

# Special Olympics Research Overview



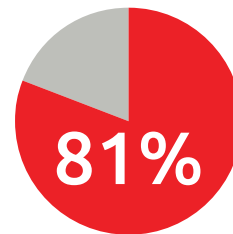
More than  
**4.5 million**  
Special Olympics athletes compete across  
**170**  
countries, averaging  
**258**  
competitions each day around the world.



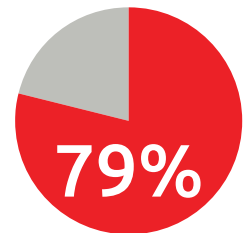
**94%** of Special Olympics athletes reported improved sports skills.



Children ages 2-7 experienced a  
**7 month gain**  
in motor skills after participation in an 8-week Young Athletes program.



of students say that the Unified Strategy is changing their school for the better.

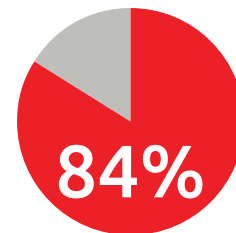


of Unified teammates without disabilities reported increased understanding of people with intellectual disabilities.



**65%** of parents

felt that participation in Special Olympics had raised their expectations of their sons and daughters.



of healthcare providers felt better prepared to treat people with intellectual disabilities.

Special Olympics' brand ranks highly in **familiarity and favorability ratings.**



**Over half** of athletes' siblings in the United States felt that participation in Special Olympics brought their family closer together.

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For the past 15 years, Special Olympics' research and evaluation work has focused on a range of topics, including the attitudes the general public has towards people with intellectual disabilities, the perception of their capabilities, barriers to employment and community inclusion, health status and access to quality health care, and the impact of Special Olympics' programming. Research and evaluation has advanced our knowledge of the cultural and environmental factors that are obstacles to people with intellectual disabilities living more fulfilling lives that reflect dignity, equity and opportunity. Also, through this work, Special Olympics has been a driving force for realizing improved policies and laws that support the rights of people with intellectual disabilities.

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**WHEN USED EFFECTIVELY, RESEARCH CAN BE A POWERFUL TOOL. THIS RESEARCH OVERVIEW DOCUMENT IS DESIGNED TO HELP SPECIAL OLYMPICS PROGRAMS**

share the impact of their programming in communities, encourage others to engage in the Special Olympics movement, secure partnerships, strengthen presentations to major donors, inform legislative bodies around the world, and create evidence-based programming. Additionally, this document aims to encourage and prepare Programs to conduct their own research and evaluation.

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**Special Olympics impacts lives. Use the data behind the incredible personal stories to activate more people to #PlayUnified.**

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Each section of this overview contains information on the need for each area of programming as well as the impact of Special Olympics in that area. Users can reference the entire document or specific sections of it: [Attitudes](#), [Sports](#), [Unified Sports](#), [Health](#), [Unified Strategy: Unified Champion Schools](#), [Young Athletes](#), [Families](#), [Demographics](#), [Brand](#), and [Conducting Your Own Research and Evaluation](#). Please contact [research@specialolympics.org](mailto:research@specialolympics.org) with any questions or ideas for future Program-focused resources. ●

# Special Olympics Attitudes Research

## WHY ATTITUDES?

As evident throughout history, people in societies around the globe hold many misperceptions and negative attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Negative attitudes have been shown to be barriers to inclusion for people with ID in the community.<sup>1,2</sup> Several factors, including prior experience with people with ID and educational level, influence attitudes towards people with ID.<sup>3,4</sup> Research has shown that these attitudes can be changed through increased quality, positive interactions which challenge existing stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> This is at the crux of the Special Olympics Movement and is a strategic priority for the organization. Special Olympics utilizes sport to fight the stigma faced by people with ID, demonstrate their abilities, and change attitudes.

1 Abbott, S., & McConkey, R. (2006). The barriers to social inclusion as perceived by people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal Of Intellectual Disabilities*, 10(3), 275-287.

2 Gilmore, L., Campbell, J., & Cuskelly, M. (2003). Developmental Expectations, Personality Stereotypes, and Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education: community and teacher views of Down syndrome. *International Journal Of Disability, Development & Education*, 50(1), 65.

3 Tak-fai Lau, J., & Chau-kiu, C. (1999). Discriminatory attitudes to people with intellectual disability or mental health difficulty. *International Social Work*, 42(4), 431.

4 Yazbeck, M., McVilly, K., & Parmenter, T. R. (2004). Attitudes Toward People with Intellectual Disabilities. *Journal Of Disability Policy Studies*, 15(2), 97-111.

5 McManus, J. L., Feyes, K. J., & Saucier, D. A. (2011). Contact and knowledge as predictors of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28(5), 579-590.

**Myth 1:** The majority of people with ID are severely impaired.

**Fact 1:** 85% of people with ID are only mildly impaired. Despite this fact, there is a widespread belief that people with ID are not capable of doing things such as playing inclusive sports and attending inclusive schools.<sup>6</sup>

**Myth 2:** Most people feel that their city/area is a good place to live for people with ID.

**Fact 2:** Only 50% of people reported that their city/area is a good place for people with ID to live, while 36% reported their city/area is not a good place for people with ID to live.<sup>7</sup>

6 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

7 Gallup (2014). *Gallup World Poll*.

**Myth 3:** The public's attitude toward people with ID cannot be changed by increased interactions between people with and without ID.

**Fact 3:** Attitudes can be changed through increased quality interactions that challenge prevailing stigmas. Research has shown that structured and positive interactions can lead to attitude change.<sup>8</sup>

8 McManus, J. L., Feyes, K. J., & Saucier, D. A. (2011). Contact and knowledge as predictors of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28(5), 579-590.

## PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Due to the impact that public attitudes have on the lives of people with ID, documenting these attitudes has been one of the cornerstones of Special Olympics research. Since 2001, surveys of public attitudes have been conducted in 14 countries representing all Special Olympics regions. Special Olympics' [multinational attitudes study](#) surveyed people from 10 countries around the world to assess their attitudes about people with ID. It found that while attitudes vary between different countries and regions around the world, misperceptions and negative attitudes are found worldwide<sup>9</sup>:

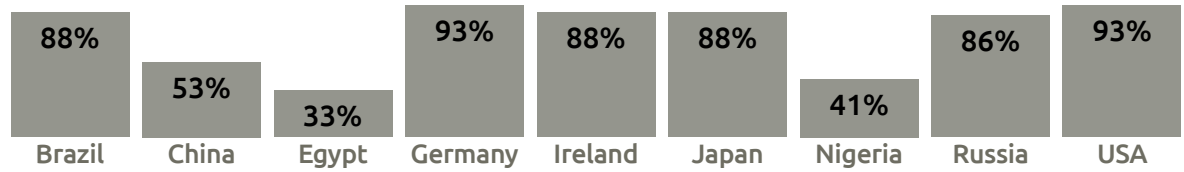
- Although people with ID face many barriers to health care, **approximately 2/3 (68%) of those surveyed felt that people with ID receive the same or better health care than the general public.** (For more information see the [Special Olympics Health Research](#) section.)
- Over one third of the respondents felt that people with ID should be employed in "special workshops", not mainstream workplaces. **Significant numbers of people in all countries surveyed felt that inclusion in the work place and school could have negative consequences** including more accidents, lower productivity, decreased ability to learn, and lack of discipline.
- When asked about obstacles to inclusion, respondents believed that **negative attitudes from other students, employees, and neighbors, as well as a lack of available supports were huge barriers to inclusion.**
- Attitudes varied from country to country about sports participation for people with ID. In Japan, India, and China, less than 20% of respondents believed that people with ID are very capable of participating in sports with other people with ID, as opposed to 75% in Germany.

