



sense

connecting sight, sound and life

# Sensory Tennis

Creating meaningful  
tennis activities for  
people with complex  
disabilities



LÜSÜ  
INCLUSIVE SPORTS



Open Court  
Disability Tennis



# Contents

## Section 1

### Introduction

- About Sense
- Why is sport important for people with complex disabilities?
- Our partners
- What is sensory tennis?
- Who can deliver sensory tennis?
- Outcomes

## Section 2

### Delivering sensory tennis

- How to plan your sessions
- Session plan example
- Suggested activities

## Section 3

### Evaluating your session

- Person-centred evaluation
- Observation of session delivery

### Key points to consider

### Suggested equipment list

## About Sense

Sense is a national disability charity that supports people with complex disabilities to communicate and experience the world. Sport and physical activity are an incredible way to do this, giving people a way to connect and feel valued. Our specialist team develop new opportunities for people with complex disabilities to be active.

Tennis has a lot to offer – everyone should have a chance to test their racket skills! That's why we've created sensory tennis. Sense want to support people to have meaningful sport experiences, with carefully designed activity plans and a person-centred approach.

## Why is sport important for people with complex disabilities?

- There are 1.6 million people with complex disabilities in the UK.
- The more complex someone's disability, the lower their activity levels are likely to be.
- Just two in five (39 %) people with three or more impairments are active.
- Just two in five (40 %) disabled people feel they have the opportunity to be as active as they'd like to be.

## Our partners

Sense have developed sensory tennis to support people with complex disabilities to find meaningful sport experiences. This work was carried out by the Sense Active team, in partnership with:



### Lawn Tennis Association (LTA)

The Open Court Programme is a national programme funded by Sport England and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA). It is delivered at a local level with a collaboration of key partners. The LTA aim to provide opportunities for disabled people to get involved in tennis through a person-centred approach.

The programme consists of disability specific activities, including tennis for people with learning disabilities, visual or hearing impairments and for people who use a wheelchair. It also includes activities for people with long-term health concerns, such as dementia or mental health conditions.

The Open Court programme is hosted across 40+ networks across the UK. There are over 500 venues that deliver disability specific or inclusive tennis opportunities.

You could be part of it! No matter where you want to play or how often, you could benefit from the programme:

- Get resources for your club or community venue to activate a tennis programme.
- You'll be given access to adaptive equipment.
- Speak to dedicated staff and trained coaches for expert advice, mentoring and support.

If you'd like more information about how the LTA and Open Court programme can support you to access tennis, please email [disabilitytennis@lta.org.uk](mailto:disabilitytennis@lta.org.uk)



## LUSU Sports

LUSU Sports are Lou and Sue – two passionate, energetic and knowledgeable tennis coaches. They're committed to making tennis a sport for everyone, so that we can all experience the joy and friendship that movement can bring.

They do this by training people to work with children and young adults with complex disabilities. Their sessions focus on activities that support mental health and wellbeing. For LUSU Sports, tennis is a chance for learning and

play – it should be flexible and it should be fun! They believe all activity and sport should be fully inclusive. We're in it together.

If you would like more information on how LUSU Sports can assist you, please email: [info@lususports.com](mailto:info@lususports.com)

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# What is sensory tennis?

To make any sport accessible, you need to truly understand the barriers that are preventing people from engaging. While tennis could be made more accessible by using a tennis ball with a bell or by making the court smaller, many people with complex disabilities would still be excluded. It's often other factors – like the concepts, rules and tactics of the game – that prevent people from joining in.

At Sense, we've developed our very own sensory tennis programme. The sport is broken down into separate activities that focus on the same tennis skills and allow participants to derive the same benefits, but in a more sensory and engaging way.

Person-centred delivery is at the heart of sensory tennis. We make sure that everyone's preferences, abilities and learning processes are understood by us, so that we can tailor the session to be just right. We believe in focusing on individual outcomes and celebrating each achievement. Together, we can support people with complex disabilities to get as much out of a tennis session as anyone else.



