. Coaching athletes with ADHD requires balancing strategies that keep athletes engaged while still also working on skill development. Ahmann et al. (2017) describe the purpose of coaching individuals with ADHD as focusing on strategies to help with executive functioning, such as organization, time management, focus, and emotional regulation. Coaches who are supportive rather than authoritative allow the individual to understand what they are struggling with and then develop real-world solutions.

Building on the importance of equipping coaches with skills to recognize and respond to the needs of athletes with ADHD, the following section will outline practical strategies that coaches can implement in both practices and game situations to foster growth both in personal and sport environments. It is important to note that not all adolescents with ADHD will come with a label or diagnosis, nor will all parents/athletes want to share that information, as such, coaches must understand what the signs or symptoms are, not to point it out or diagnose it, but so that they can use the strategies that are helpful for those individuals. It is also important to acknowledge that while many of these strategies can be universally applicable and will benefit all athletes, some accommodations will need to be made specifically for those with ADHD.

To begin with, establishing a clear structure and routine for practices will enable adolescents with ADHD to know what to expect and what is expected of them, leading to less frustration (Ahmann et al., 2017). In a sports setting, this could involve using the same drills for both warm-up and cool-down, or planning practices that follow a consistent format. Although the drills and teaching methods may vary, the format itself remains the same (Ahmann et al., 2017). Breaking down tasks into smaller, manageable ones or chunking a drill into smaller parts can

decrease a sense of overwhelm, leading to less emotional dysregulation from an adolescent with ADHD (Ahmann et al., 2017). Providing visual support such as diagrams, checklists, and colour-coded schedules or plays can help reduce working memory load, making it less challenging to stay focused and engaged (Ahmann et al., 2017).

When coaching adolescents with ADHD, it is essential to understand the specific neurodevelopmental profile to understand what supports may be the most beneficial and which may be detrimental (Thurston et al., 2023). Avoid assuming that behaviours are due to defiance and instead try to see behaviours as a symptom of the disorder (Thurston et al., 2023). Providing consistent routines decreases anxiety and cognitive load, which can then let athletes focus on skill execution rather than guessing what transition is coming next (Thurston et al., 2023). Checking for understanding by asking the athlete what has been asked of them or what they need to do, or by repeating back the instruction, is a great tool to utilize (Thurston et al., 2023). In addition, clear, concise language and short sentences help to avoid multistep directions without the support of visuals or time to break down the tasks (Thurston et al., 2023; Wolfe & Madden, 2016).

Adolescents with ADHD struggle with focus during training, following multi-step instructions, and managing emotional regulation during practices and games (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). Giving instructions directly before a drill or skill limits distraction time, while visual cues and demonstrations during explanations further support understanding (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). Limiting external noise and stimuli when possible, allowing movement breaks for self-regulation, and using shorter, varied drills with breaks in between can help sustain attention (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). When giving feedback, it is important to be very specific and immediate, related to the particular skill or behaviour, and to reinforce positive behaviour and

effort throughout the game or practice rather than all at once at the end (Wolfe & Madden, 2016; Ahmann et al., 2017).

When incorporating sport psychology and strategies, examining goal setting and accountability can be a valuable tool to use (Ahmann et al., 2017). Setting clear and measurable goals that are realistic can help with athlete motivation and performance reflection (Ahmann et al., 2017). It is vital to be strength-based when doing this and to emphasize effort and persistence, not just the outcome of the games (Ahmann et al., 2017; Thurston et al., 2023). Positive reinforcement can lead to an increase in confidence, which is often a struggle for adolescents with ADHD (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). Teaching self-advocacy, such as encouraging adolescents to communicate their needs to their coaches, teammates, and officials, can help build emotional confidence (Ahmann et al., 2017). Another effective strategy in sports psychology is the combination of mindfulness and visualization. According to Modesto-Lowe et al. (2015), mindfulness may improve self-regulation and attention, showing that it may be a good tool to use not only for adolescents with ADHD but also for the whole team.

