



ASHA Member & Affiliate Guide

2025/2026 Season

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

ASHA has created this guide to assist our member and affiliate as they navigate the evolving needs of athletes, families and communities.

These are shared guidelines and tools meant to support the unique and diverse ways our member and affiliate programs operate, while keeping the focus where it belongs: on the athletes. Special hockey thrives when programs are inclusive, flexible, and rooted in community.









Our goal is to provide resources that help you continue growing the game in a way that works for your team, while staying aligned with the core values of safety, access, and respect for all abilities.

Thank you for your continued dedication to your athletes, your families, and this incredible sport. Your commitment makes special hockey possible.

Need Help?? Contact us at ASHA@Specialhockey.org

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Please refer to additional ASHA Member Guidelines for the following topics:

ASHA Policy Guidelines Pt 2

- Roles and Responsibilities
- ASHA Board
- Code of Conduct
- Locker Room Policy
- ASHA Policy Summary
- Conflict Resolution
- Zero Tolerance Policy (Summarized)

ASHA Insurance, Equipment and Fundraising Resources Guidelines Pt 3

- Insurance Summary and Request for COI
- Equipment Program
- Fundraising with Give Smart

ASHA Registration and Forms Guidelines Pt 4

- Team Manager / Registrar and Registration Resources
- Forms and Resources



The American Special Hockey Association 2025/2026 member team and affiliate guidelines were developed and designed to help you navigate the season more effectively, with practical tools and clear expectations. We appreciate the time, energy, and commitment you bring to Special Hockey, and we're here to support that work every step of the way.

What's Inside & Why It Matters

- **Built for Inclusion:** These guidelines are made for athletes who need something different. ASHA exists to make hockey accessible, and your programs make that mission real every day.
- **Leveled Play that Supports Growth:** Clearer player rating descriptions help everyone, from coaches to officials, create matchups that are safe, encouraging, and fun.
- **Flexible Team Models That Fit Your Game Plan:** Leveled, Mixed-Bench, or Unified. Whatever your team looks like, ASHA supports the structure that works best for your athletes.
- **Clear Game Format Breakdowns:** You'll find simple, side-by-side guidance for Level A, B, and C games, reflecting how your teams actually play and grow.
- **Coach & Volunteer Support:** Real-world expectations for coaches, managers, and volunteers focused on safety, encouragement, and practical help.
- **SafeSport Compliance Made Clear:** Straightforward guidance on reporting, boundaries, and prevention, so your team knows what to do and where to turn when it matters.
- **Celebrating Team Identity:** Your athletes' sense of pride and belonging matters. We've included guidance to help teams stay connected, even when rosters are split for leveled games.

Administrative Tools & Forms

- Practical resources to make your season smoother from start to finish:
 - **Team Registration Guide:** Step-by-step instructions to help your team register with ease
 - **ASHA Member Team Season Form:** A quick way to tell us who you are and how we can support you
 - **Event Sanctioning Request Form:** Use this when planning tournaments, scrimmages, or events
 - **Insurance Certificate Requests:** For rinks and partners that need proof of coverage.

We're proud to serve our member teams and deeply value the work you do in your communities. Our goal is to provide meaningful support, and we're always open to feedback and ideas on how we can do that better.

ASHA MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

WHAT ASHA PROVIDES

- Affordable No Fee Membership
- National insurance.
- Training built for adaptive hockey
- Game and conduct guidelines
- Access to 20+ events.
- Grant support, equipment donations & scholarships
- Marketing tools
- Advocacy
- Responsive Support

All so your program can focus on the athletes

COMMITMENT TO SERVICE AND FOCUS ON MISSION

- ASHA is a volunteer organization governed by a dedicated Board of Directors. We do not charge membership fees for our services.
- Every dollar raised goes back into the community, directly supporting ASHA-affiliated programs and athletes.
- As a national network, we also connect teams with one another, helping members learn, collaborate, and engage across communities.

FOCUSED SUPPORT FOR SPECIAL HOCKEY

- ASHA provides training and resources specific to working with individuals with disabilities in adaptive recreation settings. New training programs for the 2025/2026 season will reflect updated regulations and feedback from our member teams.
- Recognized national guidelines are provided for game play, player ratings, codes of conduct, and volunteer responsibilities.
- Members have access to over two dozen sanctioned tournaments and events each season, as well as guidance and support for those coordinating events at the local level.
- Skills camps are held throughout the year, including in the summer months, to maintain community connection and continue athlete development opportunities.
- ASHA's network of over 130 member and affiliate organizations offers valuable peer learning, coaching support, and shared opportunities for participation.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

- ASHA provides participant insurance coverage at no cost to registered organizations and players. This umbrella policy includes commercial general liability, participant accident coverage, catastrophic loss, crime coverage, special event coverage and access to optional Directors & Officers (D&O) liability coverage at minimal cost.
- Teams benefit from access to online tools including an updated website, online registration, background checks and abuse prevention training (provided at a low vendor cost), and individualized team pages.
- ASHA also offers responsive phone and email support for member organizations, including referrals to professional services when needed.

DEVELOPMENT AND FISCAL SUPPORT

- ASHA provides support for new program development through in-kind equipment donations and startup grants.
- Junior Coach Scholarships are awarded annually to student volunteers pursuing post-secondary education.
- Members also benefit from grant writing support, access to state-specific nonprofit governance resources, and assistance navigating best practices for responsible financial and operational management.
- We work to connect member teams with corporate and community partnerships that offer group discounts on equipment and merchandise.

MARKETING AND AWARENESS

- ASHA offers support for marketing and outreach through our national website, social media presence, and content development.
- We assist with the creation of customized brochures, posters, and awareness campaigns.
- Member teams may also request support in building relationships with local schools and agencies serving individuals with special needs.