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The simple breakdown of the skills enabled all pupils to have a go and to achieve. This helped to educate staff that the pupils don't have to achieve the whole skill, as it would be perceived in a traditional tennis session. It encouraged a focus on every development and achievement.”  
Teacher, SEN School



# Who can deliver sensory tennis?

This toolkit is designed to support anyone involved in running activity sessions for people with complex disabilities. The information here is not technical. Even if you have little or no experience in delivering sport, this guide will enable you to start leading these activities. You can offer sensory tennis if you're a:

- Tennis coach
- School teacher or teaching assistant
- Care worker
- Family member

This resource can be used to organise tennis sessions in:

- Traditional tennis facilities
- Day, residential and supported living services
- Schools and colleges
- At home

## Outcomes

There's a lot we want to achieve with these activities – the scope for positive impact is huge. The most important outcomes relate to health, wellbeing and personal development. Anyone taking part in sensory tennis should be involved in identifying which outcomes they want to work towards. Each activity can then be designed to help them achieve their goals.

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**I'm always led by the participant. You can create a session plan, but you need to be flexible enough to understand that the pace and development will be decided by the participant – it'll vary depending on the outcomes they want to achieve."**  
Andy Bell, Tennis Chesterfield

**It's important that all sensory tennis sessions are outcome-led.**



Some goals are widely shared by those taking part in sensory tennis. Here are some examples:



### Independence

Work towards doing activities more independently.



### Fun

This activity will provide enjoyment.



### Health and fitness

Improve your strength, flexibility, fitness levels or weight.



### Try something new

Experience something you haven't tried before.



### Skill development

This activity will improve your coordination and fine-motor skills.



### Social skills

Increase your interaction with others and develop friendships.



### Communication

Develop your communication skills.



### Choice

Develop the ability to exercise choice by deciding how you want to complete an exercise.



### Exploration

Make use of your senses and show curiosity by exploring your environment.



These outcomes have applications within everyday life. Participants may find that they can complete day-to-day tasks with more confidence and independence, from getting dressed in the morning to socialising with others.

# Section

# 2

## Delivering sensory tennis

### How to plan your sessions

The activities within this toolkit are designed to be done anywhere, with whatever equipment you have available.

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I'm now confident in breaking down specific tennis skills. I'm not afraid to stay on that movement or activity for a longer amount of time than I would normally, to ensure the participant is confident in the task."

Ben Haworth, Brentwood Tennis Club



There are two different ways of delivering sensory tennis. Which one you decide to follow will depend on the outcomes participants are working towards.

## Option 1

Deliver a full session. This incorporates a coin toss, warm up, body and ball activity, racket and ball activity, celebration and handshake.

### Benefits

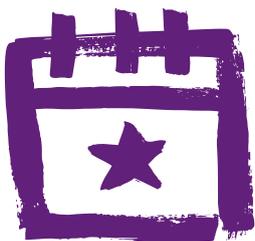
- ✓ Participants are able to work on a range of different skills. They therefore get to enjoy a wider variety of physical, mental and social outcomes.
- ✓ The session provides a complete and rounded tennis experience.

## Option 2

Select one skill. Focus in more depth on developing a particular skill and achieving one or two outcomes.

### Benefits

- ✓ Participants can focus on the skill they're interested in developing, prioritising the outcomes and achievements that mean the most to them.
- ✓ Repetition of a skill helps facilitate learning in people with complex disabilities.



In this guide, you'll find an activity plan to help you to structure your tennis sessions. This can be tailored to match the energy and ability of each participant. If the activities are no longer providing a challenge, use the progressions provided to make the sessions a bit more demanding. Or the opposite may be true – if the activities are too tricky at first, then we've also provided instructions to make the sessions slightly easier.

## Videos

Each activity is accompanied by a video, providing a demonstration of how the activity can be delivered. Find all videos at: [sense.org.uk/sensory-tennis](https://www.sense.org.uk/sensory-tennis)



# Session plan example

You can use this session plan as a guide for delivering your own sensory tennis sessions. Full instructions for each of the activities suggested in the table below can be found on pages 14–25.