In a study done by Reitman et al. (2005), parents of children with ADHD took part in a program called “Parent as a Coach Program.” The main goal of the program was for children with ADHD to increase sports participation skills, for example, following rules and staying on task, and to improve social behaviour, for example, teamwork and cooperation (Reitman et al., 2005). In this program, parents would take on a coaching role that had an emphasis on positive reinforcement, rules, and clear expectations during the sporting activity (Reitman et al., 2005). They were able to redirect or help manage off-task behaviour while still having their child participate in training sessions and game play (Reitman et al., 2005). Strategies included breaking down tasks into small steps, visual and verbal prompts, immediate and specific praise

for effort and behaviour, and predictable routines to create structure and consistency (Reitman et al., 2005). The program also incorporated sports psychology principles such as short-term goal setting, positive self-talk, and emotional regulation modelling (Reitman et al., 2005). The outcome of this study showed an increase in sports participation, improved peer interactions, and a decrease in disruptive behaviour when structure was consistently given, reinforcing that structure and predictability are among the most effective supports for athletes with ADHD (Reitman et al., 2005).

Supporting athletes with ADHD requires coaches to move beyond general strategies and adopt approaches that are individualized, engaging, and responsive to the unique needs of each athlete. Although time-consuming, when coaches take the time to really get to know their athletes, especially those with ADHD, it makes the overall process easier (Brown, 2025). Understanding effective strategies, recognizing what does not work, and identifying signs early can help athletes stay on track and meet them where they are (Brown, 2025). Keeping everyone actively engaged at all times, by making the drills fast-paced and stimulating, helps adolescents sustain their focus and are less likely to be distracted (Houchin, 2025). For example, using different coloured cones, varied equipment, and more nets than needed can help adolescents become more engaged, even if the equipment is not specifically designed for that sport. Adolescents with ADHD tend to experience failure quite often. By embracing failure in a sports setting and then leading discussions afterwards, adolescents can discuss what was challenging and explore ways to improve (Houchin, 2025). This approach involves all team members, fostering teamwork and growth, and reframes the idea that failure is bad. Another key strategy for adolescents with ADHD can be providing them opportunities to fidget to self-regulate (Brown, 2025). This can look like standing at the back but continuing to listen, pulling on straps

or twisting small pieces of equipment in their hands, or sitting on a ball. Avoid threatening or punishing, as adolescents with ADHD tend to live in the ‘now’; if an issue arises, talk to the individual in private to avoid shame and escalation (Brown, 2025). Ultimately, by focusing on connection, engagement, and positive redirection, coaches can create an environment where athletes with ADHD feel understood, supported, and motivated to grow.

While providing coaches with evidence-based strategies is essential in supporting athletes with ADHD, it is also important to realize that supporting these athletes often goes beyond the coach. By incorporating the school counsellor into the life of the student-athlete with ADHD it allows the student to be supported with the challenges they are facing with sports as well as on a larger social-emotional scale

Theme Three- Bridging the Gap Between Athlete and Coach

Understanding ADHD and identifying strategies to support adolescent student-athletes provides a strong foundation for assisting this group of individuals. However, these tools alone will not address all the challenges young athletes come across both on and off the field or court. It is important to consider the role of the school counsellor, who bridges mental health, academic, and athletic needs, ensuring students have tools for resilience and self-advocacy. There is an increasing emphasis placed on the importance of mental health in schools and when incorporating athletes who are neurodivergent, the need is even higher (Brown, 2025). Research by Zhang et al., (2024); Phrathep et al., (2022); and Brown, (2025), shows that student-centered counselling approaches foster emotional regulation, self advocacy skills, and the confidence to thrive in sporting settings. This section reviews the literature on school-based counselling interventions for athletes with ADHD.

Self-Determination Theory:

There are several types of counselling theories that can be used to support student-athletes with ADHD. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), for example, looks at human motivation, growth and well-being and the idea that people have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Fostering these needs in sport settings allows adolescents to develop self-regulation, motivation, and well-being all of which are crucial for athletes with ADHD. Autonomy-supported environments help adolescents develop intrinsic motivation, persistence, and emotional well-being (Zhang et al., 2024). SDT promotes autonomy, confidence, and belonging which can be areas where adolescents with ADHD often struggle and encourages them to make choices and set goals (Zhang et al., 2024). The purpose of the study was aimed at looking at the effects of autonomy-supportive coaching on adolescent athletes and how the overall psychological development is with a focus on athletes with neurodevelopmental disorders, including ADHD (Zhang et al., 2024). The study identified which coaching behaviours and environments best promote self-advocacy and well-being in sport. Athletes exposed to autonomy-supportive coaching showed greater resilience and optimism compared to those in more controlling environments (Zhang et al., 2024). Adolescents with ADHD are more sensitive to negative feedback and often respond positively to validation and autonomy. These skills will not only benefit sport settings but also in other areas of life where being confident and emotionally skilled is beneficial in day-to-day life.