ADVOCACY

- ASHA collaborates with local governing bodies, leagues, and hockey associations to ensure that individuals with special needs are fully included in the sport.
- We work to promote consistency, accessibility, and positive communication across the broader hockey community.
- We also support teams in building partnerships with local stakeholders and sponsors to sustain and grow their programs.
- Volunteer and coach contributions are recognized throughout the year as part of our commitment to community-based leadership.



EVERYONE BELONGS

Special Hockey celebrates all abilities and creates space for athletes who need adapted support to participate fully.

FOCUS ON ACCESS

Our goal is to provide a safe and welcoming environment for those who may not have equitable access to typical hockey programs.

SUPPORT FOR ALL ABILITIES

Athletes may benefit from accommodations in areas like communication, coordination, learning, or social interaction.

NO AGE LIMIT

Special Hockey is open to individuals age five and up, with no upper age limit and a wide range of diagnoses welcomed. No pressure to choose one path.

ELIGIBILITY IS GUIDED BY PURPOSE

Local programs make eligibility decisions based on ASHA's core mission: creating access for those who need it most.

Athletes participating in typical hockey are encouraged to stay engaged, and are always welcome in Special Hockey in supportive roles.



OUR MISSION

The American Special Hockey Association (ASHA) serves individuals with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities by providing accessible opportunities to participate in the sport of hockey.

Our mission engages families and communities by including athletes of all abilities in the game. Special Hockey provides a recreational environment that emphasizes community engagement, teamwork, and personal skill development. For individuals with disabilities, it supports life skills, promotes inclusion, and builds a strong sense of belonging. For families, coaches, and volunteers, Special Hockey offers a meaningful network that strengthens communities through shared involvement in the sport.

ELIGIBILITY

The American Special Hockey Association (ASHA) welcomes athletes with disabilities who need a modified or adapted hockey environment to participate safely, successfully, and meaningfully. Special Hockey is intended for individuals who benefit from structured support on the ice, on the bench, and throughout the experience. It is not designed for those who can independently participate in traditional recreational or competitive hockey programs.

ASHA is committed to inclusion and access, recognizing the diverse strengths and needs within the disability community. Our goal is to ensure that individuals who may not otherwise have the opportunity to play hockey can do so in a setting that is safe, welcoming, and tailored to their needs.

Eligible participants may have physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities that impact communication, learning, mobility, motor coordination, sensory processing, social interaction, or behavior. Common diagnoses include autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, seizure disorders, cognitive disabilities, sensory processing challenges, and other neurological or physical conditions that require adaptation.

Participation is open to individuals starting at age five, with no upper age limit. Athletes may join at any stage of life and often remain involved for many years. Programs are encouraged to consider functional needs, rather than diagnosis alone, when determining whether Special Hockey is the right fit for a prospective athlete.

If an athlete requires structured support, game modifications, or adaptive equipment to participate fully and safely, they likely meet the spirit and intent of ASHA eligibility. When in doubt, programs are encouraged to reach out for support in making decisions that reflect ASHA's mission and the individual strengths and needs of each athlete.

ASHA does not discourage any individual with a disability from participating in typical hockey programs alongside their peers. Special Hockey exists to provide an adaptive and inclusive option for those who require additional support to succeed. Individuals who are thriving in standard hockey environments are encouraged to continue doing so. At the same time, they are always welcome to stay connected to their local Special Hockey community in other meaningful roles such as junior coaches, mentors, assistant coaches, or volunteers, depending on the structure and needs of the program.

Final eligibility decisions are made by local programs. These decisions should always be guided by the mission and intent of Special Hockey: to create equitable access to the game for individuals with disabilities who would otherwise be excluded. **5**





TEAM INFORMATION

The New Season Organization Form must be submitted and approved by July 15—or within 30 days of forming a new team.

REGISTRATION

All athletes, coaches, and volunteers must be registered with ASHA before participating in any team activity.



TEAM ELIGIBILITY

ASHA MEMBER ORGANIZATION

To be recognized as an ASHA Member Organization in Good Standing—and to remain eligible for participation in ASHA-sanctioned festivals, events, insurance programs, and development opportunities—each program must meet the following requirements:

- Submit a New Season Organization Form by July 15 each year, or within 30 days of forming a new team, whichever is later.
- Ensure that all team participants—including athletes, coaches, and volunteers—are registered through ASHA before engaging in any team activities. Where required, individuals must also complete background screening and abuse prevention training through ASHA's registration system.

In addition to these registration requirements, all ASHA Member Organizations must commit to the following:

- Maintain accurate, complete, and up-to-date registration records for all participants.
- Uphold the ASHA IDEA Zero Tolerance Policy, which promotes inclusion, dignity, equity, and accountability.
- Follow all ASHA rules, guidelines, and safety protocols—not only in technical compliance but in mission and spirit.

These expectations help ensure consistency, safety, and integrity across all ASHA-affiliated programs and events.

AFFILIATE MEMBERSHIP

Affiliate Members are organizations that participate in ASHA programs or receive ASHA support on a more limited basis. This category includes Canadian affiliate teams, community-based agencies, and adaptive sports programs that may not operate as full ASHA teams but are engaged in shared goals and activities.

Affiliate members are eligible for select ASHA benefits, such as:

- Special event insurance
- Equipment donation support
- Collaboration and guidance to help reduce barriers to participation

DUAL REGISTRATION AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

ASHA does not restrict member organizations or affiliates from registering with other leagues, associations, or sports governing bodies. We recognize that every opportunity is a valuable one. Programs are encouraged to collaborate with their local communities and make use of all available resources to support their athletes and grow the game.