What?	Why?	How?	Outcomes
What aspect of tennis are we focussing on?	Why is this an important part of the session?	How are we going to deliver this activity in a way that's suitable for someone with complex disabilities?	What benefits will participants gain by completing these activities?
<b>Coin toss</b> Page 14	Signalling the start of the sensory tennis session.	Create a sensory alternative to the 'coin toss'.	Understanding the sensory tennis session is about to start.
<b>Warm up</b> (5 mins) Pages 15–17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A chance to get used to your surroundings</li> <li>■ Working together as a group</li> <li>■ Raises the pulse</li> <li>■ Physical and mental preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Mapping the space and equipment</li> <li>■ Gradually introducing movement</li> <li>■ Making contact with others in the group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Improved spatial and body awareness</li> <li>■ Improved social and communication skills</li> <li>■ Improved physical health</li> <li>■ More independence</li> </ul>

To access a full six week session plan and further support and resources please visit [lususports.com/sensory-tennis](https://lususports.com/sensory-tennis)

<p><b>Body and ball</b> (10 mins) Pages 18–20</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Building spatial awareness</li> <li>■ Working on fine motor skills</li> <li>■ Understanding movement of the ball</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Practice controlling balls of different textures at different heights</li> <li>■ Bouncing a ball to a partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Body awareness</li> <li>■ Improved strength</li> <li>■ Improved hand-eye coordination</li> </ul>
<p><b>Racket and ball</b> (10 mins) Pages 21–23</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Learning tennis strokes</li> <li>■ Tracking a moving ball</li> <li>■ Developing arm and wrist strength</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Pushing a ball along the floor with the hand or racket</li> <li>■ Contacting a ball with a racket</li> <li>■ Imitating tennis stroke movements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Improved grip strength</li> <li>■ Improved hand-eye coordination</li> <li>■ Improved movement</li> </ul>
<p><b>Celebration</b> (10 mins) Page 24</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Celebrating our achievements</li> <li>■ Creating togetherness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Celebrating each achievement</li> <li>■ Working towards a personal goal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ More confidence</li> <li>■ Recognising achievements</li> <li>■ Sharing success with others</li> <li>■ Improved communication</li> </ul>
<p><b>Handshake</b> Page 25</p>	<p>Signalling the end of the sensory tennis session.</p>	<p>Create your own way of signalling that the session is over.</p>	<p>Understanding that the sensory tennis session has finished.</p>

# Coin toss

## Aims



This action marks the start of the sensory tennis session. It's a signal that will give participants a chance to mentally prepare for the activity ahead.



Communication

## Create your coin toss

Create something which represents the start of the tennis session. This could be a sound, colour, texture, movement or gesture that participants can learn to connect with the start of the activity. It's your way of communicating "we are ready to begin."

For example:

- A BSL sign for "go"
- A green cone
- Waving a tennis racket
- Feeling and flipping a coin

## Top tips

- Whatever you choose, it's important that everyone in the group can engage with it and understand the meaning it holds.
- To make the signal effective, it must be repeated at the same point in the session (at the very start) every week. This will help participants connect the signal with the start of the session and get themselves ready.



# Warm up

## Aims



These exercises raise pulses, stretch out limbs and help participants get ready for the session ahead! It's also a time for everyone to get used to their surroundings and start working together as a group.



Independence



Exploration



Health and fitness

## Mapping space and equipment



- 1 Move around the environment, feeling the perimeter of the space. This might be the walls, flooring or a net.
- 2 Pick up pieces of tennis equipment and explore their shape, size and texture.



## Make it easier

- Provide more support, guidance and direction to the participant when moving around and exploring the space.
- Suggest pieces of equipment for the participant to explore and support them to feel and squeeze each item.
- Spend longer exploring one piece of equipment in more detail.

