



I.N.S.P.I.R.E
Inclusive Sports Programs for
Individuals with autism
ERASMUS+ SPORT
PROJECT REF. 101182662
01/11/2024 - 31/03/2026



MAPPING - Inclusion of Young People with Autism in Sport

1. Introduction

This document represents a **preliminary mapping activity** carried out by **Sport HUB and Mimma Dreams APS** within the framework of the European project *Inclusive Sports Programs for Individuals with Autism – I.N.S.P.I.R.E.* Preliminary Interview TC1 - 101182662.

The initiative aims to promote access to sport for young people with autism spectrum disorder through inclusive methodologies, the collection of comparative data, and the valorization of good practices at the local, national, and European level.

Within this framework, the mapping conducted aimed to:

- collect direct evidence from families, caregivers, and young people with autism regarding conditions of access to sport;
- identify barriers and critical issues in the reference contexts;
- highlight inclusive experiences and practices already active in the area;
- contribute to building a knowledge base that supports the development of future project actions.

Italy, like other European countries, shows increasing attention to sport as a tool for social inclusion, but at the same time cultural, organizational, and infrastructural obstacles persist.



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This preliminary activity therefore intends to provide an evidence base useful both for subsequent project phases and for policymakers and operators wishing to strengthen sports inclusion policies.

2. Work Objectives

To promote a deeper and comparative understanding of the conditions of access to sport for young people with autism, in order to strengthen inclusive policies and practices both nationally and at the European level.

Specific Objectives

- Analyze the main **physical, cultural, organizational, and economic barriers** hindering full sports participation.
- Map and value **good practices and inclusive models** at the local, national, and European level, in line with the priorities of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030.
- Collect and systematize **direct testimonies** from families, caregivers, and young people with autism, with a comparative and transnational perspective.
- Develop **operational and transferable recommendations** for policymakers, sports organizations, and associative networks, to guide future European cooperation strategies.
- Contribute, as a **preliminary activity to Transnational Cooperation (TC1)**, to building a useful evidence base for subsequent project phases and for the dissemination of shared guidelines at the European level.



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3. Local and National Context

The Italian sports system

The Italian sports system is characterized by a **network structure**, where public bodies, national sports federations, amateur associations, and third sector organizations coexist. The Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) and the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP) represent the two institutional pillars overseeing the Olympic and Paralympic sectors, with roles in promotion, coordination, and regulation.

At a territorial level, Northern Italy has a **higher density of sports facilities, services, and dedicated projects**, supported by an active associative and cooperative fabric. In Central Italy, opportunities are distributed more heterogeneously, with significant differences between major cities and rural areas. In the South and Islands, structural and organizational challenges persist, with fewer infrastructures and fewer trained operators. This uneven distribution translates into unequal access to sport across the peninsula.

Regulations and inclusion policies

The national regulatory framework has long recognized the right to sport as a tool for social inclusion. **Law 104/1992** constitutes the fundamental reference in terms of assistance and social integration of people with disabilities. In recent years, several government and ministerial initiatives have emphasized the importance of ensuring equal opportunities in access to sport for all, also through targeted funding, guidelines for adapted physical activity, and pilot projects in cooperation with schools and associations.

At the European level, the **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030** reiterates the centrality of sport as a tool for well-being and inclusion, promoting transnational cooperation and the exchange of good practices. Programs such as **Erasmus+ Sport** and initiatives linked to the **European Week of Sport** have fostered collaborative projects (such as I.N.S.P.I.R.E.) aimed at reducing territorial disparities, strengthening operator training, and promoting replicable inclusive models in all Member States.



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Stakeholders involved

The main stakeholders in the inclusive sports system include:

- **Public bodies:** Ministry of Sport and Youth, Ministry of Education, Regions, and Local Authorities.
- **National sports organizations:** CONI and CIP, with their federations and associated sports disciplines.
- **Associations and sports clubs:** Amateur Sports Associations (ASD), multi-sports clubs, sports promotion bodies, and private clubs.
- **Third sector and associative networks:** organizations such as Special Olympics Italy, social cooperatives, volunteer organizations, and foundations.
- **Schools and universities,** as key channels for promoting inclusive practices during developmental age.
- **European partners,** with whom transnational cooperation projects are developed to exchange experiences, methodologies, and tools to make sport accessible to all.

4. Analisi dello stato dell'inclusione

4.1 Current State of Access to Sport for Young People with Autism

The evidence collected through our mapping indicates **real but uneven access:** where structured associative networks exist (ASD/SSD, multi-sport associations, Special Olympics), entry into sport occurs with greater continuity and variety of disciplines (baskin, climbing, swimming, rugby, athletics). The **perception of inclusion** is "intermediate" (average ratings ~3/5) while **ease of access** is judged to be low (averages ~2–3/5), a sign that information, intake, and support pathways are not yet standardized.