LEVELED PLAY AT A GLANCE

ASHA's leveling framework helps make gameplay safer, more balanced, and more meaningful for every participant. It gives teams the tools to create appropriate matchups, supports officials in managing fair play, and ensures athletes of all abilities can fully enjoy the game. These descriptions are not meant to restrict the use of mixed-bench teams in everyday programming. Instead, they offer a shared language and structure for events where leveled play is needed.

If a mixed-bench team is scheduled to play a clearly leveled opponent, communication between coaches is essential. A brief safety and risk management plan must be submitted in advance.

TEAM COMPOSITION QUICK GUIDE

Level A — Highly skilled and independent athletes; no on-ice support required

Level A/B — Mix of A-level and strong B-level athletes

Level B — Moderate independence and developing skills; may need occasional prompts or support

Level B/C — Primarily B-level athletes, with supportive C-level participants

Level C/B — Mostly C-level athletes, with minimal B-level support; developmental pace

Level C — Athletes needing significant support or adaptive equipment; focused on inclusion and basic skill-building

Leveled play isn't about separation—it's about setting every athlete up for success.

ASHA SPECIAL HOCKEY GUIDELINES



HONORING TEAM IDENTITY

ASHA deeply respects and values the connection athletes have to their home teams. For many participants, the sense of belonging, pride, and camaraderie developed within their local program is just as meaningful as the game itself. That identity should be honored and celebrated—especially at larger events.

When athletes represent their home programs in leveled play formats at regional or national events, it's important to remember that every team member plays a role. Athletes who are not rostered for a specific leveled game are strongly encouraged to attend, cheer, and support their teammates. Their presence contributes to the overall team experience, reinforces inclusion, and strengthens community spirit.

ASHA recognizes that many teams include athletes with a wide range of abilities, and that assigning players to specific levels can be challenging—especially for programs that do not use formal leveling in their regular practices. However, at regional and national events where games are structured by ability, it is essential to provide clear and consistent guidance to promote safety and fair play.

The leveling framework helps ensure that gameplay is safe, balanced, and enjoyable for all participants. It assists teams in forming appropriate matchups, provides clarity for officials, and helps ensure that athletes of all ability levels have a meaningful experience on the ice.

These descriptions are not intended to restrict or replace the use of mixed-bench teams in day-to-day programming. Instead, they offer a common language and structure for events where leveling is necessary. Mixed-bench teams—those that include athletes across multiple ability levels and do not align with one of the outlined categories—require prior approval and a safety plan when participating in leveled games. If a mixed-bench team is scheduled to compete against a clearly leveled opponent, communication between coaches is essential to ensure shared expectations and alignment.

ASHA GAME LEVELS AND TEAM FORMATS OVERVIEW

To ensure leveled play remains fair, safe, and engaging for all, ASHA encourages programs to build rosters with thoughtful balance:

- Level A teams are composed of athletes with the highest level of independence and skill, capable of structured, competitive play with no on-ice support.
- Level A/B teams include a mix of A-level and high B-level athletes.
- Level B teams consist of athletes with intermediate skills and moderate independence, who may benefit from occasional prompts or on-ice Jr. Coach/Mentors.
- Level B/C teams are primarily made up of B-level athletes, supported by C-level players who can safely engage in a faster-paced environment.
- Level C/B teams are inclusive rosters composed mostly of C-level athletes, with minimal B-level support. Games are adapted for developmental participation.
- Level C teams include athletes who require significant support or adaptive equipment, with a focus on basic skills, engagement, and on-ice mentorship.

EVERY TEAM FORMAT HAS VALUE

ASHA supports leveled, mixed-bench, and unified teams—what matters most is clear communication and athlete safety.

PLAN AHEAD

Mixed-bench teams must submit a simple plan before participating in leveled events to help everyone stay safe and informed.

Ratings should stay consistent. Athlete ratings (A, B, or C) should be applied the same way across all team formats, including mixed-bench.

COMMUNICATION BUILDS TRUST

Teams playing each other should always discuss leveling, gameplay, and support needs in advance

Leveled Teams

Athletes are grouped by similar skill level and on-ice independence (Level A, B, or C). This format is commonly used at festivals and tournaments for safer, more structured play.

MIXED-BENCH TEAMS

Athletes with varying levels and support needs play together on the same team. This format is especially common in home games and smaller regional events.

UNIFIED TEAMS

In pre-approved cases, athletes with disabilities may be paired with peer Jr. Coach/Mentors to participate in recreational-style adult league play.



TEAM COMPOSITION

Special Hockey games are typically played with five skaters and one goaltender per team, similar to traditional hockey. Depending on the local program, teams may include youth players (under 18), adult players (18 and older), or a combination of both. To promote safety, fairness, and a more enjoyable experience, athletes are generally grouped by ability level—commonly designated as Level A, B, or C.

The American Special Hockey Association understands that its member programs vary in size, resources, and regional structure. Some programs are able to field multiple leveled teams, while others combine athletes into a single roster. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and ASHA supports flexible team design—as long as it prioritizes athlete safety, communication, and a positive experience.

COMMUNITY GAMES AND SPECIAL EVENTS

Games between ASHA teams and local recreational, high school, or professional teams are considered special events. These games are covered under ASHA's insurance policy when properly sanctioned. To receive coverage, programs must submit an Event Sanctioning Form along with a roster of all guest team athletes and coaches prior to the event.