9 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

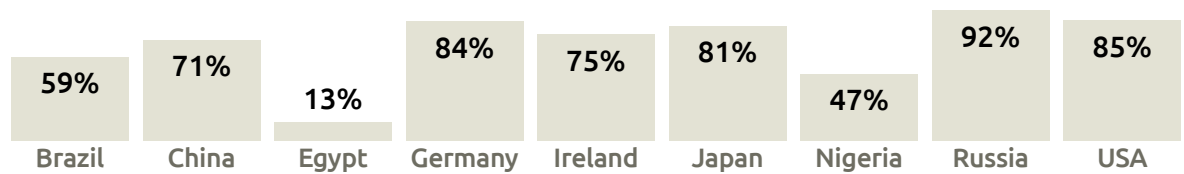
- **When asked about the ability of people with ID to participate on sports teams with others without ID, respondents were much more skeptical.** In nine out of ten countries surveyed, only 20% or less of the population believed that people with ID could play sports alongside their peers without disabilities. In four of the ten, that number fell to 10% or less.

**PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE ABILITIES OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (SELECTED CAPABILITIES)**

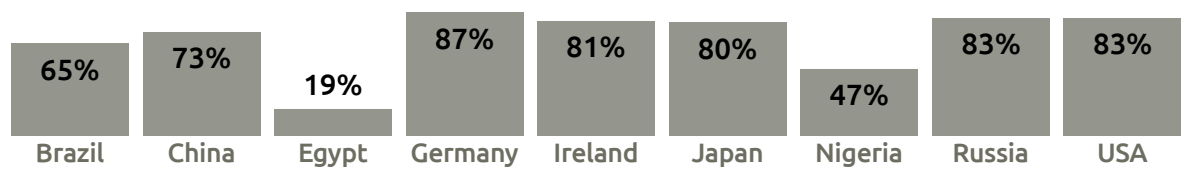
**Sustain Friendships**



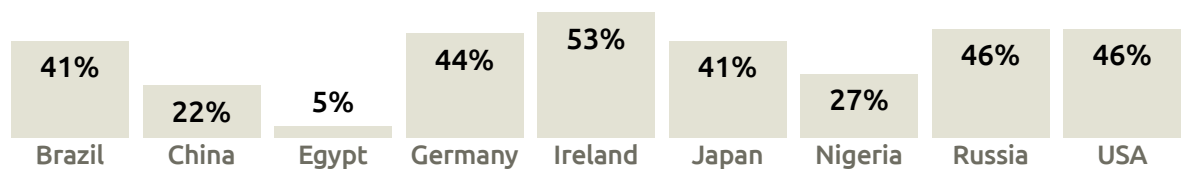
**Wash and Dress**



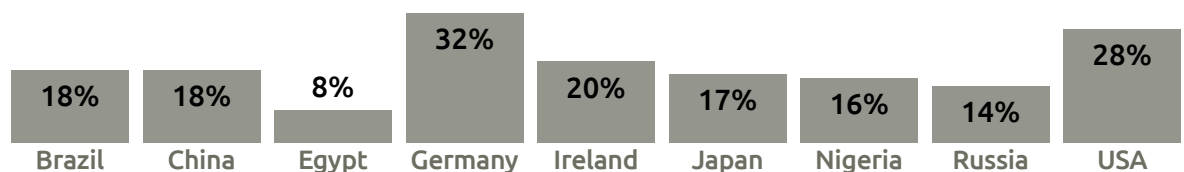
**Tell Time**



**Understand News Events**



**Handle Emergencies**



Youth attitudes also play an important role in fostering inclusion, particularly in school settings. A Special Olympics study focusing on Japanese youth found<sup>10</sup>:

- Only 40% of Japanese youth reported having personal contact with students with ID in school.
- **Only 17% of Japanese students indicated that they would spend time with students with ID outside of the classroom**, and over 75% of Japanese students expressed concern that including students with ID in their classroom would impede their own learning.
- Japanese youths did not hold completely negative perceptions about people with ID. For example, over 70% of Japanese youths believed that people with ID were capable of playing on a sports team. Furthermore, **nearly half of Japanese youth (46%) were open to having students with ID in their school, in contrast to Japanese adults who overwhelmingly believe that children with ID should learn in separate schools.**<sup>11,12</sup>

While a multitude of characteristics and experiences can influence attitudes, media is one factor that can play a powerful role in how the public regards people with ID. Negative portrayals can perpetuate misperceptions and hide the real issues that people with ID face. Alternatively, positive and realistic media portrayals can have a positive impact. One [study](#) found that **after a viewing of the film *The Ringer*, 74% of youth and 83% of adult respondents thought that the movie would have a positive impact on the public's attitudes toward people with ID.**<sup>13</sup>

Special Olympics research has demonstrated that much work remains in order to educate the public and dispel inaccuracies and stigma about people with ID.

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**“I don't have anyone with ID around me and there is no way I can know about it. Misunderstanding is to some extent inevitable.”**

—Student, Japan<sup>14</sup>

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10 Norins, J., Matsumoto, C., Siperstein, G. (2005). *National Survey of Japanese Youth's Attitudes Toward Peers with Intellectual Disabilities*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston and Special Olympics, Inc.

11 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

12 Special Olympics (2005). *Changing Attitudes Changing the World – A Study of Youth Attitudes about Intellectual Disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

13 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M. (2006). *Survey of adult and youth reactions to public showing of *The Ringer**. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

14 Norins, J., Matsumoto, C., Siperstein, G. (2005). *National Survey of Japanese Youth's Attitudes Toward Peers with Intellectual Disabilities*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston and Special Olympics, Inc.



# CHANGING ATTITUDES THROUGH SPECIAL OLYMPICS

In addition to understanding the state of attitudes toward people with ID, Special Olympics has conducted research to determine the impact of its programs on attitudes.

**Evaluations have found that Special Olympics programs are changing the attitudes of parents, athletes, health care professionals, students, and the general public.**

- **Special Olympics sports changes parents' expectations.** A [U.S. study](#) found that many parents credit Special Olympics with helping them better understand their child's capabilities. Sixty-five percent (65%) of parents felt that participation in Special Olympics had raised their expectations of their sons and daughters.<sup>15</sup>
- **Special Olympics sports not only impacts others' perceptions about ID, it also influences the attitudes people with ID hold about themselves.** An [evaluation of Special Olympics in Brazil, Argentina, and Peru](#) found that nearly all athletes who participated in Special Olympics reported improvements in "feeling good about yourself."<sup>16</sup>
- **Unified Sports influences the attitudes of partners without disabilities toward athletes with intellectual disabilities.** One [evaluation in Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia](#) found that the majority of Unified football partners felt that their understanding of people with ID had improved a lot (50%) or a little (29%).<sup>17</sup>
- **World Games can challenge negative public attitudes toward people with ID.** One [study assessing attitude change in youth before and after the World Games in China](#) found that after World Games, Chinese youth had improved perceptions about the abilities of students with ID and were significantly more willing to interact with a student with ID inside and outside of school.<sup>18</sup>
- **Healthy Athletes transforms health care professionals' attitudes about the abilities of people with ID.** After volunteering with Healthy Athletes, health care professionals reported improved perceptions of people with ID's ability to 'describe their health to doctor' and 'act appropriately toward strangers'.<sup>19</sup>

15 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

16 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru*. Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Boston.

17 Norins, J., Harada, C., & Parker, R. (2006). *An Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot-Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston and Special Olympics, Inc.

18 Norins, J., Parker, R. C., & Siperstein, G. N. (2006). *Impact of the Special Olympics world games on the attitudes of youth in China*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

19 Bainbridge, D. (2008). *The antecedents and impacts of participation in Special Olympics Healthy Athletes on the perceptions and professional practice of health care professionals: A preliminary investigation*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

- **The Unified Strategy shifts perceptions of students with ID.** Seventy-one percent (71%) of U.S. school administrators observed that the Special Olympics Unified Strategy impacts the behaviors and attitudes of students without disabilities toward their peers with ID.<sup>20</sup>
- **Young Athletes raises parents' expectations of their child with ID.** In the United States, 21% of teachers reported that Young Athletes benefited families by raising parental expectations of their child's capabilities.<sup>21</sup>

Through each of its programs, Special Olympics positively shapes perceptions of people with ID, paving the way for social inclusion.

20 Center for Social Development and Education (2012). *Project UNIFY 2011-2012 Final Evaluation Report*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.