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This picture overlaps with the national context: according to ISTAT, **sports practice** is more widespread in the **North** (North-East 43.9%; North-West 41.7%; Center 41.5%) and significantly lower in the **South and Islands** (27.9%), with a direct impact on opportunities for young people with autism in different macro-areas. [Istat](#)

At the European level, the **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030** recognizes sport as a lever for inclusion and promotes concrete actions to remove barriers and foster participation throughout the life cycle—the framework within which the I.N.S.P.I.R.E. project also operates. [European Commissionsport.ec.europa.eu](https://european-commission.sport.ec.europa.eu)

4.2 Ongoing Initiatives and Projects (Italy & EU)

- **Special Olympics:** extensive network of school and association programs, 25 disciplines and protocols with multiple national federations; in Italy, ~**19,970 athletes and partner-athletes** are registered in competitive school teams (2023). These programs provide formats, inclusive regulations, and continuity of events/training. [Special Olympics Italia](#)
- **Baskin** (inclusive basketball): discipline with an **adapted regulation** that provides for differentiated roles and allows for the **active participation** of athletes with different functional profiles, facilitating mixed play and cooperation. baskin.it [Baskin - Sport progettato per tutti](#)
- **Paralympic ecosystem:** the **CIP** and particularly **FISDIR** for the intellectual-relational area structure pathways, calendars, and technical criteria, favoring a "normalized" and continuous offer for athletes with intellectual disabilities. [Comitato ParalimpicoAnffas](#)
- **EU Programs (Erasmus+ Sport):** fund transnational networks for social inclusion through sport, volunteering, and combating discrimination; projects like InSport work on European inclusion models transferable at the local level. I.N.S.P.I.R.E. fits into this trajectory. [Erasmus+European Commissionin-sport.eu](https://erasmus+european-commission.in-sport.eu)

4.3 Barriers: Physical, Cultural, Organizational (with Territorial Perspective)

- **Physical/Infrastructural**



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Facility provision and quality not uniform: official evidence shows differences in investments in facilities and needs, with South and Islands more fragile in terms of structures and functionality. This limits continuous supply and proximity for families. [Sport e Salute S.p.A.](#)

- **Cultural**

Low awareness of autism and neurodiversity in part of the sports ecosystem; expectations and implicit rules of groups are often not made explicit, hindering **role inclusion** within teams. The responses collected call for **training and personalized communication** (athletes, families, staff, peers). EU frameworks push precisely on empowerment and removal of attitudinal barriers. [European Commission](#)

- **Organizational/Economic**

Fragmentation of pathways (school–ASD/SSD–services), **project discontinuity, educational support burdens, and costs** perceived as disproportionate. EU tools (Erasmus+ Sport) and national networks (CIP/FISDIR/Special Olympics) can **stabilize the offer** through formats, protocols, and long-term partnerships. [Erasmus+Comitato ParalimpicoSpecial Olympics Italia](#)

4.4 Existing Opportunities and Levers for Improvement

- **Inclusive formats and regulations** (Baskin; Special Olympics protocols): ready-to-use, **replicable** in different contexts, reduce dependence on individual figures, and standardize quality. [baskin.itSpecial Olympics Italia](#)
- **Transnational networks:** Erasmus+ Sport projects allow for **transfer of good practices**, joint training, and shared guidelines (e.g., InSport; I.N.S.P.I.R.E.), increasing **scalability and sustainability** of local interventions. [Erasmus+European Commission](#)
- **Alignment with EU policy:** the 2021–2030 Strategy provides a policy framework for integrating sport, school, and social/health services; this facilitates **territorial plans and monitoring** comparable between countries/regions. [European Commission](#)
- **Scientific evidence:** the positive link between **physical activity and psychosocial outcomes** in young people with autism supports targeted investments (staff training,



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environmental adaptations, communication mediation) as tools with a **high cost-benefit ratio**. [FrontiersPMC](#)

4.5 Where to Intervene

- **Where to intervene immediately:** mandatory training on autism and group management; support plans (educator/technician "bridge"); role-based sports (Baskin) and **multi-level** sports; stable school-associations calendar; territorial map of facilities and "friendly" settings.
- **National/European scale:** use **Erasmus+ Sport** to consolidate partnerships and guidelines; link with the **EU 2021–2030 Strategy** for common indicators (access, frequency, retention, satisfaction, well-being outcomes). [Erasmus+European Commission](#)

5. Methodology

5. Methodology

5.1 Study Design and Mapping Logic

This activity constitutes a **preliminary mapping** functional to the **Transnational Cooperation (TC1)** pathway of the I.N.S.P.I.R.E. project. The approach is **descriptive-exploratory**, with a **mixed-methods approach**: we integrate **quantitative** evidence (indicators and percentage distributions) with **qualitative** evidence (recurring themes and testimonies), and triangulate with authoritative secondary sources (national/EU regulatory framework, sports organizations, literature on inclusive sport).

5.2 Tools used

- **Structured digital survey** (Jotform), aimed at **families, caregivers, and young people**. The item battery includes:
 - ❖ i. **Closed-ended questions** on: current sports participation; frequency; access context (school/associations/private/other); practiced disciplines (multiple response); Likert 1–5 evaluations on perceived inclusion and ease in finding suitable activities; perception of local inclusive opportunities;



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- ❖ ii. **Open-ended questions** on: barriers encountered; positive experiences; improvement suggestions.
- **Secondary sources:** institutional documents and datasets (e.g., **ISTAT, CONI/CIP/FISDIR, Special Olympics; EU frameworks** such as the European Strategy 2021–2030 for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), used to provide **comparative breadth and macro-regional contextualization** (North/Center/South) and **European context**.

5.3 Participant Selection Criteria

- **Inclusion:** (i) young person on the autism spectrum or family member/caregiver; (ii) **residence in Italy;** (iii) **current or recent** experience (last 12 months) of interest or sports practice; (iv) willingness to provide feedback on barriers/opportunities.
- **Heterogeneity/variety of context:** particular attention to **different access channels** (school, ASD/SSD, multi-sport associations, private) and to different disciplines, to capture replicable inclusive patterns.