Throughout the article, the authors mention SDT as a tool to foster empowerment and self-advocacy by using athlete choice and feedback (Zhang et al., 2024). By providing athletes the ability to have input in their choices but also having skill mastery and positive team climate it allows the adolescent the freedom to be themselves. SDT allows intrinsic motivation and well-

being for youth athletes and positive outcomes are especially important for neurodiverse youth such as those with ADHD (Zhang et al., 2024). The rationale for fostering empowerment, self-advocacy, and optimism using coaching practices focused on athlete choice and a supportive environment provide an inclusive environment for all. School counsellors and coaches best support athletes by creating autonomy-supportive environments that emphasize choice, voice, and individualized feedback, especially for adolescents with ADHD.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT):

Another intervention for adolescents with ADHD could be Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), as it can help counsellors use goal-setting and self-advocacy strategies for students with ADHD. Lim et al. (2020), studied whether group SFBT could improve social skills, emotional well-being, and self-efficacy to reduce ADHD symptoms in adolescents. The study also assessed the effectiveness of SFBT as a practical intervention for those adolescents with ADHD. SFBT identifies the solution to a given problem by looking at personal strengths and then setting attainable goals rather than looking at the past (Lim et al., 2020). This approach could be very beneficial to student athletes who are struggling with self-confidence, as SFBT is strength-based and provides consistent support. Participants attended eight weekly group sessions focusing on goal-setting, identifying exceptions, and actionable steps (Lim et al., 2020). The findings showed that adolescents who took part in the SFBT group had a large reduction in ADHD symptoms and increased feelings of self-efficacy, social functioning, and emotional regulation (Lim et al., 2020). This type of therapy focuses on strengths, confidence building, and develops action plans that help adolescents manage daily challenges (Lim et al., 2020).

Although Hsu et al. (2021) did not focus directly on student-athletes, their study examined SFBT's effectiveness with youth facing behaviour problems, including ADHD. They

noted that SFBT “focuses on the construction of solutions rather than assessing and solving problems, using a variety of specific strategies to build small, positive changes that then reverberate through the client’s system to become amplified into larger and lasting change (p. 2). SFBT use of techniques such as the miracle question, scaling and focusing on exceptions can help adolescents set achievable goals, maintain motivation, and build self-efficacy all of which are important skills for a sport setting. As shown by Lim et al. (2020) & Hsu et al. (2021), SFBT could be an option for school counsellors to support adolescents with ADHD because it can provide structured yet flexible goal-setting and be used in a group, which can be beneficial in settings where time and resources are limited.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):

A school counsellor is typically not practicing deep therapeutic work within the highschool setting and instead would be more seen as a triage system. Wood & Turner (2025) give an overview of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a modern counselling approach that is gaining popularity within a sports psychology setting. ACT was formally introduced in the 1980’s and 1990’s and became known as a “third-wave”, meaning it integrates behaviourism and Cognitive Behavioural Techniques (CBT) with mindfulness, acceptance, and a focus on values (Wood & Turner, 2025). Using this type of therapy with student athletes would be helpful as it “provides individuals a choice in when to allow thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations to control them, and when to attend to pressing matters” (Wood & Turner, 2025, p. 3). Although not developed or stated specifically, for adolescents with ADHD, ACT can be used to support emotional regulation, self-advocacy, and mental performance in athletes, all of which are areas that adolescents with ADHD struggle with. Interventions can be delivered individually or in groups/workshops, targeting issues like anxiety, performance pressure, perfectionism, self-

criticism, and resilience (Wood & Turner, 2025). Some of the interventions listed in the article include visualizing thoughts as objects, labelling recurring worries, and repeating affirmations, all of which are very useful for athletes struggling with self-doubt or negative self-talk (Wood & Turner, 2025). To help with anxiety and performing under pressure, mindfulness activities can be taught which can then be used during game or practice settings (Wood & Turner, 2025). The benefits of using this type of therapy include an improved psychological flexibility, emotional regulation, and resiliency which aligns with athlete values, however, some of the challenges include explaining abstract concepts to athletes and ensuring buy-in as ACT focuses more on the process rather than changing entire thoughts (Wood & Turner, 2025). School counsellors and coaches can use ACT tools to help with performance challenges but also to support the long-term emotional resilience and self-advocacy skills for student athletes, especially those who have ADHD.