21 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATTITUDES RESEARCH



Only **50%** of people reported that their city/area is a good place for people with ID to live, while **36%** reported their city/area is not a good place for people with ID to live.<sup>22</sup>



Over **one third** of the general population believes that people with ID should be employed in "special workshops," not mainstream workplaces.<sup>23</sup>



Despite 85% of people with ID being only mildly impaired, there is a **widespread belief** that people with ID are not capable of doing things such as playing inclusive sports and attending inclusive schools.<sup>24</sup>



Special Olympics sports changes parents' expectations. **65%** of parents felt that participation in Special Olympics had raised their expectations of their sons and daughters.<sup>25</sup>



Attitudes about sports participation for people with ID vary. In Japan and China, only **17%** of people believe that people with ID are very capable of participating in sports with other people with ID, as opposed to **75%** in Germany.<sup>26</sup>



Unified Sports **influences the attitudes** of partners without disabilities toward athletes with intellectual disabilities. One evaluation found that the majority of Unified football partners felt that their understanding of people with ID had improved a lot (**50%**) or a little (**29%**).<sup>27</sup>

22 Gallup (2014). *Gallup World Poll*.

23 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

24 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

25 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

26 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

27 Norins, J., Harada, C., & Parker, R. (2006). *An Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot-Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston and Special Olympics, Inc.

# Special Olympics Overall Impact & Sports Research

## WHY SPORTS?

Research commissioned by Special Olympics has shown that many people around the world underestimate the potential and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities (ID).<sup>1</sup> Sport not only helps to change external perceptions, it creates an opportunity to improve self-esteem, self-worth, and social inclusion.<sup>2,3</sup> Moreover, it is **an opportunity to engage, have fun, and be a part of the global cultural phenomenon of sports.** As an organization that seeks to empower people with ID to achieve their personal best in all aspects of life, Special Olympics provides an opportunity for people with ID to demonstrate excellence, improve their physical fitness, and create relationships through sports.

## IMPACT OF INVOLVEMENT



In 2014, 4.5 million Special Olympics athletes competed in 94,000 competitions worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Special Olympics studies have shown that participating in Special Olympics sports has a positive impact on athletes in a variety of ways:

- Studies in the [United States](#), [Brazil](#), [Peru](#), [Argentina](#), and [China](#) found that **families reported improvements in athletes' self-esteem and self-confidence, social skills, and sports skills as a result of participating in Special Olympics.**
- The same studies found that **almost all athletes (94% on average) reported improvements in their sports skills** as a result of participating in Special Olympics.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

1 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

2 Dykens, E. M., Rosner, B. A., & Butterbaugh, G. (1998). Exercise and sports in children and adolescents with developmental disabilities. Positive physical and psychosocial effects. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*, 7(4), 757-71.

3 Dinomais, M., Gambart, G., Bruneau, A., Bontoux3, L., Deries, X., Tessiot, C., & Richard, I. (2010). Social Functioning and Self-Esteem in Young People with Disabilities Participating in Adapted Competitive Sport. *Neuropediatrics*, 41(2), 49-54. doi:10.1055/s-0030-1255118

4 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

5 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

6 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

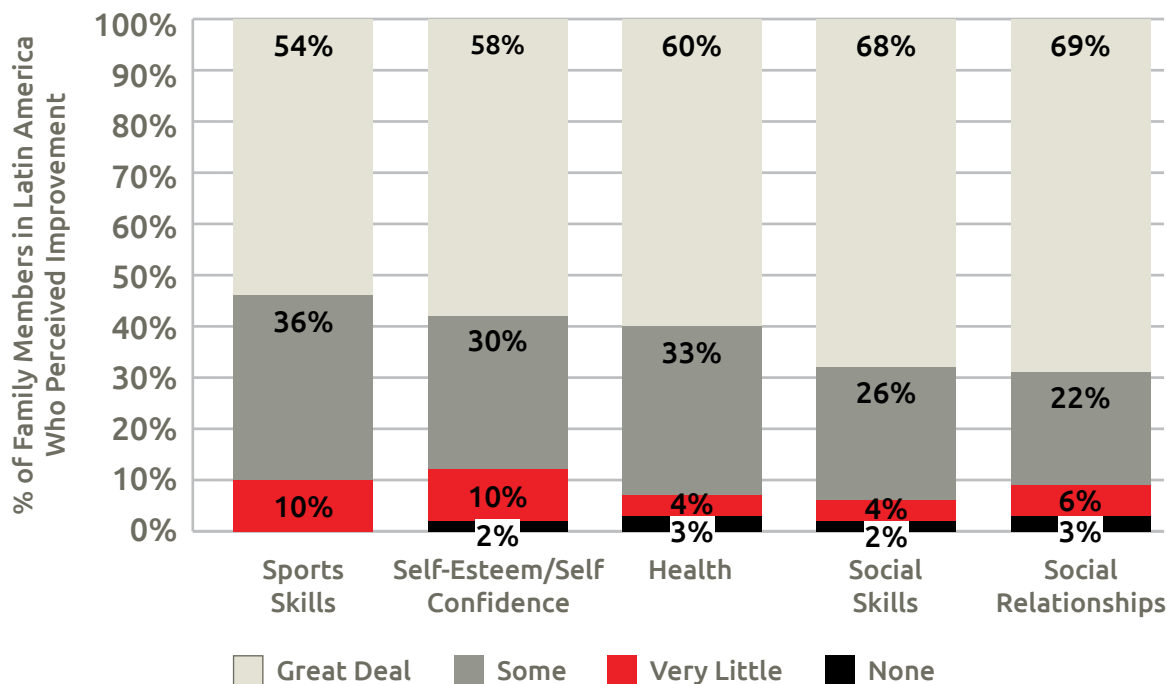
7 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston; 2008

- In a U.S. study, parents reported that 85.2% of athletes who were ‘very involved’ in Special Olympics, improved their sports skills.

“I like to prove to myself that I can do it.”

—Athlete, United States<sup>8</sup>

## FAMILY PERCEPTIONS OF ATHLETE IMPROVEMENT<sup>9</sup>



## FAMILIES

Families also benefit from athletes participating in Special Olympics. A U.S. study found that<sup>10</sup>:

- Parents and siblings of athletes felt **Special Olympics provided opportunities for the family to come together, thereby strengthening family relationships.** They also reported that it provided opportunities to connect with other families and be meaningfully involved in the community.
- Over half of athletes’ siblings (57%) felt that **participation in Special Olympics had brought their family closer together.**
- 52% of athletes’ siblings said that attending Special Olympics events gave them the **opportunity to see and be proud of their brothers’ and/or sisters’ abilities and accomplishments.**

8 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

9 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston; 2008

10 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family.* Special Olympics: Washington, DC.