Note: the sample is **intentionally non-probabilistic** (purposive), adequate for the exploratory stage and the nature of mapping/TC1. Inference is analytical (theoretical-interpretative), not statistical.

5.4 Data Collection and Management

- **Digital administration** in a secure environment; collection 2025.
- **Data management:** field cleaning and normalization; pseudonymization of sources; management of multiple responses (disciplines).
- **Quality:** internal consistency check (valid ranges for Likert; consistency between declared practices and frequency); terminological alignment (e.g., "baskin" as a structured inclusive discipline).

5.5 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** construction of **percentage indicators** for key variables (participation, frequency, inclusion, ease, opportunities); graphical representations; summaries by macro-area where relevant.
- **Qualitative:** **thematic analysis** (inductive-deductive coding) on barriers/experiences/suggestions; emergence of macro-categories: skills and



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supports; costs/sustainability; project continuity; group/role dynamics; inclusive formats and networks.

- **Triangulation:** comparison with policies and institutional data to validate the reading (e.g., North-Center-South differentials; role of networks like Special Olympics; relevance of Baskin as an inclusive regulation).

5.6 Ethical and Quality Considerations

- **Voluntariness** and anonymity of responses; exclusive use for improving policies/services.
- **Methodological transparency:** clarity of indicators and usage limits (preliminary study, analytical inference).
- **Usefulness for TC1/EU:** the evidence guides **guidelines, replicable formats, and training priorities** transferable to partner countries.

6. Results

6.1 Quantitative Overview (Indicators in %)

- **Current participation: Yes 80% -- No 20%** → actual presence in sport, driven by the associative sector.
- **Practice frequency: Always 40% -- Often 20% -- Sometimes 40%** → for many, sport is part of the routine.
- **Perceived inclusion (1–5): distribution 2: 40% -- 3: 40% -- 4: 20%** → intermediate inclusion with room for growth.
- **Inclusive opportunities in the territory: Not sufficient 100%** → perception of a deficient ecosystem.
- **Ease in finding suitable activities (1–5): 1:20% -- 2:40% -- 3:20% -- 4:20% -- 5:0%** → informative access/organizational labyrinths still critical.
- **Disciplines (mentions, multiple response): Swimming 22.2% -- Climbing 22.2% -- Rugby 11.1% -- Baskin 11.1% -- Athletics 11.1% -- Golf 11.1% -- Nordic walking 11.1%** → wide variety, with Baskin and climbing as inclusive drivers.



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6.2 Qualitative Overview (Recurring Themes and Patterns)

- **Skills & supports:** request for specific training on autism, augmentative communication, group management; educator/technician "bridge" as an enabling factor.
- **Costs & sustainability:** perceived burdens for educational supports; need for vouchers or local coverage.
- **Project continuity:** risk of being "project-based"; value of structured networks (e.g., Special Olympics) for scheduling and providing stability.
- **Group/role dynamics:** need for clear roles and rule adaptation; here Baskin is cited as a model with differentiated roles.
- **Strengths:** positive experiences in climbing (motivation, focus) and rugby (teamwork with educational figures).

Exemplary Quotes (Anonymized)

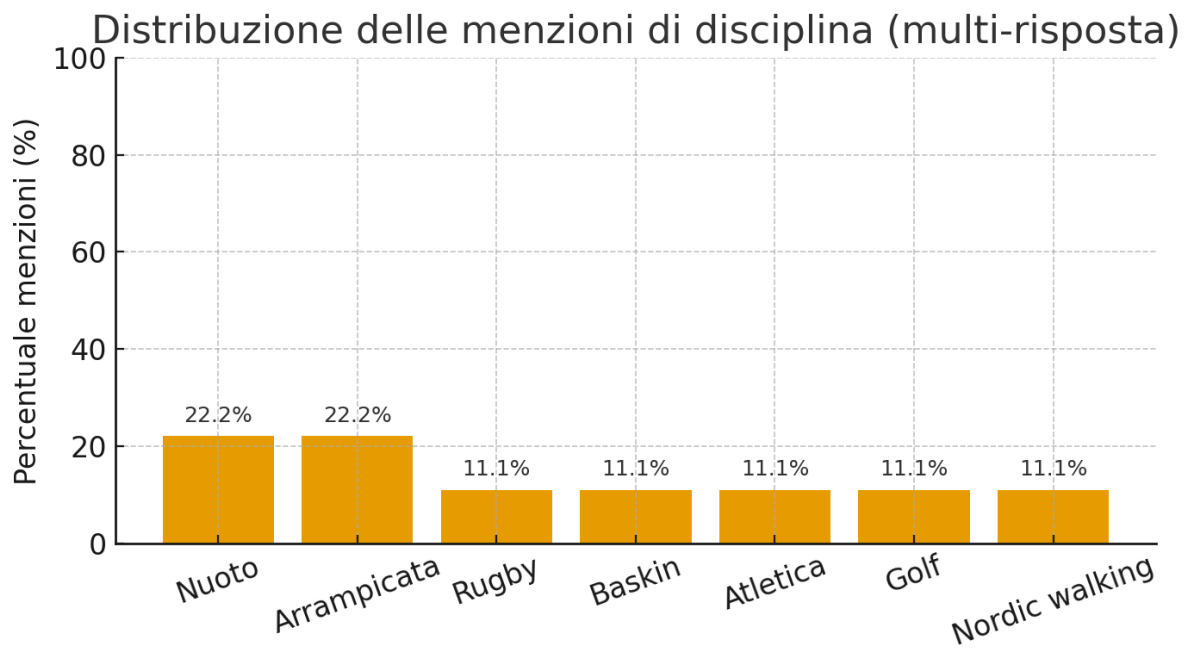
- "Teams need to be trained on disability and rights."
- "Baskin is 360° inclusive."
- "The facility was poorly prepared and the costs were not proportional."
- "In climbing the experience was inclusive and motivating."