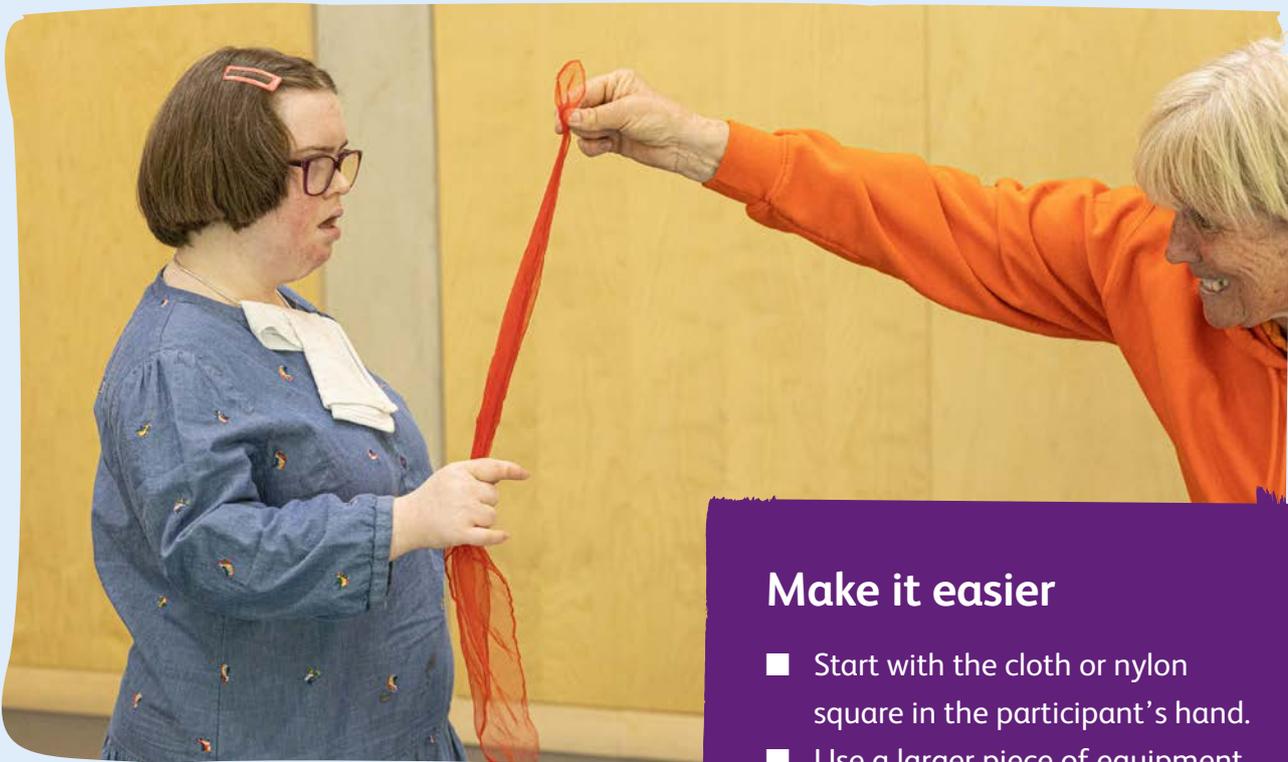
## Make it harder

- Encourage the participant to explore the environment more independently.
- Try exploring new pieces of equipment.
- Encourage the participant to interact with a number of different items in a specific amount of time. How do they differ in shape, size, weight and texture?

## Nylon squares



- 1 Work with a partner using a dish cloth or nylon square.
- 2 The partner pulls the cloth through one of the participant's hands as they try to grip it.
- 3 Try both hands.



### Make it easier

- Start with the cloth or nylon square in the participant's hand.
- Use a larger piece of equipment that's easier to grip.

### Make it harder

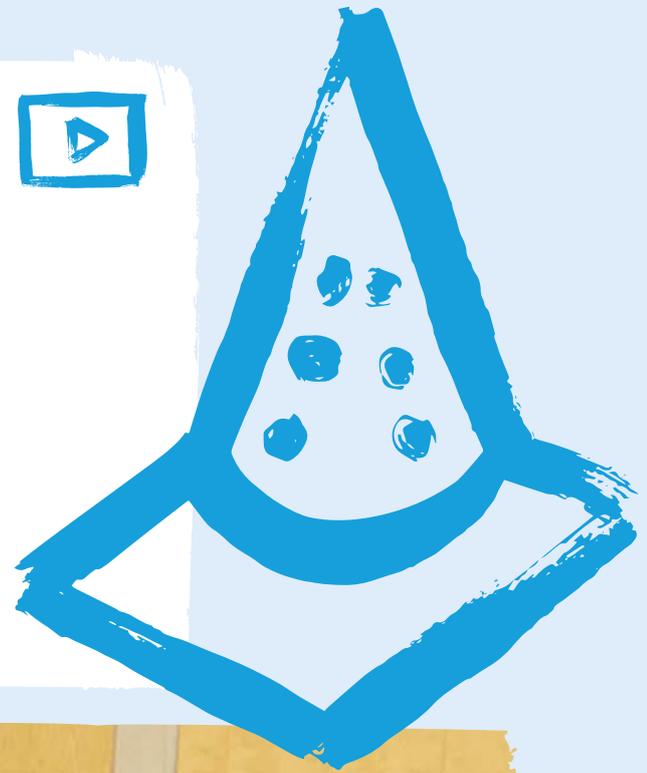
- Throw the cloth or nylon square into the air for the participant to try to catch.
- Try throwing and catching from different heights or distances.
- In a space, throw the cloth or nylon square into the air so the participant has to move to catch it.