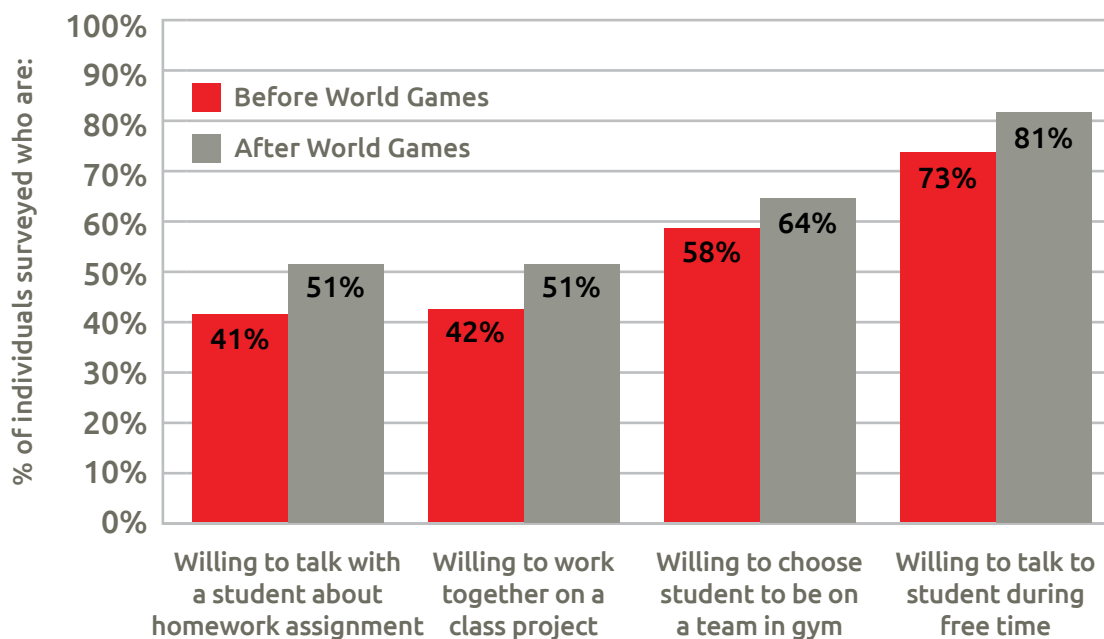
- **Special Olympics helps raise parents' expectations of their child with ID.** Parents reported that Special Olympics allowed them to see their children's independence and competence.
- **Parents learn about their child's athletic abilities through Special Olympics.** Parents were "impressed, and often surprised, by their child's athletic ability, by their level of effort, their competitive nature, and by their demonstrations of sportsmanship."

## WORLD GAMES

Participating in World Games is a unique experience for athletes, coaches, families, and the community and has been shown to positively influence the public's perception of people with ID's abilities. A [study before and after the World Games in Shanghai](#) documented the attitudes of Chinese youth in Shanghai, Chongqing, and Beijing. It found that after World Games<sup>11</sup>:

- **Youth had improved perceptions about the ability of students with ID.** For example, youth were more confident in the ability of students with ID to participate in physical activity and understand the rules of a sports game.
- **Youth were significantly more willing to interact with a student with ID inside and outside of school.** For example, after World Games the percent of youth willing to work together on a class project with a student with ID rose by 9%.
- **Youth in Shanghai who were involved in World Games held much more positive views of the capabilities of students with ID** than youth who were not involved.

### CHINESE YOUTH WILLINGNESS TO INTERACT WITH STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES BEFORE AND AFTER 2007 WORLD GAMES<sup>12</sup>



11 Norins, J., Parker, R. C., & Siperstein, G. N. (2006). *Impact of the Special Olympics world games on the attitudes of youth in China*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

12 Norins, J., Parker, R. C., & Siperstein, G. N. (2006). *Impact of the Special Olympics world games on the attitudes of youth in China*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

Research on World Games has also focused on the experience of coaches and athletes before, during, and after World Games. One [study](#) found that, while both athletes and coaches focus on sports at World Games, athletes view sports more through the lens of competition and performance, whereas coaches view it as an opportunity to promote the personal development of the athlete. Coaches tended to place more emphasis on building the athlete’s self-confidence and having them achieve their personal best while athletes were more focused on winning medals and experiencing a major competition. This study shed light on the **dual roles of the coach: preparing athletes in their sport and promoting the personal and social skills of athletes.**<sup>13</sup>

13 Dowling, S., Hassan, D., & McConkey, R. (2012). The 2011 Summer World Games Experience for Special Olympics Athletes and Coaches: A longitudinal study in four countries. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### SPECIAL OLYMPICS OVERALL IMPACT AND SPORTS RESEARCH



**70%** of parents in the United States reported that Special Olympics has a positive effect on time spent as a family – either increasing time spent together or types of activities shared.<sup>14</sup>



**82%** of siblings in the United States felt that Special Olympics had positively impacted their family.<sup>15</sup>



Athletes improve sports skills through Special Olympics. In the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and China, **94%** reported improvements as a result of their participation.<sup>16,17,18</sup>



**World Games** serves as a catalyst to change attitudes about people with ID. After World Games in Shanghai, youth in several Chinese cities were **more likely to interact** with a student with ID inside and outside of the classroom.<sup>19</sup>



**94,000** Special Olympics competitions were held in 2014, averaging **258 competitions per day** around the world.<sup>20</sup>

14 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Special Olympics: Washington, DC.

15 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Special Olympics: Washington, DC.

16 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report*. University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

17 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report*. University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

18 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston; 2008

19 Norins, J., Parker, R. C., & Siperstein, G. N. (2006). *Impact of the Special Olympics world games on the attitudes of youth in China*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

20 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

# Special Olympics Unified Sports Research

## WHY UNIFIED SPORTS?

While it is important for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) to have social experiences with their peers, oftentimes these experiences are elusive. For example, adolescents with ID are more likely to participate in activities with their family or on their own than with their peers.<sup>1,2</sup> Research suggests that organized social activities, such as sports, may be necessary to facilitate social involvement of people with ID in their communities.<sup>2</sup> **Unified Sports provides people with and without ID the opportunity to play on the same sports team, creating a space for friendships, physical activity, and fun.** Research on Unified Sports has found that Unified Sports athletes (participants with ID) experience improved social competence and social inclusion while decreasing problem behaviors.<sup>3,4</sup> Moreover, Unified Sports partners (participants without ID) improve their attitudes toward people with ID as a result of participating in the program.<sup>3</sup> In order to build upon this impact, Special Olympics continues to conduct research and evaluation to identify best practices and demonstrate the impact of Unified Sports on athletes, partners, and the community.

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**“I can tell you this, there aren’t really many opportunities at all for her to leave and have a fun day like that, and be with peers, whether Unified friends or other special needs peers. It doesn’t happen at all. ...I think, something like this, to look forward to, having a feeling of activity of her own, friends of her own, that sort of thing, there’s no question in my mind that that’s a positive experience.”**

—Parent<sup>5</sup>

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1 Hall, L. J., & Strickett, T. (2002). Peer relationships of preadolescent students with disabilities who attend a separate school. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 37*(4), 399-409.

2 Abells, D., Burbidge, J., & Minnes, P. (2008). Involvement of adolescents with intellectual disabilities in social and recreational activities. *Journal on Developmental Disabilities, 14*(2), 88-94.

3 Özer, D., Baran, F., Aktop, A., Nalbant, S., Ağlamış, E., & Hutzler, Y. (2012). Effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disability. *Research in developmental disabilities, 33*(1), 229-239.

4 McConkey, R., Dowling, S., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2012). Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 57*(10), 923-935.

5 Nanavati, J. (2015). *Unified Sports in School Settings: Evidence of Impact*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics International.

# IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Unified Sports is a key Special Olympics program, and over the course of the past five years it has seen tremendous growth. In 2015, **over 1,276,000 people with and without ID participated in the program**, a 49.5% growth rate from the previous year.<sup>6</sup> Athletes and partners benefit from Unified Sports in a number of ways. First and foremost, Unified Sports is a fun, challenging experience for athletes and partners that allows them to improve their sports skills and be part of a team.