6.3 Interpretative Reading

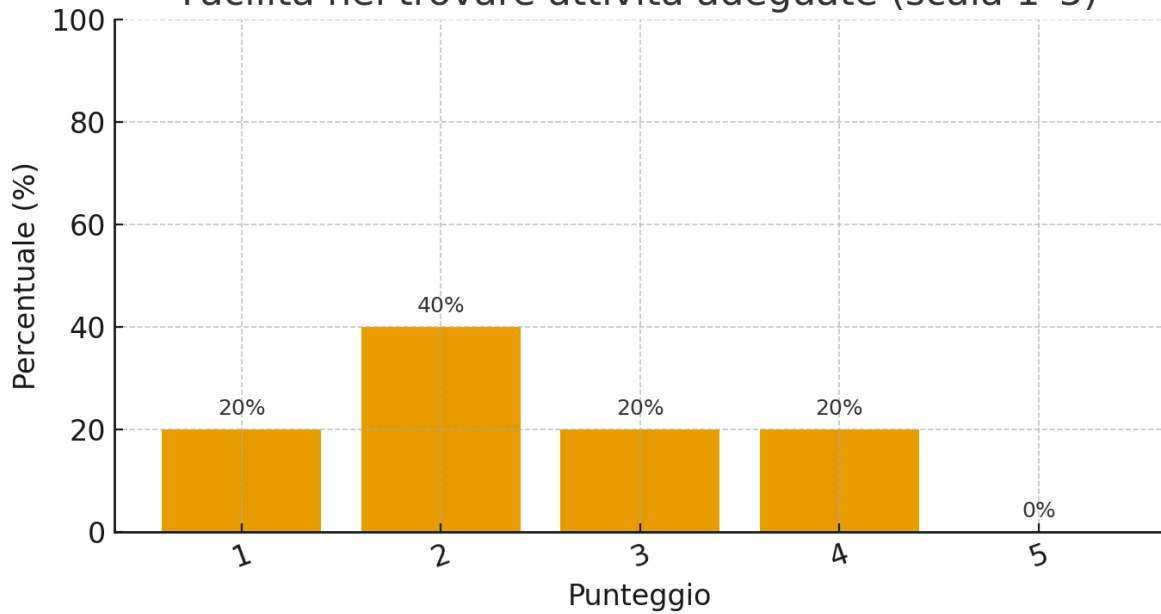
- The **associative channel** is the actual "**gateway**": where ASD/SSD with inclusive networks and protocols exist, **inclusion and frequency** increase.
- The **perception of scarcity** of opportunities and the **low ease** of access signal a deficit in territorial governance (guidance, intake, athlete-discipline matching).
- **Standardized formats** (Baskin, Special Olympics) act as friction reducers: clear regulations, differentiated roles, scheduled events/training → higher retention and less dependence on individual operators.

6.4 Implications for TC1 and the European Scale

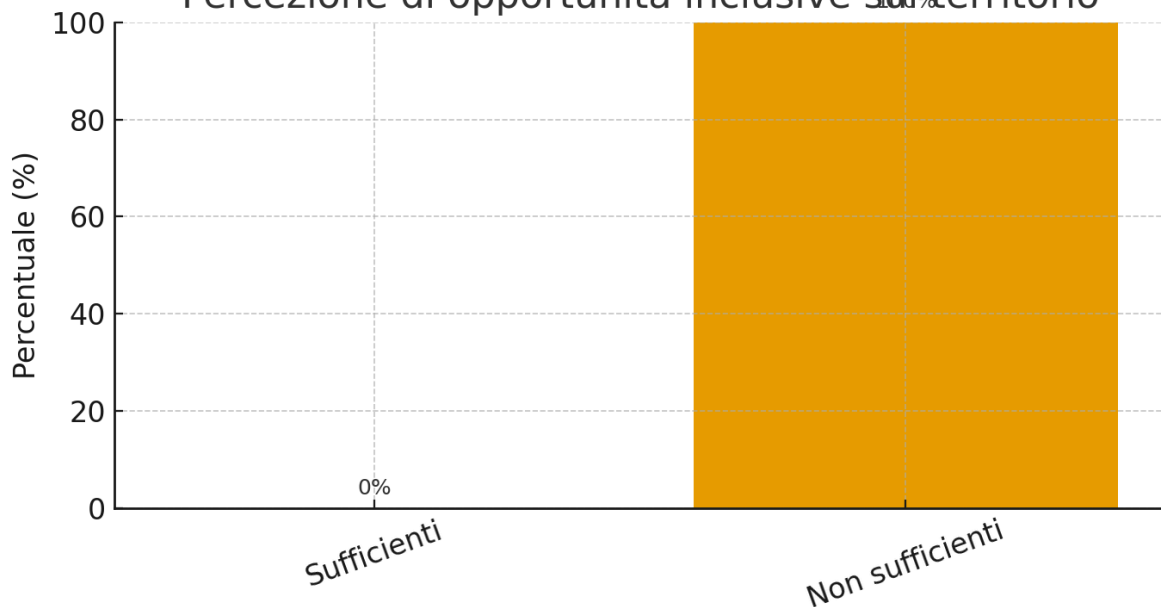
- **For TC1:** priority to (i) **joint training** for staff-technicians-managers; (ii) **intake protocols and individualized plans**; (iii) **European catalog of transferable inclusive formats**; (iv) **shared monitoring** with indicators of access, frequency, perceived inclusion, retention, and well-being.
- **For the EU:** use **Erasmus+ Sport** networks and the **2021–2030 Strategy framework** to scale effective practices, reduce territorial gaps, and harmonize **training languages and metrics**.