All three of the articles discuss evidence-based, strengths-oriented therapies to support adolescents in a sport setting. Solution Focused Based Therapy, Self-Determination Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy each emphasize positive self-talk, empowering the athlete to set goals, and to take ownership of their progress. SFBT is short term, goal-orientated, and strength based that targets behavioural problems through practical solutions. This is shown by Hsu et al. (2021), conducting a meta-analysis of SFBT for behavioural issues in adolescents with success from externalized behaviours. Zhang et al. (2024), use autonomy-supportive coaching to nurture resilience and optimism in a team context. Wood & Turner (2025) apply ACT in various sports settings with athletes who are facing anxiety and perfectionism. Combining parts from each therapy may be most beneficial when working with adolescents with ADHD as they each support their psychological and behavioral growth in high stress environments.

To illustrate a real world application and case study regarding the importance of evidence based interventions and support from counsellors, Lund provides a strong example that ties together the need for coaches to have the necessary support and training to properly coach adolescents with ADHD. In the article by Lund (2025), it highlights the connection between athletics, academic stress and ADHD, “ADHD among student-athletes is important to me because, although college student-athletes traditionally experience more stressors than their campus peers due to the demands of their dual roles, the additional presence of ADHD often compounds their stress” (p. 40). While structured athletic routines can help manage symptoms, additional academic and emotional support is often needed (Lund, 2025). In one case, a student-athlete with ADHD, anxiety, and depression benefited from counselling focused on managing routines, medication and academic deadlines. The counsellor taught strategies like setting timers and reminders, chunking work, and seeking self-care (Lund, 2025). The intervention sessions also included finding self-care options such as breaks, physical activity, or social connection to prevent burnout. Over the period of counselling, the students experienced “mood improvements and increased confidence,” with measurable progress on depression and anxiety scales. Not only did academic performance improve but increased self-regulation and coping skills also restored the student’s athletic motivation and participation (Lund, 2025). Lund also advocates for mental health services be within the athletic departments, making access easier for busy athletes, and sending the message that mental health is a priority, “having in-house mental health services sends a message that the athletic department prioritizes mental health and thus normalizes it as an inherent part of athletics” (2025, p. 44). Self-advocacy means teaching athletes to recognize their needs, communicate them, and find accommodations in both settings while building resilience involves fostering coping mechanisms to navigate setbacks or stressors (Lund, 2025).

The article showcases that interventions that focus on a specific skill such as self-advocacy, executive functioning, and resilience are more foundational than offering general emotional support; providing athletes with concrete strategies helps them meet both the academic and athletic parts of their lives (Lund, 2025). Effective support for student-athletes with ADHD requires an in-depth understanding of the athlete's world including their daily struggles, schedules, performance pressures and what their identity is (Lund, 2025). As Lund concludes, "The more a provider understands their clients world and can express this understanding, the more likely you are to quickly build rapport and create a productive therapeutic relationship leading to better client outcomes (Lund, 2025, p. 46). Connection and rapport are not only best practice but the foundation for building trust and growth within an individual (Lund, 2025).

School counsellors have a unique role when working with adolescents with ADHD in a sport setting. The integration of evidence-based interventions including autonomy-supportive coaching, solution-focused brief therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy are some examples of how counsellors can provide support for student-athletes with ADHD. The literature review and case study that is highlighted in theme three demonstrate that when coaches and school counsellors collaborate and come up with strategies that will work for specific individuals it can foster resiliency, self-advocacy, and long-term success both in and out of sport.