- Participants enjoy their experience in Unified Sports. An [evaluation in Europe](#) found that large numbers of athletes (54%) and partners (40%) thought that **having fun was one of the most important aspects of Unified Sports**.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, having fun was one of the areas athletes and partners liked the most about participating in the program.<sup>8</sup>
- Unified Sports creates a place where athletes and partners strive to seek personal bests. An evaluation in Europe found that **partners reported feeling challenged** all (43%) or some (52%) of the time during training.<sup>7</sup>
- Participants improve their sports skills. Unified football athletes and partners in Europe **reported that their football skills improved** a lot (46%) or a little (46%).<sup>9</sup> A 2015 Special Olympics survey conducted into 6 countries found that 91% of athletes and partners felt that their sports skills improved.<sup>5</sup>
- Preliminary research suggests that **Unified Sports can improve physical fitness among participants**. One study found that both athletes and partners improved their physical fitness after participating in Unified Sports when compared to those who did not participate.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to traditional Special Olympics sports, **Unified Sports also helps athletes and partners build confidence and self-esteem.**

- 82% of family members in the United States reported that athletes improved their self-esteem/self-confidence after participating in Unified Sports.<sup>8</sup>
- Unified athletes and partners in Europe also experienced improvements in self-esteem. Athletes reported feeling a lot (53%) or a little (34%) better about themselves after participating in the program. Similarly, 38% of partners felt a lot better about themselves, while 30% felt a little better.<sup>7</sup>

6 2015 Reach Report (2015). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

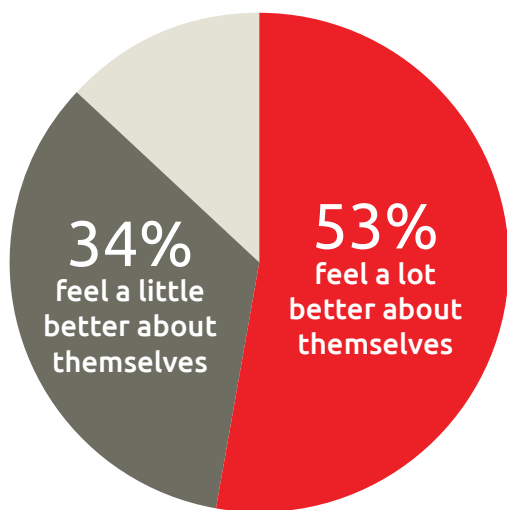
7 Norins, J., Haradan, C., Parker, R. (2006). *Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc. & University of Massachusetts Boston.

8 Siperstein, G., Hardman, M., Wappett, M., & Clary, L. (2001). *National evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Sports program*. A special report. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston, University of Utah, & Special Olympics, Inc.

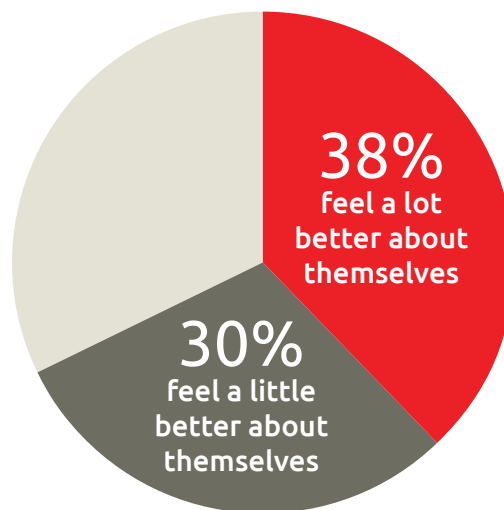
9 Nanavati, J. & Haas, K. (2015). *Unified Sports Evaluation*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics International.

10 Baran, F., Aktop, A., Özer, D., Nalbant, S., Ađlamiş, E., Barak, S., & Hutzler, Y. (2013). The effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports Soccer training program on anthropometry, physical fitness and skilled performance in Special Olympics soccer athletes and non-disabled partners. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 34(1), 695- 709.





**Athletes**



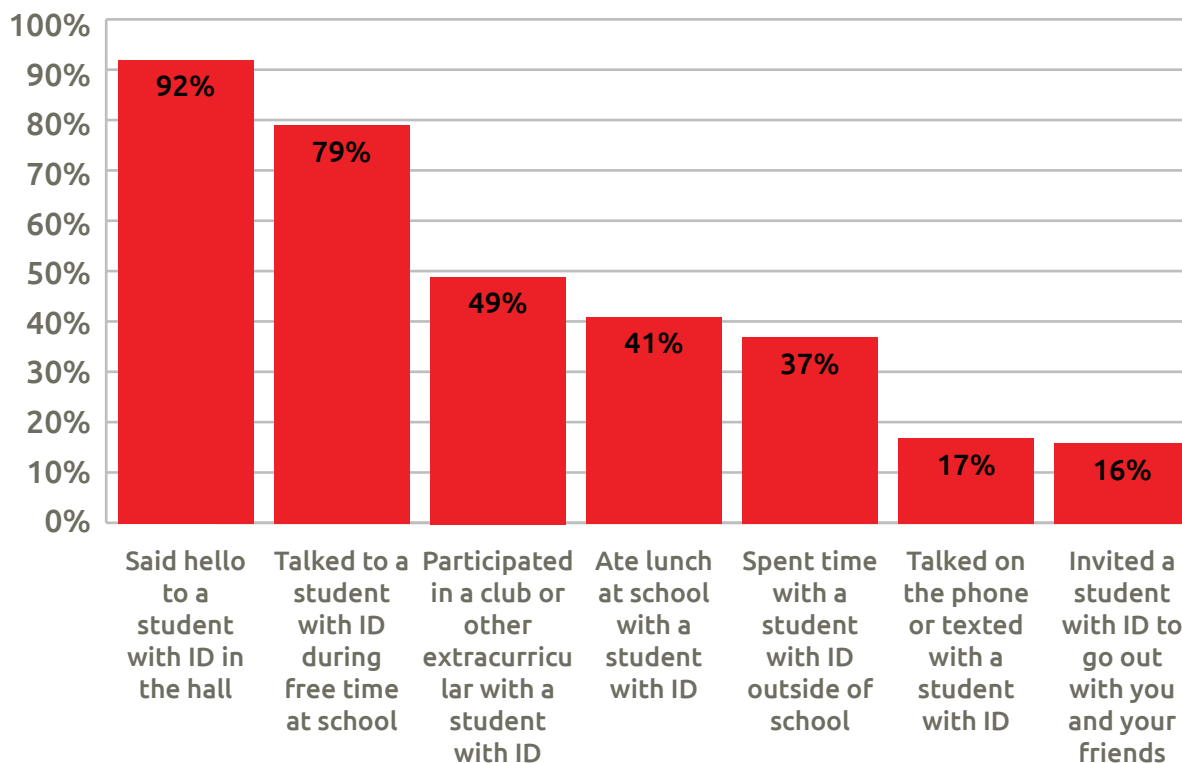
**Partners**

Through sports, athletes and partners are given the opportunity to spend time together, oftentimes for the first time, and share a common interest and goal. **This supports the development of friendships between athletes and partners as well as social inclusion on the team.** As partners spend more time with athletes, their attitudes and beliefs about athletes begin to shift, paving the way for greater acceptance of all people with ID.

- A study in Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia found that for many of the partners (57%), playing Unified football was also their **first experience interacting with people with ID.** After participating, the majority of partners (79%) reported that their understanding of people with ID improved.<sup>7</sup>
- Oftentimes, **Unified Sports teams socialize outside of practices and competitions, further building friendships and promoting social inclusion.** In a European study, many athletes (41%) and partners (39%) reported that they spent time with teammates outside of training and competitions.<sup>7</sup> In another Special Olympics survey, 65% of respondents reporting that they did activities together as a team outside of training and competition.<sup>9</sup>

- In a survey conducted by Special Olympics in 6 countries, **48% of partners reported that their closest friend on the team had ID.**<sup>9</sup>
- An [analysis of data on Unified Sports in U.S. schools](#) found that 79% of Unified Sports partners reported talking to a student with ID during free time at school and 41% reported eating lunch with a student with ID. They also held **positive beliefs about classroom inclusion** for students with disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

## UNIFIED SPORTS PARTICIPANTS REPORTED INTERACTIONS WITH PEERS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN U.S. SCHOOLS<sup>5</sup>



Building friendships and social inclusion among the team is a key impact of Unified Sports. Evaluations have shown that finding committed partners and creating an environment where there is meaningful involvement of all players is important to building a successful program.<sup>8</sup> **Coaches also play an important role in this process** by serving as a role model for attitude and behavior toward people with ID, promoting equal and meaningful involvement of all players, and encouraging social interactions between athletes and partners outside of Unified Sports.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Dowling, S., McConkey, R., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2010). Unified gives us a chance: An evaluation of Special Olympics youth unified sports

In addition to being a fun, engaging experience, Unified Sports has a multitude of benefits for athletes and partners. As a result, participants express enthusiasm about the program and a survey conducted by Special Olympics found that **95% of athletes and partners indicated they plan to play Unified Sports again.**<sup>9</sup> The commitment and excitement about the program demonstrates the value of Unified Sports for people with and without ID around the world.