TEAM STRUCTURES IN ASHA PROGRAMS

Across ASHA programs, three common team formats are used:

- **Leveled Teams:** Athletes are grouped by similar skill level and on-ice independence (Levels A, B, or C). This format is often used at tournaments and festivals.
- **Mixed-Bench Teams:** Athletes of varying levels and support needs play together on the same team. This format is common in smaller programs or for home games.
- **Unified Adult Teams:** In some pre-approved cases, adult athletes with disabilities participate alongside peers in recreational adult league play.
- No one format is considered more “official” than another. Each approach supports athlete engagement in different ways, and all rely on respectful communication and thoughtful planning to ensure safe, inclusive, and meaningful participation.

LEVELED PLAY & MIXED-BENCH

At ASHA-sanctioned events where games are organized by level, programs that wish to bring a mixed-bench team must request prior approval. This allows time to submit a brief safety and risk management plan, which outlines:

- How expectations for gameplay will be communicated
- How support needs will be addressed during the game
- How potential matchups will be managed

This step is not meant to discourage creativity or limit participation. Many teams rely on flexible rosters to include all athletes—and ASHA supports that. The goal is simply to ensure everyone (athletes, coaches, officials, and families) knows what to expect and can participate safely and confidently.

When games involve teams from different ASHA-affiliated organizations, it is expected that both programs communicate in advance to agree on leveling standards, gameplay format, and accommodations as needed. Whether playing leveled or mixed, athlete ratings should be applied consistently across all formats. A player rated as Level B for one event should not be rated differently in another setting simply due to roster structure. This consistency protects the integrity of the leveling process, reduces confusion, and builds trust between programs.



GAME FORMAT GUIDELINES

A Level Games

- 5 skaters + 1 goaltender on the ice per team (unless pulling goalie for an extra attacker).
- No coaches on the ice during play (exceptions for safety may be approved in advance).
- No double-shifting unless necessary due to roster size.
- Line changes made on the fly; no buzzer system.
- Score is kept, with a max 4-goal differential shown on the scoreboard.
- Penalties result in a penalty shot (ideally taken by the fouled player); 2-minute penalties may be assessed if appropriate.
- Teams must have at least 5 skaters on the ice regardless of penalties.
- Coaches are responsible for managing lines to avoid running up the score.
- Games officiated by experienced referees familiar with Special Hockey and Level A play.
- Game length: 60 minutes (three 20-minute running clock periods). Adjustments must be agreed upon in advance and communicated clearly.

B Level Games

- 5 skaters + 1 goaltender per team; with mutual coach approval, 1–2 roamers may be added.
- Junior Coaches or Jr. Coach/Mentors may be on the ice (with prior agreement from both teams).
- No double-shifting unless roster size is limited.
- Line changes typically on the buzzer; fly changes allowed with agreement from both teams.
- Score is kept, with a max 4-goal differential shown.
- Participation of any A-level athletes must be managed carefully to preserve balance.
- Penalties result in a penalty shot (ideally taken by the fouled player); 2-minute penalties allowed at coach/referee discretion.
- Extra penalty shots may be awarded to encourage engagement and skill-building.
- Games may be officiated by certified referees or trained volunteer officials.
- Game length: 60 minutes (three 20-minute running clock periods). Any modifications must be agreed upon in advance and communicated to all parties.

C Level Games

- 5 skaters + 1 goaltender per team; with coach agreement, additional roamers may be used.
- Up to 3 Jr. Coach/Mentors or on-ice helpers are allowed, provided all coaches agree and support enhances athlete experience.
- Line changes made on the buzzer to support structure and consistency.
- Modified scoring may be used—1 goal per team per score, regardless of who scores. Actual score may be kept with prior coach agreement.
- B-level player participation must be carefully managed to preserve fairness and support.
- Penalties result in a penalty shot (taken by any player, as determined by coach/referee).
- Extra penalty shots may be awarded to maintain engagement.
- Games may be officiated by trained volunteers or certified officials.
- Game length: 60 minutes (three 20-minute periods). A 5-minute warm-up is recommended for player evaluation and matchup review. All adaptations must be agreed upon and communicated prior to play.



Level A **Independent & Competitive**

Athletes at this level play independently, understand the game, and thrive in fast-paced, structured environments with little to no support.

Level B **Developing & Supported**

These athletes show growing skills and moderate independence. They may need occasional guidance and benefit from a slower pace or nearby support.

Level C **Emerging & Assisted**

Athletes at this level require substantial support and focus on basic skills, engagement, and inclusion—often with on-ice Jr. Coach/Mentors or adaptive equipment.

ATHLETE LEVEL A (A+ to A-)

Athletes at Level A are typically the most independent and skilled players on their teams. They often:

- Skate confidently and independently at higher speeds
- Maintain balance, edge control, and directional changes without assistance
- Demonstrate strong game awareness and actively track puck movement and play development
- Execute hockey fundamentals such as stickhandling, passing, and shooting with accuracy and control
- Understand and apply rules and strategies (e.g., offside, icing, positioning) with minimal guidance
- Participate in structured drills and team activities with full comprehension
- Take regular shifts and change lines independently without prompting
- Require little to no in-game support or prompting from coaches or volunteers
- Can play competitive, full-ice hockey at a pace comparable to non-disabled recreational levels
- Thrive in fast-paced, structured environments that emphasize competition and skill execution

ATHLETE LEVEL B (B+ to B-)

Athletes at Level B demonstrate moderate independence and developing hockey skills.