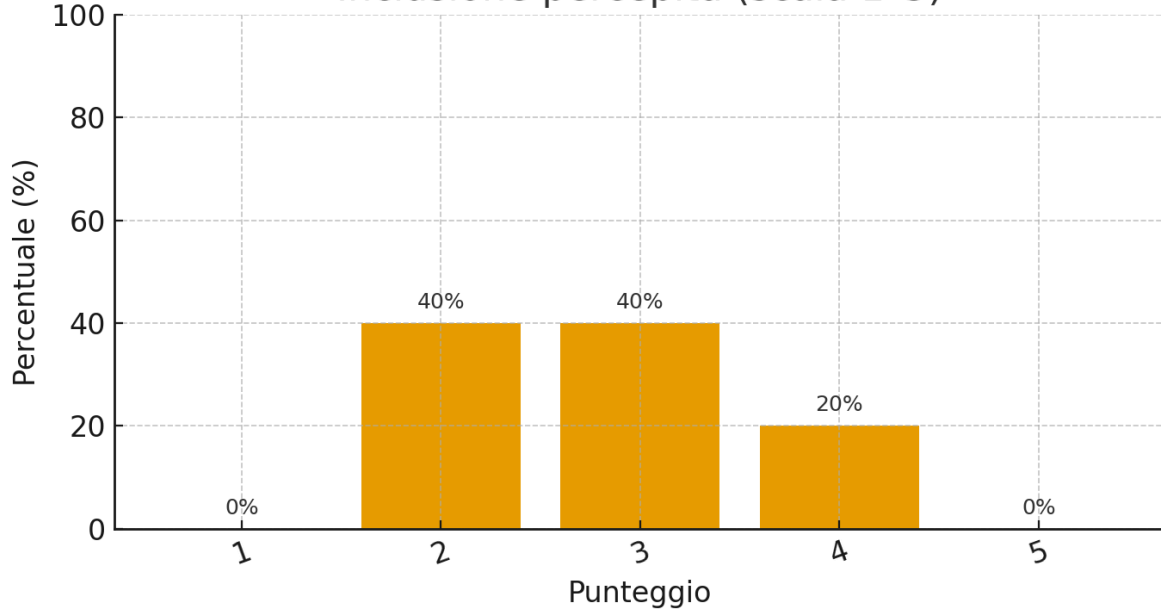
Facilità nel trovare attività adeguate (scala 1-5)



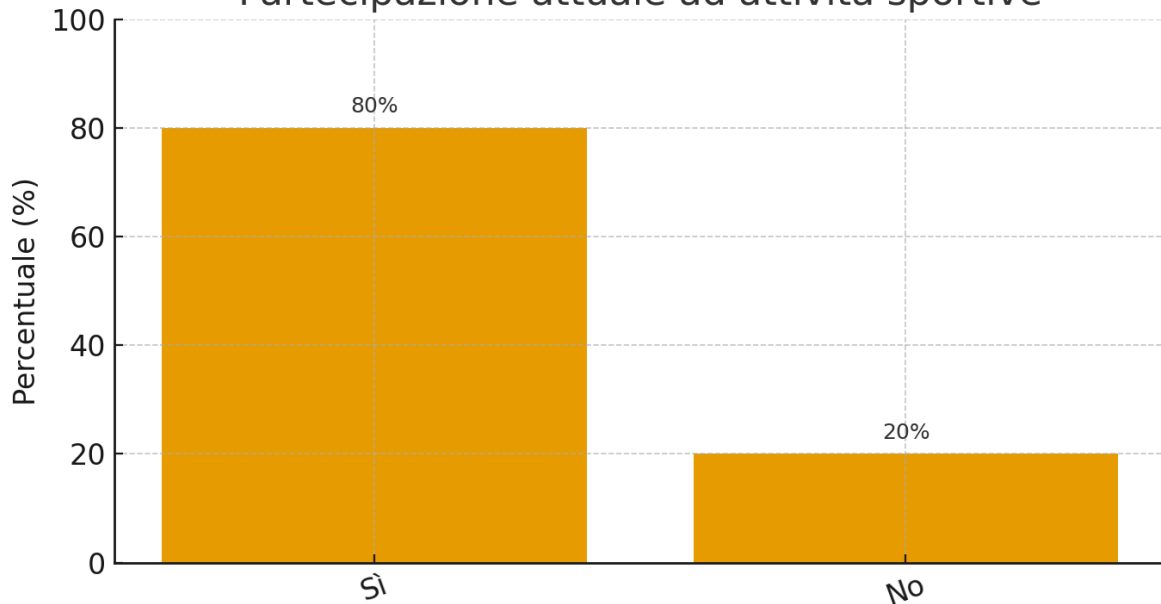
Percezione di opportunità inclusive sul territorio