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**“...I like how they developed a friendship. And I noticed it after we came back from our first event and I saw kids interacting in the hallways either just saying hi or giving a high five. And normally those kids wouldn’t even talk to each other prior to participating with this unified team.”**

— Coach, Special Olympics Florida<sup>9</sup>

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## CREATING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

In many communities, playing inclusive sports is thought to be infeasible. According to one study surveying public attitudes, **the vast majority of the public in nine out of ten countries thought people with ID were not capable of playing sports with people without ID.**<sup>12</sup> Unified Sports brings people with ID into the community and highlights their strengths and potential, in stark contrast to the negative stereotypes that are often pervasive.

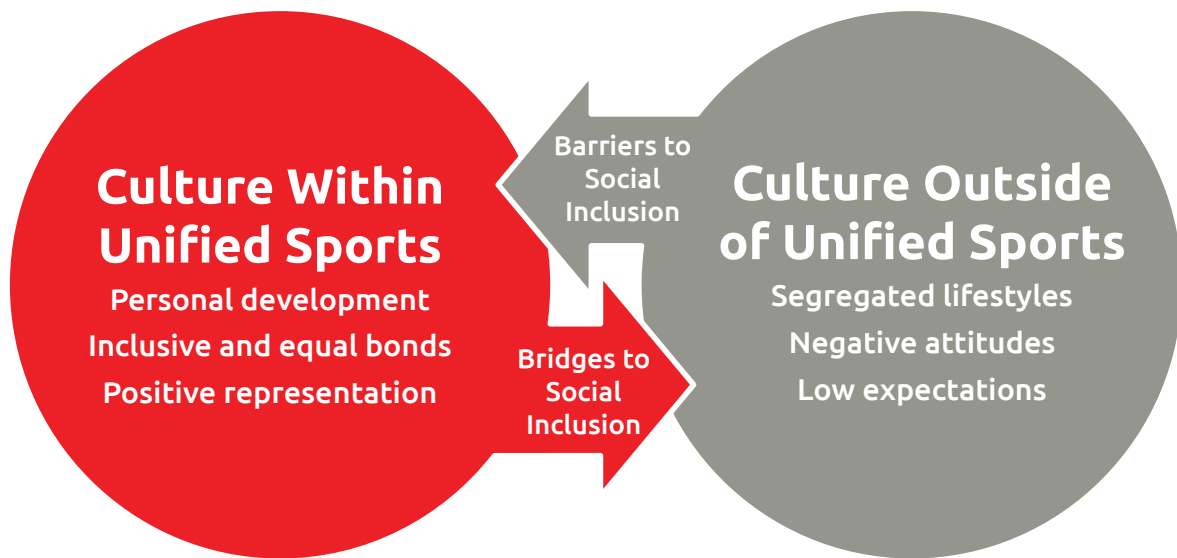
A [study in Serbia, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and Hungary](#) sought to determine how Unified Sports contributed to social inclusion not only among teams, but in the broader community. It found that Unified Sports creates a culture of inclusion that is embedded in a wider culture of stigma and discrimination. **By consistently challenging the negative perceptions of people with ID and demonstrating their capabilities, Unified Sports creates “bridges to social inclusion” in the community.**<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>13</sup> Dowling, S., McConkey, R., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2010). Unified gives us a chance: An evaluation of Special Olympics youth unified sports programme in Europe/Eurasia. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

## UNIFIED SPORTS AS A BRIDGE TO SOCIAL INCLUSION<sup>12</sup>



There are four main elements of Unified Sports that challenge barriers to inclusion in the community. These are:

- 1. Promoting the personal development of athletes and partners.** Developing social and sports skills while focusing on ability, rather than disability.
- 2. Creating inclusive and equal bonds among athletes and partners.** Promoting true partnerships that are positive and inclusive.
- 3. Generating positive perceptions of athletes.** Serving as a platform to inform the community about people with ID.
- 4. Building alliances within the community.** Building parent support/advocacy networks and connecting with local sports organizations, schools, governments, etc. for support.<sup>13</sup>

These processes allow social inclusion to occur within Unified teams and in the broader community. Evaluations have shown that Unified Sports has in fact helped athletes enhance their involvement in the community. According to one Special Olympics survey, as a result of participating in Unified Sports, 83% of participants reported that they do more activities in their community.<sup>9</sup> Through the power of sport, Unified Sports connects people with and without ID, building bridges to social inclusion in the broader community and breaking down stigmas.

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**“This team includes everyone, we play as one, we work together, that is the best way for Unified teams.”**

—Unified partner, Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

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## KEY FINDINGS:

### SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED SPORTS RESEARCH



82% of family members in the United States reported that athletes improved their self-esteem/self-confidence after participating in Unified Sports.<sup>8</sup>



A survey in five countries found that 85% of athletes reported exercising more every week as a result of participating in Unified Sports.<sup>9</sup>



94% of athletes and teammates say Unified Sports made them healthier and 91% of athletes and teammates report Unified Sports improved their sports skills



Coaches mentioned improved confidence, enhanced communication (including previously mute athletes talking in order to communicate with teammates!) and improved social inclusion



After participating in Unified football, the majority of partners (79%) reported that their understanding of people with ID improved.<sup>7</sup>



Unified football athletes and partners in Europe reported that their football skills improved a lot (46%) or a little (46%).<sup>7</sup>



In 2015, over 1,276,000 people with and without ID participated in Unified Sports.<sup>6</sup>



In a survey conducted by Special Olympics, 48% of partners reported that their closest friend on the team had ID.<sup>9</sup>



By consistently challenging the negative perceptions of people with ID and demonstrating their capabilities, Unified Sports creates “bridges to social inclusion” in the community.<sup>11</sup>

# Special Olympics Health Research

## WHY HEALTH?

Health has a substantial impact on the quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) and affects each Special Olympics athlete's ability to train and compete in sports effectively. Despite severe need and higher health risks, people with ID are denied health services, have limited access to community health interventions, and experience a lack of targeted health interventions and programs. There is often a misconception that the poor health of people with ID is unavoidable because it is an inherent part of their disability; yet research has shown that it is in fact a result of a breakdown in health education, health promotion, and health care that can and should be addressed.<sup>1</sup>

For more information on the health needs of people with ID, check out our [Health & Intellectual Disability information sheet](#). For comparison statistics between Special Olympics athletes and the general population, check out our [Comparison Table](#).

<sup>1</sup> Krahn, G. L., Hammond, L., & Turner, A. (2006). A cascade of disparities: health and health care access for people with intellectual disabilities. *Mental retardation and developmental disabilities research reviews*, 12(1), 70-82.

**Myth 1:** Health care professionals are well-prepared to treat people with ID.

**Fact 1:** The majority of health care professionals are not educated on how to treat people with ID. In one study, 56% of medical students in the United States reported that graduates were "not competent" to treat people with ID.<sup>2</sup>

**Myth 2:** People with ID have better access to health care than people without ID.

**Fact 2:** People with ID face significant barriers accessing health care. People with ID have lower rates of preventative health practices, such as dental hygiene, physical activity, preventive screening, and management of chronic conditions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, people with ID often struggle to find a doctor that knows how and is willing to treat them and, once they get to a doctor's office, challenges with communication and provider knowledge about ID can create additional barriers.<sup>1,2,4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Holder, M. (2004). CAN project: Curriculum assessment of needs. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, M. A., Lewis, C. E., Leake, B., King, B. H., & Lindemann, R. (2002). The quality of health care for adults with developmental disabilities. *Public health reports*, 117(2), 174.

<sup>4</sup> Kerins, G., Petrovic, K., Ganesini, J., Keilty, B., & Bruder, M. B. (2004). Physician attitudes and practices on providing care to individuals with intellectual disabilities: an exploratory study. *Connecticut medicine*, 68, 485-490.

**Myth 3:** When people with ID die younger than the general population, it is due to factors associated with their disability.