These players typically:

- Skate unassisted but may have limited speed, stamina, or control
- Show growing ability in stickhandling, passing, and shooting, though execution may be inconsistent
- Understand basic game rules and concepts, with occasional reminders needed
- Remain engaged in gameplay most of the time, with occasional lapses in focus
- Participate in structured drills with some understanding and may require repetition or modeling
- May need assistance with positioning, line changes, or reminders about gameplay flow
- Benefit from a coach or on-ice Jr. Coach/Mentor nearby to reinforce instructions and safety
- Can participate in leveled games with minimal adaptations (e.g., slower pace, simplified rules)
- May have one-on-one support on the ice who serves as a non-intrusive guide
- Often enjoy balanced competition that allows them to apply their skills in a moderately paced, supportive setting

ATHLETE Level C (C+ to C-)

Athletes at Level C are in the early stages of hockey development and often require substantial support. These players typically:

- May need physical assistance with skating, such as a gait trainer, walker, or close on-ice support
- Have limited balance or motor control and may tire quickly
- Are learning basic movements like stopping, turning, or pushing the puck
- Require continuous guidance to stay engaged and safe during gameplay
- May not understand rules or structured gameplay but enjoy being on the ice and participating at their own pace
- May struggle to follow drills or group activities without direct one-on-one instruction or visual modeling
- Often benefit from shorter shifts and modified game formats (e.g., 3-on-3, open play, or half-ice)
- Require assistance with positioning and may need reminders to stay with the group or respond to cues
- Respond well to encouraging environments focused on fun, inclusion, and peer interaction



FACILITY

The American Special Hockey Association supports adapted gameplay across a variety of surfaces, including full-size regulation ice, half-ice, and cross-ice formats. While full-ice remains the standard for ASHA-sanctioned events, half-ice or cross-ice games may be used based on ice availability or to enhance the experience for newer athletes or those developing foundational skills. The choice of rink size should be guided by what best supports a safe, positive, and inclusive experience for all participants.

ASHA also encourages the use of off-ice hockey formats, including street hockey, floor hockey, and ball hockey. These are effective tools for increasing access, develop skills, building local participation, and maintaining athlete engagement year-round. These formats are especially valuable for new programs, athletes with mobility concerns, or teams with limited access to ice time.

EQUIPMENT

All athletes must wear full protective equipment while on the ice. This includes a helmet with full facial protection, gloves, and protective footwear when not wearing skates—such as when using adaptive equipment. This same standard of safety applies to coaching staff and on-ice volunteers: helmets and protective/anti-skid footwear are mandatory for anyone stepping onto the ice in a coaching or support role, regardless of whether they are skating.

Neck guards are requested for all A level athletes and are strongly encouraged for athletes at the B and C levels. While ASHA understands that neck guard policies may vary by region or facility, we believe that promoting their use reflects our shared commitment to player safety, especially at higher speeds or in more structured gameplay.

The American Special Hockey Association supports adaptive play and believes that athletes of all abilities should be able to safely access the game. Equipment such as gait trainers, wheelchairs, and other mobility devices may be used during both practices and games, provided they are properly supervised and integrated in a way that supports safety and positive participation for all. Programs are encouraged to consult with ASHA when introducing new equipment to ensure that adaptations meet safety and gameplay guidelines while supporting athlete success.

To further promote safety and accessibility:

- Protective footwear is strongly recommended for athletes using mobility devices. Options such as steel-toe boots or modified skate boots without blades can provide essential toe and ankle protection.
- For athletes who use their feet to move across the ice while using a mobility device, anti-slip soles or grip-enhancing footwear are encouraged to help reduce the risk of slipping or injury.

FULL GEAR IS REQUIRED

All athletes must wear full protective equipment—including a helmet with full facial protection—while on the ice for game play. Coaches and volunteers need helmets too.

Anyone stepping onto the ice in a coaching or support role must wear a helmet and protective footwear (anti-skid), even if not skating.

ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT IS WELCOMED

Mobility devices like wheelchairs and gait trainers are permitted when properly supervised and safely integrated into practices and games.

Safety comes first.

All equipment adaptations should align with ASHA's goal of safe, inclusive participation for athletes of all abilities.



EQUIPMENT Continued

- Use of mobility aids on the ice should generally be reserved for athletes who are full-time or regular users of such devices outside of hockey, ensuring safety, appropriate integration and supervision.
- ASHA encourages coaches to reach out when a new or unique adaptation is being introduced, so we can help support a safe and successful experience for all athletes.

ASHA does not restrict the use of wheelchairs or mobility aids and remains committed to creating meaningful opportunities for athletes of all abilities. We expect that every athlete has the appropriate support to participate safely, and that participation—regardless of mobility—promotes safety, success, and team inclusion. Clear communication with coaches is essential to ensure shared expectations and a safe environment for all.



GAME MANAGEMENT

To promote fair, inclusive, and enjoyable play, coaches should make every effort to match lines with players of similar ability on the opposing team. Thoughtful line-matching helps create a positive experience for all athletes.

When a team has a large roster—especially at lower skill levels—and wishes to rotate more than five skaters at a time, coaches must first gain approval from the opposing coach and inform officials before the game begins. Coaches must present an accurate, up-to-date ASHA roster prior to the game.

Athletes classified at Level A should participate in Level A games whenever possible. If an A-level athlete is attending in a supporting role—such as assisting a younger or mixed-level team—coaches must ensure that their involvement aligns with the spirit of the game.

While many higher-level athletes bring leadership and encouragement, this is not always the case. Coaches should ensure that their participation enhances the experience for everyone involved, especially athletes at earlier stages of development. The focus should remain on encouragement, teamwork, and shared success.

Double-shifting should be avoided whenever possible, to ensure equitable ice time for all players. If a game becomes one-sided or engagement begins to drop—especially in lower-level matchups—coaches are encouraged to work together to implement creative, agreed-upon adjustments. This may include awarding additional penalty shots to give more athletes a chance to handle the puck and shoot on goal. These adaptations should be discussed with referees prior to implementation.