## Side to side



- 1 Place two cones a metre apart on the floor or on a tabletop. The participant positions themselves in the middle.
- 2 The participant reaches out to the two cones, tapping each cone using right and left hands.
- 3 Try to alternate between cones.



### Make it easier

- Provide more support, guidance and direction to the participant.
- Move the cone towards the participant.

### Make it harder

- Move the cones further apart so the participant must move towards them.
- Encourage the participant to clap their hands after each tap to simulate the 'ready position' that players take between shots.



# Body and ball



## Aims



These activities will give participants a way to understand the movement of a ball in play. As they release and send away the ball, they'll also be heightening awareness of their own body.



Skill development



Choice



Try something new

## Grip and release



- 1 Use a range of balls with different textures and sizes.
- 2 Place a ball in the participant's hands and encourage them to grip it as tightly as possible.
- 3 Then, ask them to release the ball to the floor.
- 4 This activity can also be done seated at a table.



## Make it easier

- Support the participant to gently grip and release the ball.
- Use a single ball of the participant's choosing.

## Make it harder

- Encourage the participant to drop the ball from different heights.
- Set up a target area for the ball to hit on release.
- Challenge the participant to try to catch the ball after the bounce.

## Flying fish tapping



- 1 Working with a partner, use a 'flying fish' (see equipment list, p30) or a ball in a sock.
- 2 Partner holds the flying fish out at shoulder height.
- 3 Participant taps it by moving their hand upwards.
- 4 Alternatively, the partner holds the flying fish above the participant's head and they tap it with an overarm action.



### Make it easier

- Support the participant with hand movement.
- Move the flying fish closer to the participant's head or hand.

### Make it harder

- The flying fish is held loosely in the partner's hand, for the participant to tap it out of their grip onto the floor.
- Participant hits the ball with a racket instead of their hand.





## Bounce and catch

- 1 Place three balls next to the participant on a racket.
- 2 A partner stands 2 metres away facing the participant.
- 3 The participant picks up a ball and bounces it to their partner to catch.
- 4 Repeat with all three balls.



### Make it easier

- Support the participant with gripping and throwing each ball, guiding their hand movement.
- Remove the racket and start with a ball in the participant's hand.

### Make it harder

- Increase the number of balls for a longer game.
- Increase the distance between the participant and partner.
- Have the partner bounce the ball back to the participant for them to catch it.

# Racket and ball

## Aims

These activities introduce the use of a racket and simulate movements used in tennis strokes. They allow participants to develop upper body strength, spatial awareness and learn to track a moving ball with the eyes.



Skill development



Independence



Communication



Social skills

## Balloon tennis



- 1 Work with a partner using a balloon.
- 2 The partner releases the balloon into the air.
- 3 Using either one of their hands, the participant taps the balloon upwards, trying to keep it in the air.



## Make it easier

- Allow the partner to tap the balloon too, to keep it in the air for longer.
- Support with the participant's movement where needed.

## Make it harder

- Let the balloon travel across a wider space to increase movement.
- Use a racket to tap the balloon instead of the hand.
- Introduce a net or some barrier tape for the participant to tap the balloon across.

## Floor tennis



- 1 Working with a partner, stand or sit 2 metres apart facing each other.
- 2 The participant pushes a ball along the floor or tabletop with a racket towards their partner.
- 3 The partner pushes the ball back.
- 4 Add a challenge and see how many passes you can make!



### Make it easier

- Start with pushing the ball a small distance.
- Use hand or a giant foam hand instead of the racket.
- Support the participant to push the ball.