**Fact 3:** The majority of premature deaths for people with ID are due to a lack of health care access and utilization. People with ID die younger than the general population (average of 13 years for men, 20 years for women), as a United Kingdom study found in 2013. The majority of the premature deaths for people with ID were due to delays or problems investigating, diagnosing, and treating illnesses and with receiving appropriate care, while people in the general population who died prematurely passed away due to lifestyle factors.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hollins, S., & Tuffrey-Wijne, I. (2013). Meeting the needs of patients with learning disabilities. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 346.

## SPECIAL OLYMPICS HEALTHY ATHLETES®

To document the health needs of our athletes and the impact of our health program, research and evaluation has been embedded into Special Olympics' health programming since its inception. As of 2015, Special Olympics has provided more than 1.7 million health examinations to Special Olympics athletes and has amassed the **world's largest data set on the health status of people with intellectual disabilities**. This data, collected during Healthy Athletes exams, has uncovered vast gaps in the health care of our athletes.

### HEALTHY ATHLETES UNCOVERS HEALTH ISSUES



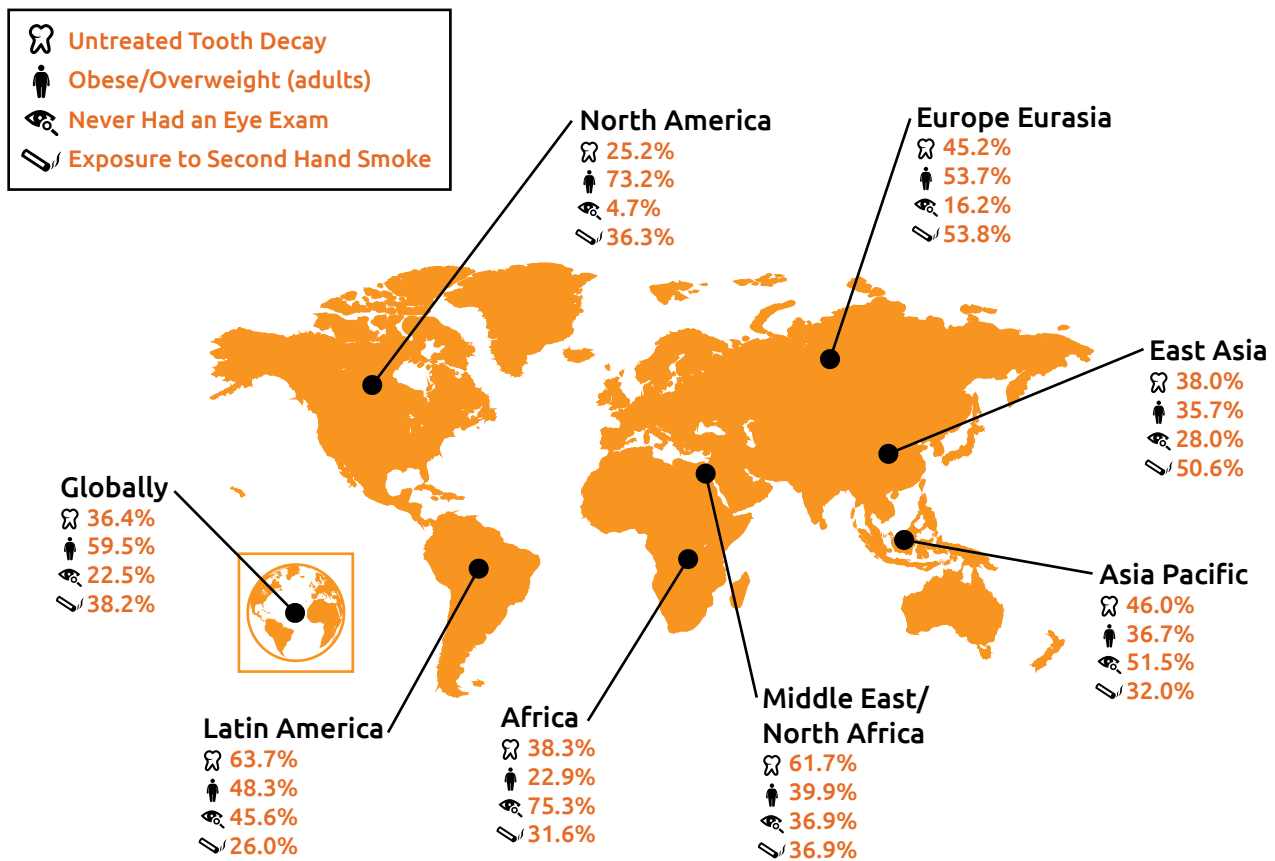
Data through September, 2016.

This data is crucial in order to demonstrate the health needs of Special Olympics athletes and people with ID more broadly to policy makers, partners, non-profit organizations, and others. A survey among Special Olympics Programs in 2014 found that 38% (n = 38) of

Programs presented Healthy Athletes data to influence policy and raise awareness about Special Olympics.<sup>6</sup> For a Healthy Athletes data overview, see our [regional breakout table](#) of key healthy indicators.

Even after a health need has been identified at a Healthy Athletes event, people with ID struggle to access the care they need. Special Olympics data shows that after Special Smiles exams in the United States, **1 in 3 athletes who received a referral and returned to Healthy Athletes still had an unmet health need.** Despite these challenges, most people are unaware of health disparities that exist. One Special Olympics study found that **68% of people around the world think that people with ID receive the same or better health care than others.**<sup>7</sup>

## HEALTHY ATHLETES REGIONAL EXAM RESULTS



The Healthy Athletes dataset includes over 140,000 dentistry, 70,000 audiology, 70,000 podiatry, 125,000 optometry, 85,000 health promotion, and 70,000 fitness exams since 2007. Over half of each of the disciplines' exams were completed outside of North America. Data through September 2016.

6 Special Olympics Health Policy Survey (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

7 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.



# MEASURING IMPACT

In addition to collecting data on health exams, Special Olympics has collected evidence on the impact of our programming.



## HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Through its health work, Special Olympics has provided specialized training to more than 135,000 health care professionals and students worldwide and results from these trainings show:

- After being trained at Healthy Athletes, health care professionals reported improvements in competency and confidence in having patients with ID.<sup>8</sup>
  - 72.7% of healthcare professional volunteers said that they would seek out more patients with ID
  - 93% the health care professionals agreed or strongly agreed that the training improved their ability to communicate with people with ID
  - 89% found the training useful for their daily work.



## FAMILIES

Family members play a key role in the health of our athletes, and efforts to engage family members through Family Health Forums have proven successful. A survey conducted after these forums found that **98% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the health of their family would improve as a result of participating.**



## ATHLETE LEADERSHIP

Special Olympics has also demonstrated that empowering athletes with health knowledge can be a powerful tool to improve their health and the health of their peers:

- After training Special Olympics athletes to be Healthy Lifestyle Coaches for other Special Olympics athletes, Healthy Lifestyle Coaches demonstrated **improvements in self-efficacy, hydration knowledge, physical activity knowledge, and advocacy.** Meanwhile, Special Olympics athletes trained by Healthy Lifestyle Coaches also demonstrated changes in health knowledge.
- 81% of Special Olympics athletes who received health coaching from fellow Special Olympics athletes liked having a fellow athlete as a health coach, and 60% said they would recommend the program.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bainbridge, D. (2008). The antecedents and impacts of participation in Special Olympics Healthy Athletes on the perceptions and professional practice of health care professionals: A preliminary investigation. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>9</sup> Marks, B., Sisirak, J., & Heller, T. (2011). Special Olympics Athletes as Healthy Lifestyle Coaches: Pilot Intervention. Washington, DC: Special Olympics Inc.

Athlete leadership in health is continuing to be emphasized within Special Olympics' community health program, where 669 athlete health leaders have been educated between 2012-2015. In turn, these leaders are spreading their knowledge about health to their peers, family, and community.

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS HEALTH RESEARCH



**84%** of health care providers feel better prepared to treat people with ID as a result of volunteering with Healthy Athletes.<sup>8</sup>



**52%** of medical deans report that their students are "not competent" to treat people with ID.<sup>2</sup>



People with intellectual disabilities are much more likely to have **unidentified and/or untreated** health issues. For example, among Special Olympics athletes globally, 3 in 10 fail a hearing test.