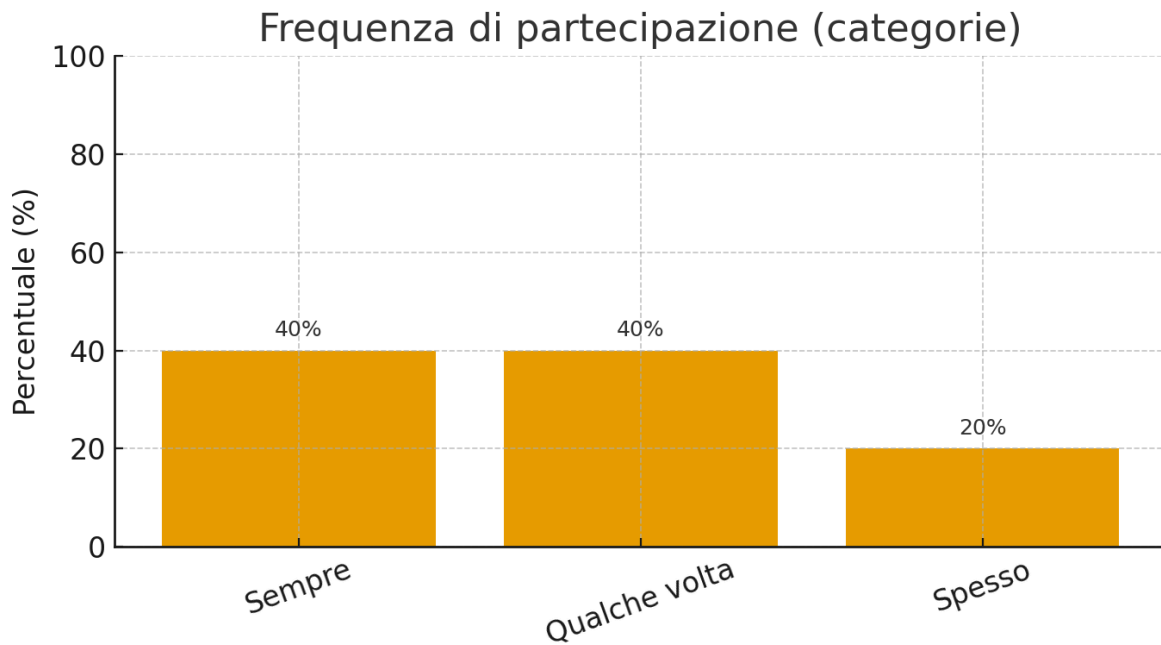


Inclusione percepita (scala 1-5)



Partecipazione attuale ad attività sportive





7. Regional and National Focus

7. Regional and National Focus

7.1 Extent of Collected Data

The mapping data confirms some **structural trends already identified at the national level**:

- Sports practice in Italy is **territorially uneven**: according to ISTAT, the share of people practicing sport continuously is higher in the **North-East (43.9%) and North-West (41.7%), followed by the Center (41.5%), while it drops significantly in the South and Islands (27.9%)**. This contextual difference directly influences the access possibilities for young people with autism as well.
- Our preliminary survey shows how families in the North find **more opportunities** (associations, Special Olympics, Baskin), while those in the South mainly report **shortages in supply and infrastructure**.



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7.2 Territorial Differences

- **Northern Italy:** greater availability of **facilities, sports associations, and trained technicians**, also thanks to the concentration of CIP and Special Olympics initiatives. However, critical issues related to **specific training on the autism spectrum and project continuity** (many pathways remain "project-based") emerge here.
- **Central Italy:** **intermediate** situation, with experiences of excellence in metropolitan areas and strong inequalities in rural and internal areas. Here the main problem is **coordination** between schools, local authorities, and sports associations.
- **South and Islands:** **lower level of sports practice** and more marked infrastructural deficiencies, with limited diffusion of inclusive projects. Families report greater difficulty in finding information and accessing activities continuously.

7.3 Similarities with the Local Context

Despite the gaps, some **common elements on a national scale emerge:**

- The **key role of sports associations** as an entry channel.
- The **centrality of inclusive formats** like Baskin and Special Olympics, which guarantee replicable models and adapted regulations.
- The transversal request for **mandatory and widespread training** on educational and communicative aspects related to autism.

7.4 Implications

These data highlight the need for:

- **Territorially differentiated policies:** in the North, invest in training and consolidation of pathways; in the Center, strengthen institutional coordination; in the South, strengthen infrastructure and associative networks.
- **Shared national standards:** define common guidelines for sports inclusion, which can be adapted locally but guarantee uniform rights at the national level.



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- **Connection with the European level:** the Italian data confirms the validity of EU priorities (Strategy 2021–2030), particularly the need to reduce territorial gaps and ensure **equal access to inclusive sport regardless of geographical residence**.

8. European Focus

Comparison at the European level reveals a heterogeneous picture but with common elements of strong interest.

In Nordic countries (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands), the sports inclusion of young people with intellectual and autism spectrum disabilities has long been an integral part of welfare systems. Sports policies are closely integrated with educational and health policies, and inclusive sports practice is recognized as a **fundamental social right**. These countries have invested in the systematic training of coaches and physical education teachers, the creation of national guidelines, and direct financial support for families.

In Western and Central European countries (Germany, France, Belgium), strong institutional commitment and a wide network of associations collaborating with schools and health services are observed. However, the distribution of services can be uneven between urban and rural areas, with territorial differences similar to those found in Italy.