### Make it harder

- Increase the distance between the participant and partner.
- Try stopping the ball under the strings of the racket before pushing it back.



## Racket contact



- 1 A partner stands beside the participant and drops the ball vertically down from shoulder height.
- 2 The participant tries to hit the ball before it rolls away (multiple bounces are allowed).



### Make it easier

- Place the ball on top of a tall cone or empty plastic bottle and try to hit it off.
- Start with the racket held back.
- Support and guide the racket.

### Make it harder

- Drop the ball from waist height to reduce hitting time.
- Try to hit the ball after just one bounce.
- Create a target area or aim to hit the ball over a net.



# Celebration



## Aims

Each sensory tennis activity demands something from the participant. Their efforts and achievements should be celebrated in every session!

A celebration can be introduced to any of the activities within this resource. Simply choose an appropriate target number of hits, throws or catches for the participant to work towards, or challenge them to reach a personal best. Use ribbons, clapping and cheering to show that you recognise their efforts and progress. Their achievements can be monitored over a number of weeks to track improvements.



Fun



Choice



Try something new



## Here are a few examples of goals to celebrate:

- Pushing a ball five times back and forth with a partner using hand or racket.
- Pushing a ball through five sets of gates made from two cones or markers.
- Tapping a flying fish down onto a target area three times.
- How many times out of ten attempts can they hit a ball over the net when dropped by a partner?

# Handshake

## Aims



This action signals the end of the sensory tennis session. It's an opportunity for the participants to start winding down and preparing for a rest.

## Create your handshake

Create something which represents the end of the tennis session. This could be a sound, colour, texture, movement or gesture, that participants can learn to connect with the end of the activity. It's your way of communicating "we're now finished."



## Communication

## Examples could be:

- A round of applause
- A red cone
- Tapping rackets
- Tapping elbows

## Top tips

- Whatever you choose, it's important that everyone in the group can engage with it and understand the meaning it holds.
- This should be repeated at the same point every week (when all activities are finished) in order to help participants understand that they have now come to the end of the sensory tennis session.

# Section 3

## Evaluating your session

It's important to evaluate each session after you finish for the day. This way, you can ensure your participants' needs and outcome goals are being met.

We recommend doing this immediately after each session, while it's fresh in your mind. There are two different areas to consider when conducting your evaluation: the participants' engagement and your performance as a coach.

### 1 Person-centred evaluation

A person-centred evaluation involves considering the experiences of each participant. It's useful to involve the support staff in this process. They'll have been working closely with the participants during the session and can give a more detailed account of the individual's engagement.

**Consider the following:**

- **Skill development:** Are participants demonstrating new or improved skills which they have not done previously?
- **Strength, flexibility and movement:** Are the participants able to stretch further, hold or grip objects better, or move more quickly?
- **Social interactions:** Are participants making more contact with their peers

and others around them? This could be verbally, or through sign or touch.

- **Sharing a group environment:** Do participants appear more comfortable, calm and relaxed in a group and a sports-based environment?
- **Independence:** Are participants able to complete tasks or movements more independently, regardless of how small or subtle, that they were not able to before?
- **Recall and anticipation:** Do participants remember the activities from week to week, and recognise intuitively what it is they will be doing next?

Monitor each participant over the course of a few weeks. Try to notice how they develop each session in relation to the above areas.

## 2 Observation of session delivery

Think about how the session was delivered by the session leader or coach.

■ **How was communication used?**

Did the coach give the staff and participants clear information, using a variety of methods?

■ **How was mobility supported?**

Did the coach help the staff and participants to understand and negotiate the environment?

■ **Was enough time given?**

Was there sufficient time for the activities? Did the coach follow the pace of the participants and respect their choices? Were participants in control of each situation?

■ **How did the coach maximise the experience for the participants?**

Did they allow participants to try new things for themselves? Did they adapt the activities based on the needs of those taking part?

# Key points to consider

1

## Empower support staff

Support staff will know the participants best and will be working with them closely throughout the session.

Make sure that they feel empowered to adapt the activities to support or develop the participants as they see fit. Encourage them to be creative!

2

## Be patient

Don't worry if things take longer than expected, or if people don't move through all the set out activities in a session.