Coaches and officials are encouraged to meet before each game to review lineups, confirm game flow expectations, and discuss any rule modifications (such as how offsides, icings, or faceoffs will be handled). Open communication sets the tone for collaboration and consistency. Event organizers should make every effort to group teams by skill level whenever possible to prioritize safety, fairness, and fun for all participants.

Game formats may be designated as Level A, A/B, B, B/C, or C, depending on the composition of the rosters participating in the game. These designations help align game pace, on-ice support, and overall structure to the abilities of the athletes involved.

Coaches are strongly encouraged to communicate with one another in advance of any game, especially at festivals or events—to discuss team composition and agree on the appropriate level designation. This proactive collaboration ensures safer matchups, clearer expectations, and a more enjoyable experience for all players.

AMERICAN SPECIAL HOCKEY ASSOCIATION ATHLETE & GAME LEVELING GUIDELINES



ASHA's leveling framework helps make gameplay safer, more balanced, and more meaningful for every participant. It gives teams the tools to create appropriate matchups, supports officials in managing fair play, and ensures athletes of all abilities can fully enjoy the game.

These descriptions are not meant to restrict the use of mixed-bench teams in everyday programming. Instead, they offer a shared language and structure for events where leveled play is needed.

If a mixed-bench team is scheduled to play a clearly leveled opponent, *communication between coaches is essential*. A brief safety and risk management plan must be submitted in advance.

Supporting Inclusion & Safety

- Match lines by pace and ability to keep games safe, fun, and competitive.
- Use ASHA's leveling framework to build balanced, event-ready rosters.
- All athletes matter—non-rostered players should still cheer, support, and participate as part of the team.
- Mixed-bench teams must be pre-approved with an ASHA risk plan—work with event organizers early.
- If playing a leveled team, coaches must communicate in advance to align expectations.
- On-ice mentors (higher-level athletes) must be clearly marked and act only in a support role.
- Teams may skate 6 players (instead of 5) at lower levels with coach and ref approval.
- For lopsided games, coaches and refs can agree to add penalty shots, adjust lines or take action to balance the game.
- Assign players by ability, not age or team history, for the best experience on both sides.
- Ensure no single player dominates or disrupts the game; everyone deserves meaningful ice time.
- Matching by ability brings out the best in Special Hockey: joy, connection, and fair play.

A Level Game Guidelines

- 5 skaters + 1 goalie per team (unless pulling goalie for an extra attacker)
- No coaches on the ice during play; safety exceptions must be approved in advance
- No double-shifting unless roster size requires it
- Line changes made on the fly; no buzzer system used
- Score is kept with a maximum 4-goal differential shown on the scoreboard
- Penalties result in a penalty shot (ideally by the fouled player); 2-minute penalties may also be assessed as appropriate
- Teams must field at least 5 skaters at all times, regardless of penalties
- Coaches are expected to manage lines to avoid running up the score
- Games officiated by referees experienced in Special Hockey and Level A play
- Game length: 60 minutes (three 20-minute running clock periods); a 5-minute warm-up is recommended for evaluation and line planning any changes must be agreed upon in advance and clearly communicated

B Level Game Guidelines

- Standard format: 5 skaters + 1 goalie per team; 1–2 roamers may be added with coach agreement
- Junior Coaches/Mentors allowed on ice if both teams approve in advance
- No double-shifting unless roster size requires it
- Line changes typically on the buzzer; fly changes allowed with mutual agreement (No Off Sides)
- Score is kept with a maximum 4-goal differential displayed
- A-level athletes may participate but must be managed to maintain balance
- Penalties result in a penalty shot (preferably by the fouled player); 2-minute penalties allowed at ref/coach discretion
- Extra penalty shots may be used to encourage engagement and development
- Games may be officiated by certified referees or trained volunteer officials
- Standard game length: up to 60 minutes (three 20-minute running clock periods); a 5-minute warm-up is recommended for evaluation and line planning, any changes must be agreed upon in advance and communicated to all involved

C Level Game Guidelines

- 5 skaters + 1 goalie per team; additional roamers allowed with coach agreement
- Up to 3 mentors or on-ice helpers permitted if agreed upon by both coaches and used to enhance athlete experience
- Line changes are made on the buzzer to support structure and consistency (No Off Sides)
- Modified scoring may be used—1 goal per team per score, regardless of who scores; full scorekeeping allowed with prior coach agreement
- Participation of B-level players must be carefully managed to maintain fairness and support lower-level athletes
- Penalties result in a penalty shot, taken by any player as chosen by the coach or referee. Extra penalty shots may be awarded to encourage engagement and participation
- Games may be officiated by trained volunteers or certified referees
- Game length: up to 60 minutes (three 20-minute running clock periods); a 5-minute warm-up is recommended for evaluation and line planning. Any modifications must be agreed upon in advance and clearly communicated

RATING YOUR SPECIAL HOCKEY PLAYER

Level A (A+ to A–)

Highly independent and skilled athletes who:

- Skate fast with strong balance, edge control, and direction changes
- Handle the puck, pass, and shoot with accuracy
- Understand and apply rules (e.g., offside, icing, positioning)
- Read the play and stay actively engaged
- Follow drills and strategies with minimal guidance
- Change lines independently and take regular shifts
- Require little to no on-ice support
- Compete at full-ice pace similar to recreational non-disabled players
- Thrive in fast, structured, and competitive environments

Level B (B+ to B–)

Moderately independent players with developing skills who:

- Skate unassisted but may lack speed, control, or stamina
- Can stickhandle, pass, and shoot, but may be inconsistent
- Understand basic rules with occasional reminders
- Stay engaged with some lapses in focus
- Follow drills with some help and repetition
- May need support with positioning and line changes
- Benefit from nearby coach or on-ice mentor
- Play in leveled games with slower pace or simpler rules
- May have one-on-one support acting as a non-intrusive guide
- Do well in moderately paced, supportive games

Level C (C+ to C–):

Athletes new to hockey or needing high support who:

- May use walkers, gait trainers, or close assistance to skate
- Have limited balance and tire quickly
- Are learning basic movements (stopping, turning, puck pushing)
- Need continuous help to stay safe and engaged
- May not grasp structured rules but enjoy being on the ice
- Require direct 1:1 instruction or visual modeling
- Benefit from short shifts and modified formats (3-on-3, half-ice)
- Need help with positioning and staying with the group
- Thrive in positive, inclusive environments focused on fun



ASHA MEDICAL EMERGENCY GUIDELINES

Athlete Safety, Support & Communication

ASHA recognizes the diverse medical needs within our community. To ensure appropriate care ASHA affiliate member organizations must work closely with parents and guardians to identify any known medical diagnoses or conditions that may require additional monitoring or support. This includes—but is not limited to—diabetes, seizure disorders, asthma, allergies, and developmental or communication-related needs. This collaboration helps ensure that athletes receive the safety, support, and dignity they deserve at all times. Medical accommodations should be reviewed at the start of each season and adjusted as needed.



EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN (EAP)

Each ASHA team must maintain a site-specific Emergency Action Plan for all venues that includes:

- ED location
- Emergency access points for EMS
- Medical info and emergency contacts for all athletes
- Roles and responsibilities of coaches and volunteers
- Location of emergency forms and EpiPens (if applicable)
- Parents/Guardians must always be granted immediate access to their athlete during any medical concern or emergency

GENERAL MEDICAL EMERGENCY STEPS

1. Stop the activity and ensure safety.
2. Call 911 immediately for:
 - a. Loss of consciousness
 - b. Breathing difficulty or chest pain
 - c. Seizures (especially if prolonged or first-time)
 - d. Diabetic or allergic emergencies
 - e. Head/neck injury or trauma
3. Do not move the athlete unless necessary for safety
4. Assign someone to meet EMS
5. Notify parent/guardian immediately and remain with the athlete
6. Complete the ASHA Incident Report within 48 hours

MEDICAL INFORMATION & RECORDS

Programs must keep accessible:

- Emergency contacts
- Known diagnoses (diabetes, seizures, allergies, etc.)
- Prescribed action plans or emergency medications

TRAINING & RESPONSIBILITIES

All coaches, volunteers, and mentors must:

- Know how to recognize and respond to concussions, seizures, and diabetic events
- Understand the team's Emergency Action Plan
- Respect family input and ensure parental access at all times
- CPR/First Aid certification is strongly encouraged for all team staff

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Any of the following must be reported using ASHA's Incident Report Form within 48 hours:

- Injury during practice or play
- Concussion
- Seizure
- Diabetic event
- Emergency services called
- Reports are reviewed by the ASHA Executive Director for follow-up and compliance

CONCUSSION PROTOCOL

(CDC HEADS UP Compliant)

Recognize Symptoms:

- Headache, nausea, blurred vision, dizziness
- Confusion, irritability, memory issues
- Slurred speech, balance problems

Respond:

- Remove athlete from play immediately—no same-day return
 - Monitor and call 911 if symptoms worsen
 - Notify the parent/guardian right away
 - Require written medical clearance before returning to play
 - Complete and submit incident report
-

SEIZURE PROTOCOL

Responding to a Seizure:

1. Protect the athlete from injury; clear the space.
 2. Do not restrain or insert anything into the mouth.
 3. Time the seizure. Call 911 if:
 - a. It lasts more than 5 minutes
 - b. It is the athlete's first seizure
 - c. The athlete does not regain consciousness
 4. Place in recovery position once seizure ends.
 5. Notify parent/guardian immediately and follow any action plan
 6. Document and report
-

HYPOGLYCEMIA/DIABETES PROTOCOL

Recognize Low Blood Sugar (Hypoglycemia):

- Shakiness, sweating, fatigue
- Sudden behavior changes, confusion
- Hunger, pale skin, rapid pulse

Respond:

1. Stop activity and sit the athlete down.
2. Provide fast-acting sugar: juice, glucose tablets, regular soda.
3. Monitor closely. If symptoms worsen or don't resolve, call 911.
4. Follow the athlete's diabetes action plan (if on file).
5. Ensure parent/guardian access and notify immediately.
6. Report and document the event.

Treat first, then confirm. It is safer to assume hypoglycemia than delay treatment.

We're excited to share this Family Resource, available on SPECIALHOCKEY.ORG, to help make the family special hockey experience smoother, more fun, and full of support. If you would like an editable version to customize for your team, email your request to asha@specialhockey.org.

What to Expect at Special Hockey Practices, Games & Festivals

This guide is here to help you and your athlete feel comfortable, confident, and excited about being part of Special Hockey.

First Things First—You Belong Here

Special Hockey is for athletes who benefit from a flexible, adaptive, and inclusive approach to the game. We welcome players of all abilities, some skate independently, some use walkers or wheelchairs, and some need on-ice buddies. No matter your athlete's needs or experience, there's a place for them here.

✓ **Please note:** Athletes must have completed the current season's ASHA registration (the season starts July 1 each year) before they can participate. If you're unsure about your athlete's status, check with your team manager.