In Mediterranean and South-Eastern European countries (Italy, Greece, Croatia, Balkans), greater critical issues persist: infrastructural deficiencies, organizational fragmentation, and strong dependence on associative networks or temporary projects funded through EU funds. This makes the **continuity of sports experiences** a weak point, despite the presence of local excellences.

At the institutional level, three European frameworks are fundamental:

- The **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030**, which explicitly recalls sport as a tool for inclusion, well-being, and active citizenship.
- The **Erasmus+ Sport** program, which funds transnational networks, partnerships, and replicable good practices, supporting projects like I.N.S.P.I.R.E..
- The **European Week of Sport**, which helps spread inclusive sports culture even beyond specialized sectors, bringing it to public attention.



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In this context, the mapping conducted by Sport HUB represents not only a national snapshot but a **European piece**, useful for feeding comparisons, identifying shared standards, and strengthening the transnational dimension of sports inclusion.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis reveals some clear elements. Sport is experienced as a real opportunity by young people with autism, but access is not homogeneous: the geographical context and the presence of active associative networks make a difference. Families recognize the value of inclusive experiences, but report barriers related to costs, project continuity, and staff training. Formats like Baskin and Special Olympics programs demonstrate that replicable and structured models work and can become a national and European reference.

Main Recommendations:

- Define **national guidelines** on inclusive sport, in coherence with the EU Strategy, to guarantee equal rights throughout the territory.
- Invest in the **specific training** of technicians and operators, with mandatory modules on autism and inclusion.
- Strengthen **territorial networks** by creating stable links between schools, sports clubs, health services, and families.
- Provide **economic support** to reduce costs borne by families and guarantee frequency continuity.
- Activate a **national monitoring system** with clear indicators comparable at the European level.
- Exploit the European dimension of Erasmus+ and other tools to disseminate Italian good practices and, at the same time, import successful experiences from partners.

In summary, sport cannot be seen only as a recreational activity: for young people with autism, it represents a space for growth, well-being, and active citizenship.



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SLOVAKIA - Inclusion of Youth with Autism in Sport

1.

Introduction

The inclusion of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in sports activities is a vital component of social integration and personal development. Sports not only provide opportunities for physical fitness and health, but also foster key life skills such as teamwork, communication, and emotional regulation. This report provides a comprehensive overview of the inclusion of young people with ASD in sports, focusing on three levels: local, national, and European.

2. Objectives of the work

Local communities are often the starting point for inclusive practices. In Prešov, Slovakia, for example, a figure skating club (OZ SKATE Prešov) offers structured training sessions specifically adapted for children with ASD. These sessions are held in collaboration with local early intervention centers, such as CVI Prešov. The training is tailored to the individual needs of participants through small group sizes and the involvement of coaches trained to work with neurodiverse individuals.



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3. Local and national context

On a regional level, larger cities like Bratislava, Košice, and Žilina offer a broader range of inclusive sports services. These regions benefit from stronger networks of parents' associations, early intervention centers, and specialized schools. In contrast, rural areas face a lack of infrastructure and rely heavily on the initiative of parents and non-governmental organizations.

Nationally, Slovakia has seen significant developments in supporting children with ASD:

The organization SPOSA (Association for the Help of People with Autism) operates 23 regional branches, providing educational, therapeutic, and recreational support.

Special Olympics Slovakia promotes unified sports teams that include both neurotypical and neurodivergent athletes, such as in football and floorball.

The government has developed strategies aligned with EU frameworks to promote inclusive education and accessible extracurricular activities.

4. Analysis of the status of inclusion

Non-profit and corporate foundations play a crucial role in financing inclusive initiatives:



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The Tesco Foundation, VÚB Foundation, and Pontis Foundation have supported the creation of inclusive playgrounds, swimming programs, and sports days.

Many programs rely on public-private partnerships to secure long-term sustainability. In Italy, "Autismo e Sport" runs inclusive swimming and athletics programs across several cities.

In the Netherlands, the SportMEE platform helps families locate inclusive sports clubs.

Finland's Valteri Centre collaborates with schools to integrate children with ASD into structured physical education.

These examples illustrate the value of structured support and cross-sector collaboration in expanding access to physical activity for autistic individuals.

Importance of Physical Activity for People with Autism

The benefits of physical activity for children and adolescents with ASD are well-documented. According to Zborowska (2024), physical activity enhances social interaction, emotional regulation, and cognitive functioning, while reducing the intensity of autism-related behaviors. Despite these advantages, only 14% of children with ASD meet the recommended levels of physical activity, underscoring the need for systemic support.

A related study by Parlak et al. (2021) found that structured sports training improves a range of developmental outcomes, including:



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Communication skills,
Participation in structured and spontaneous play,
Social relationships and peer interactions,
Behavioral regulation,
Body awareness and motor coordination,
Respect for rules and routines.

5. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this report combined online desk research with comparative analysis to assess the state of inclusion of youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in sports at local, national, and European levels. The research process involved several key steps:

a) Desk Research

We conducted extensive online research using reliable academic databases, government publications, NGO reports, and EU-level policy documents. Key search terms included “autism and sports inclusion,” “inclusive physical activity programs,” “youth with ASD,” “adaptive sports education,” and “EU disability and sports policy.” Sources such as Google Scholar, ERIC, PubMed, and official websites of institutions like the European Commission, Special Olympics, and national autism associations were used to gather up-to-date and evidence-based information.



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b) Comparative Analysis

To ensure a comprehensive perspective, a comparative analysis approach was used to examine inclusion practices across different geographical levels:

Local Level: We analyzed grassroots initiatives in Prešov and other Slovak cities, gathering examples through local media, community organization websites, and direct communication with involved stakeholders.