Focus on getting good quality engagement and positive outcomes from the session. If this means moving through the activities more slowly, or focusing only on one part of the session, that's ok.

3

## Acknowledge small achievements

Due to the complex disabilities of the participants involved, developments may not be apparent straight away.

Try to focus on the outcomes listed earlier in this resource, not just on participants' "tennis skills".

For example, some people find being in a group with others challenging. If, over a number of sessions, they showed signs of relaxing then that would be a huge achievement.

Those kinds of wins should be acknowledged and celebrated.

ee

For me, there's one thing tennis coaches need to get their head around when working with young people or adults with complex needs. It's that the goals and targets for any player in any session will need to be smaller and regularly acknowledged. In our programme, we use a person-centred approach so we know what the player is capable of and what is an achievement for them."

Neil Bates, Droitwich Lido Tennis

## 4

### Recognise independence

In time, participants may begin to recognise and complete tasks more independently. Be ready to support them to gradually take more of a lead in the activities.

## 5

### Recognise behaviour changes

Behaviour change may be very subtle. Work with staff, carers or family members who know the participant well to identify small, positive changes.

## 7

### Maintain consistency

Repeating the same activities over a number of weeks, with progression where possible, is key to the learning process for many individuals with complex disabilities.

Try to maintain a routine, with weekly sessions at the same time and place, if possible, to enhance the learning process.



It's so important to continually evaluate the quality and content of your activity sessions to make sure that the participant and their carer receive a tailored session that suits them best. Since I adopted this approach the quality of my sessions has improved dramatically."

Sue Morrison, LUSU

## 6

### Consider observation techniques

A weekly evaluation of a participant may be influenced by who is making the observation. Having the same person working with and assessing a participant's progress each week helps provide consistency and a more reliable comparison.

## 8

### Be flexible

There are many factors outside of your control which may impact the delivery of a sensory tennis session, such as unforeseen disruptions or challenging behaviour. Remember that it's ok to repeat activities, scale them back or move through them slowly if required.

# Suggested equipment list

Sensory tennis sessions are designed to be delivered with minimal equipment, using whatever you have available. Think about making them sensory by using different textures, sizes and colours.

Please contact LUSU to enquire about receiving a sensory tennis equipment bag.

To get the most out of the sessions, you may wish to purchase the following:



Rackets



Cones



Ribbons or scarves



Balls of various sizes and textures



Balloons



Nylon square or dish cloth



Flying fish – tie a small ball in a nylon square and tie that to another nylon square. Alternatively, tie a ball in a sock.



## Stay connected

We'd love to hear what you think of this resource.

- How have you been using it with the people you support?
- Has it changed the way you deliver tennis, or activities in general?
- Have some of your participants' health, skills or confidence improved?

## Have your say

Please let us know what you think by emailing us at [sense.active@sense.org.uk](mailto:sense.active@sense.org.uk), and we'll be in touch to find out more.

You can also stay connected through Twitter by tagging [@sensecharity](https://twitter.com/sensecharity) and including [#SenseActive](https://twitter.com/SenseActive)

## What next?

If you have enjoyed this resource you can find more sport and physical activity resources produced by Sense Active at [www.sense.org.uk/sense-sports](http://www.sense.org.uk/sense-sports)

## Want further support?

Contact [sense.active@sense.org.uk](mailto:sense.active@sense.org.uk) if you would like further support with delivering your sessions.

## Acknowledgements

This resource has been created by the Sense Active team. However, it would not have been possible without the help of:

- Sue and Lou from LUSU
- Matt Elkington and the LTA
- James Temple, Head Coach at Exeter Golf and Country Club
- Sense Residential Services
- Sense Practice Development team

## About Sense

For everyone living with complex disabilities.  
For everyone who is deafblind. Sense is here to offer personalised support to help people communicate and experience the world. We believe that no one, no matter how complex their disabilities, should be isolated, left out, or unable to fulfil their potential.

Our experts offer support that's tailored to the individual needs of each person, whether that's at our centres, through our holidays and short breaks, or in people's own homes. In addition to practical support, we also provide information to families, and campaign for the rights of people with complex disabilities to take part in life.

**If you, or someone you know, require this information in a different format, please contact Sense Information and Advice – contact details below.**

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