Summary and Application of Capstone Project

Adolescents with ADHD face a unique set of challenges in sports environments, as difficulties with emotional regulation, executive functioning, communication, and sensory processing often interfere with their ability to participate and thrive on a team fully. The core symptoms of ADHD include inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and emotional dysregulation, making participating in sports quite challenging by interfering with following

instructions, maintaining focus, and managing emotions (Wolfe & Madden, 2016). Emotional dysregulation can look different for each individual but often manifests in outbursts, acts of frustration, or withdrawal during games and practices (Ontiveros et al., 2025). It can also contribute to difficulties with executive function, which is needed for many aspects of life, including sport (Ontiveros et al., 2025). Executive functioning deficits would be disorganization, forgetfulness, poor planning, and difficulties shifting attention, which can disrupt both practices and game play, reducing team cohesion (Chen et al., 2023; Feng et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2021). As well as emotional dysregulation, adolescents with ADHD can also struggle with peer relationships and are more likely to experience rejection, miscommunication, or conflict with team members or coaches (Lopez-Williams et al., 2005). Adolescents with ADHD can also have trouble interpreting social cues, and pragmatic language can create misunderstandings in team environments (Staikova et al., 2013). Noises, smells, physical contact, and crowded environments are all a part of sporting environments, which contribute to sensory processing overload and challenges, all of which can cause overstimulation, outbursts or avoidance behaviours (Engel-Yeger & Ziv-On, 2011). Taken together, these emotional, cognitive, social, and sensory challenges illustrate why adolescents with ADHD are at increased risk of negative sport experiences and dropout, showcasing the importance of support to help them succeed in athletic environments.

While the challenges of ADHD in sport are significant, research shows that psychoeducation and sports psychology provide coaches with practical tools and strategies to create structured, supportive, and engaging environments where adolescents with ADHD can thrive. Furthermore, meaningful collaboration between coaches and school counsellors can provide holistic support to adolescent athletes with ADHD. Psychoeducation offers an

opportunity for coaches to gain a deeper understanding of ADHD symptoms, executive functioning difficulties, and emotional regulation strategies, which provides a sense of belonging and skill development (Ahmann et al., 2017). Psychoeducation coupled with sports psychology, which emphasizes mental preparation, resilience building, motivation, and emotional regulation, together can offer coaches the guidance they need to feel confident and successful in their coaching (Zhang et al., 2025). By promoting autonomy-supportive coaching, athletes can feel confident and psychologically safe, which is very important when coaching adolescents with ADHD who frequently face rejection and frustration (Zhang et al., 2025). Collaborating with parents, school staff, counsellors, and other coaches can help adolescents feel supported and strengthen wraparound services.

The research clearly states how important providing structure and routine are in practices and games to reduce anxiety and frustration and provide predictability (Ahmann et al., 2017; Thurston et al., 2023; Reitman et al., 2005). Breaking down tasks helps prevent overwhelm and encourages sustained focus and engagement (Ahmann et al., 2017). Using visual supports such as checklists, diagrams, and demonstrations can aid in the struggles with working memory and help with comprehension (Ahmann et al., 2017). Providing environmental accommodations such as clearing extra equipment, offering fidgets to support self-regulation, and allowing athletes to stand instead of sitting will help reduce distractions and allow movement to help regulate (Thurston et al., 2023; Wolfe & Madden, 2016; Brown, 2025). As noted by Houchin, making drills fast-paced and engaging for all athletes and embracing failure as a learning opportunity helps sustain focus and reframe setbacks as growth opportunities in 2025.

Coaches need more support when working with adolescents with ADHD. By creating and implementing this resource with information, support strategies, and techniques, coaches will be

better equipped to meet the needs of all participants on their teams and in their activities, thereby fostering greater inclusivity. Adolescents who are supported and encouraged in extracurricular activities, especially sports, are more likely to lead successful lives with a stronger sense of self. Many of these children benefit significantly from engaging in physical activity to regulate their bodies and emotions, creating more positive experiences for both coaches, teammates, and participants. This will be invaluable for everyone.

The handbook attached provides coaches with easy-to-understand strategies and drills. It focuses on real-world scenarios and solutions while still including tools for structuring practices and communicating with adolescents. This handbook has strategies that can be adapted for various sports and team environments and aims to fill a gap in available resources and improve confidence among coaches working with neurodiverse athletes. By equipping coaches with practical, inclusive tools and knowledge, this capstone strives to ensure that all adolescent athletes, especially those with ADHD, can thrive and reach their full potential in sport.

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