What to Wear and Bring

- Full hockey gear is required: helmet with full face mask, gloves, shin guards, elbow pads, chest protection, and skates.
- Need help with gear? Your team manager can help you get fitted, and a size guide is available at SpecialHockey.org.
- Using a mobility device? No skates, no problem, athletes using wheelchairs, gait trainers, or walkers can still play. Just be sure they wear sturdy, protective footwear (steel-toe or anti-slip recommended).
- Neck guards are encouraged for all athletes and are requested for Level A players.
- Most teams have loaner equipment, don't hesitate to ask!
- Over time, create a personal checklist for practices and events. Being prepared includes checking for schedule updates, having the right gear, and showing up ready to have fun!

At the Rink

- Arrive 20–30 minutes before ice time to get settled in.
- Locker rooms may be assigned. Volunteers can help guide you.
 - Parents may assist their athletes but must be registered Locker Room Support Volunteers with a completed background check and abuse prevention training.
 - To avoid crowding, one parent/guardian only is allowed in the locker room if support is needed.
- Athletes should never remove their base layers in locker rooms. ASHA teams are mixed-age and gender, and privacy is important.
- Practices are structured but flexible. Athletes will be grouped by ability level (A, B, or C) and supported by trained coaches, jr. coaches/mentors, and volunteers.
- A team manager or coach will greet you and check in on how your athlete is doing.
- **Ask questions anytime!**

Who You'll See on the Ice

- Head & Assistant Coaches lead the sessions and make sure things run smoothly.
- Junior Coaches (Mentors) are trained youth volunteers who support athletes—especially at the C and B levels.
- On-Ice Buddies provide hands-on or nearby support. That's not just allowed—it's encouraged!
- Parents are not permitted on the bench or ice unless they are registered, background-checked volunteers and invited by a coach.

Safety and Support

- All on-ice coaches and volunteers wear helmets and follow ASHA safety rules.
- Practices are non-contact and designed to meet athletes where they are. Breaks are totally okay!
- Please share any specific medical or support needs—like seizures, mobility, or sensory considerations—so we can help your athlete succeed.

You're Part of the Team

- Parents are encouraged to stay at the rink during practices and games.
- You'll be part of a strong, caring community. Welcome new families, get involved, and cheer for all athletes!
- Every athlete has good days and tough days. We celebrate effort, growth, and connection, not just goals.

Festivals & Special Events

- ASHA events are organized by volunteers and sometimes take time to finalize. We appreciate your patience!
- Accurate athlete registration helps avoid delays—make sure your athlete is fully registered and listed on your team's roster.
- Every festival is unique. Ask your team manager or head coach for details about activities, accommodations, and schedules.
- Use the QR code on the back of your athlete's badge to access up-to-date event info.
- Just like practice, come fully dressed and fully prepared—and don't forget to bring all your gear home afterward!
- To reduce locker room stress:
 - Athletes needing extra support should arrive partially dressed and ready to play.
 - Only one registered adult may assist in the locker room.
 - The environment can get crowded—please be mindful of others and patient with transitions.



MOST IMPORTANTLY Special Hockey is about friendships, not scores.

Ask questions | Celebrate effort over perfection. | Cheer for every athlete. | Be prepared, be kind, and be proud
We're excited to have you on the team. Every practice, game, and event is a step forward—on the ice, in confidence, and in community.



ASHA Game Day Coach-to-Coach Checklist

Keeping Games Fun, Fair, and Focused on the Athletes

Special Hockey brings together players of all abilities—and it works best when coaches connect before a game to make sure everyone's on the same page. This checklist is a tool to help streamline those conversations, especially during tournaments or events when teams and levels vary. We're not here to tell anyone how to coach. This is just a quick-hit reminder of what's worth covering to make the game better for everyone involved.

Pre-Game Conversation Checklist

1. Team Snapshot

- “Our team is mostly Level ___ (A, B, or C).”
- “We’ve got ___ skaters, ___ goalies, and ___ first-timers.”
- “Let me know if there’s anything I should watch for with your group.”

2. Support & Adaptations

- “We’ve got a player playing up/down today—wanted to give you a heads-up.”
- “Some of our A Level Players would like to participate as helpers”
- “We’re using adaptive gear today—walkers, chairs, or visual supports.”
- “Open to swapping ideas—if you’ve tried something that works, we’re always learning.”

3. On-Ice Help

- “We’ll have ___ (coach, mentor, experienced player) on the ice.”
- Their role: ___ (support a skater, help manage play, not part of active game, etc.)
- Let us know if you’ve got someone out there too.

4. Scorekeeping Preference

- “How do you want to handle scorekeeping?”
 - Keep it even (one goal each)
 - Keep it accurate
 - Flexible—add penalty shots or mix it up
- “We’ve got some players who do better when the score feels close.”

5. Game Flow Adjustments

- “If things get lopsided, I’m fine with adjusting—mixing lines, rotating players, extra chances.”
- “Let’s stay in touch mid-game if something feels off.”

6. Officials & Communication

- Introduce any refs or helpers and set expectations.
- Share how your team responds best—verbal cues, extra whistles, no goal horns/no buzzers, shift timing, etc.

Emergency Readiness Tip

- If there's a medical issue during a game:
- Have one off-ice adult ready (not in skates) to handle 911 calls and contact info.
- Keep printed emergency contact info for players, coaches, and mentors nearby.
- Highlight any players who attend independently or have seizure risk—only what's necessary.
- Have a copy of the Emergency Incident protocol on the bench.
- Off-ice person makes the calls; coach stays with the athlete.

One Last Thing

Quick check-ins like this can make a big difference. Everyone’s juggling a lot during events—but this five-minute conversation sets the tone, keeps things running smooth, and helps every athlete walk off the ice feeling like a champ. We’re all on the same team when it comes to making Special Hockey something extraordinary.