National Level: We reviewed policies, support frameworks, and implementation efforts at the Slovak national level, comparing them with existing practices in other EU countries.

European Level: We analyzed EU strategies and funding mechanisms related to inclusion in sport, particularly within the context of the EU Disability Strategy 2021–2030 and Erasmus+ Sport initiatives.

c) Identification of Good Practices

During the research, particular attention was paid to identifying examples of good practice—initiatives that demonstrated effective collaboration, innovative approaches, and replicable structures. These were benchmarked against findings from other countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands, and Finland.

d) Data Validation

While primary data collection (e.g., interviews or surveys) was not included in this phase, the validity of secondary sources was ensured by



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cross-referencing multiple reports and academic publications. Where possible, findings were triangulated with insights from stakeholders working in the field of inclusive education and adaptive sports.

6.

Results

The research and analysis conducted at local, national, and European levels reveal both encouraging developments and ongoing challenges in the inclusion of young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in sports.

a) Local Results (Slovakia – Prešov and Surrounding Regions)

Prešov: The local figure skating club, OZ SKATE Prešov, provides inclusive training sessions for children with ASD in collaboration with early intervention centers such as CVI Prešov. These programs are notable for their individualized approach, small group sizes, and involvement of specially trained coaches.

Other Slovak cities (e.g., Senec, Trnava, Banská Bystrica, Žilina): Community-driven initiatives are emerging across the country, including:

CrossFit sessions tailored for youth with ASD (Senec),

Inclusive swimming lessons led by trained volunteers (Banská Bystrica),



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Family-oriented inclusive sports days (Trnava, Žilina).

These initiatives are often initiated by NGOs or parent-led groups and demonstrate strong collaboration between families, volunteers, and support organizations.

b) National Results (Slovakia)

Organizations like SPOSA operate across Slovakia, offering therapy, educational programs, and inclusive sports opportunities.

Special Olympics Slovakia has integrated children with ASD into unified sports teams, particularly in football and floorball, creating shared experiences for neurotypical and neurodivergent athletes.

Public-private partnerships and support from foundations such as Tesco Foundation, Pontis Foundation, and VÚB Foundation have been instrumental in financing programs and facilities that promote inclusive play and sport.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure, trained professionals, and funding are limited.

c) European Results

The comparative analysis with other EU countries highlighted several effective models:



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Italy: The organization Autismo e Sport runs inclusive swimming and athletics programs that emphasize sensory-friendly environments and individualized support.

Netherlands: The SportMEE platform serves as a national directory of inclusive sports clubs, helping families identify accessible opportunities.

Finland: The Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting partners with schools to support the integration of children with ASD into structured physical education settings.

Common factors in these successful initiatives include:

Professional training for coaches and educators,

Cross-sector partnerships between schools, NGOs, and government bodies,

Systematic national or regional support mechanisms.

d) Cross-Cutting Insights

Across all levels, the data confirmed several important insights:

Low participation rates: Despite documented benefits, only a small percentage (14–25%) of children with ASD participate in regular, organized sports.

Barriers to access: Key obstacles include lack of trained coaches, insufficient inclusive programming, physical inaccessibility, and societal stigma.



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Benefits of physical activity: Studies (Zborowska, 2024; Parlak et al., 2021) consistently show improvements in social interaction, communication, behavioral regulation, and overall well-being through structured physical activity.

Strong potential in community-led initiatives: Many of the most effective programs were initiated at the grassroots level, demonstrating that local leadership and partnerships can compensate for gaps in national policy.

7. Regional and national focus

Despite promising initiatives, several obstacles remain. Many cities lack inclusive after-school sports programs that accommodate autistic participants. There is also a notable shortage of coaches with appropriate training in ASD. Furthermore, families often face psychological and social challenges, including fear of stigma and lack of public understanding.

Examples of Good Practice:

Other cities across Slovakia provide examples of good practice:

In Senec, CrossFit programs have been tailored to children with ASD, promoting strength and self-confidence.

In Banská Bystrica, the local SPOSA branch offers inclusive swimming lessons in collaboration with trained volunteers.



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Family sports days and inclusive recreational events are organized in cities such as Trnava and Žilina, encouraging integration through shared physical experiences.

8. European Focus

At the European level, inclusion in sports is a recognized priority. The EU Disability Strategy 2021–2030 calls for equal access to physical activity and recreation for persons with disabilities. Erasmus+ Sport provides funding for cross-border initiatives that foster inclusion through movement and shared play.

Despite growing awareness, data show that only 20–25% of young people with ASD participate in organized sports. Common barriers include physical accessibility, lack of information, and social stigmatization. Inclusive initiatives are still unevenly distributed across the EU.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

These findings affirm that sports are not only beneficial but essential for the social, emotional, and educational development of individuals with autism. To strengthen the inclusion of children and youth with autism in sports, this report recommends:



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Training coaches and instructors in ASD awareness and inclusive pedagogies. Encouraging collaboration between schools, sports clubs, families, and support centers. Developing pilot projects in each region to model scalable inclusive sports programs.

Utilizing EU funding mechanisms, such as Erasmus+ Sport, to expand local initiatives. Raising public awareness about the importance of inclusive physical activity for health, socialization, and well-being. Through these measures, sports can become a powerful vehicle for inclusion, empowerment, and growth for young people with autism across Europe.



10. Attachments

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