**98%** of family members agreed or strongly agreed that they will make healthy lifestyle changes for their family as a result of participating in Family Health Forums.



Health care professionals reported **positive changes** in their perceptions of the abilities of people with ID after volunteering with Healthy Athletes. The greatest changes were around the abilities to 'describe their health to doctor' and 'act appropriately toward strangers'.<sup>8</sup>



Between 2012-2015, more than **37,000 athletes** have been engaged in wellness opportunities through Special Olympics Health programming.



As of 2015, **1.7 million** health exams have been conducted, helping athletes and families understand their health needs.



Globally, adults with intellectual disabilities (SO athletes) are more than **two times** as likely to be obese compared to adults without intellectual disabilities



Healthy Athletes helps athletes and parents identify health issues and get needed care. Among U.S. athletes who needed to see a dentist after Special Smiles, **66%** of those who returned to Special Smiles had **resolved their health issue**. Still, this means that 34% of those athletes who needed care did not receive it.

# Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Research

## WHY UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS?

The typical school and social environment for young people today can be fraught with challenges. Intense social and academic pressures are worsened by widespread hostile behavior such as bullying. In the United States, **nearly 1 in 3 students ages 12 - 18 report being bullied during the school year** and 71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.<sup>1,2</sup> **Children with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.**<sup>3</sup> While bullying remains a prominent issue, students with intellectual disabilities also face challenges with isolation on school campuses. Students with intellectual disabilities are less likely than students with any other type of disability to spend time in a regular education environment.<sup>4</sup> This is troubling given the strong relationship between school connectedness and several important outcomes including regular school attendance and staying in school.<sup>5</sup> This research demonstrates a clear need to promote a school environment that addresses not only the academic needs of students with intellectual disabilities, but also their social need to make friends and feel welcome in the school community.

## IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Special Olympics' Unified Strategy for schools, which includes Unified Sports, inclusive clubs, and whole school engagement, addresses many of the challenges faced by students with disabilities in schools today. Schools that implement this strategy (Unified Champion Schools) create communities where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in all school activities, opportunities and functions. As of 2014, over 3,000 elementary, middle and high schools across 45 states are employing the Unified

1 Robert, S., Kemp, J., Truman, & Snyder (2012). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011. Available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs11.pdf>

2 Bradshaw, C.P., Sawyer, A.L., & O'Brennan, L.M. (2007). Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff. *School Psychology Review*, 36(3), 361-382.

3 C. Marshall, E. Kendall, M. Banks & R. Gover (Eds.), (2009). *Disabilities: Insights from across fields and around the world* (Vol. 1-3). Westport, CT: Praeger Perspectives.

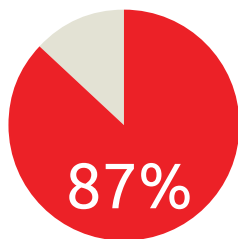
4 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved May 22, 2013, from <http://tadnet.public.tadnet.org/pages/712>

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

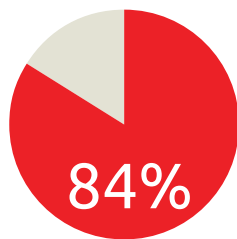
Strategy (formerly known as Project UNIFY), and as many as 1,700,000 youth with and without disabilities are experiencing messages of inclusion and acceptance. Evaluations of Unified Champion Schools found that these schools **provide students with and without disabilities opportunities to learn and play together and to create inclusive friendships.**

- 70% of school liaisons (generally teachers) and administrators say that the Unified Strategy gives students with and without disabilities more opportunities to work together.
- 75% of administrators observed that the Unified Strategy increases opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to get involved in school activities.
- Two thirds of students who participated in Unified Sports or in inclusive sports clubs (65%) said they learned they have things in common with their peers with disabilities.

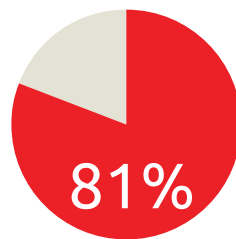
### UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS ALSO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS



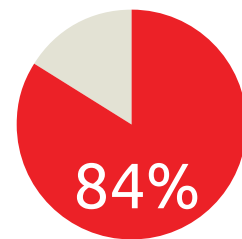
of students learn that standing up for something they believe is the right thing to do.



of students learn the skills of patience and compromise.



of students learn about the challenges of being a leader.



of students generally regard Special Olympics as a positive turning point in their lives.

These results demonstrate the profound impact that the Unified Strategy can have in schools. Importantly, it has been found that all elements of the strategy (Unified Sports, inclusive clubs, and whole school engagement) are essential to create this level of impact.

**“He has improved his social skills...His world-view of ‘this is what I can do and this is how I have to do it’ has been expanded beyond the limitations of the educational program that he’s in. He looks for ways that he can meet society at his level and his way, rather than hiding from his peers that are not special needs. There’s nothing good enough I can say about this program. It’s a necessity.”**

—Parent

# CHANGING SCHOOL CLIMATES

Unified Champion Schools promote a socially inclusive school climate that **helps students with disabilities become a part of the school community:**

- 72% of Unified Champion School liaisons (generally teachers) observe that the Unified Strategy helps **raise awareness about students with disabilities** in the school.
- 63% of school liaisons and administrators feel that the Special Olympics Unified Strategy has made a big impact in **creating a more inclusive school environment** in which students are open to and accepting of differences, and that it increases the sense of community in the school.
- 48% of school liaisons said that the Unified Strategy is providing more opportunities for general and special educators to work together.

These schools not only change the attitude of other students toward students with disabilities, the culture of the entire school shifts to one that is more welcoming and engaged.

- 58% of administrators feel the Special Olympics Unified Strategy has **made a big impact in reducing bullying and teasing** in their schools.
- Preliminary evidence suggests that **Unified Champion schools perform better than other schools on most school climate dimensions** such as respect for diversity, social and civic learning, and school connectedness and engagement.

## UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS AND STAFF PERCEPTIONS

Staff of Unified Champion Schools perceived their school community to have higher levels of:



### **social and emotional security**

Where students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion



### **social and civic learning**

Where students feel supported in the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.



### **respect for diversity**

Where there is mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.



### **school connectedness and engagement**

Where there is positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.

These findings demonstrate how Unified Champion schools provide benefits to all students. In fact, 81% of students say that the Unified Strategy is **changing their school for the better** and 95% of students said that their school should continue the Special Olympics Unified Strategy.

For more research on the Unified Strategy, check out a [Case Statement](#) and the [full 2013-2014 evaluation report](#).

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS RESEARCH



There is a **strong relationship** between school connectedness and important outcomes such as regular school attendance and staying in school.<sup>6</sup>



Children with disabilities are **two to three times** more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.<sup>7</sup>



**63%** of school liaisons and administrators feel that the Special Olympics Unified Strategy has made a big impact in creating a more inclusive school environment.



**58%** of administrators feel the Unified Strategy has made a big impact in reducing bullying and teasing in their schools.



**81%** of students say that the Unified Strategy is changing their school for the better.

<sup>6</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

<sup>7</sup> C. Marshall, E. Kendall, M. Banks & R. Gover (Eds.), (2009). *Disabilities: Insights from across fields and around the world* (Vol. 1-3). Westport, CT: Praeger Perspectives.

# Special Olympics Young Athletes Research

## WHY YOUNG ATHLETES?

Participating in Special Olympics has been shown to inspire joy, improve self-confidence, bolster family relationships and improve parents' expectations of their children with intellectual disabilities (ID).<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> While this is crucial for people with ID of all ages, Special Olympics' traditional sports program is only available to athletes ages 8 and over. Furthermore, for families experiencing having a child with ID for the first time, it can be challenging to find a social network for support and guidance. This network is crucial, as parents who have social support have better mental health and positive parenting interactions (hugging, praising, etc.) with their child with ID.<sup>5,6</sup> Young Athletes (YA) engages children with ID between the ages of 2 and 7 in a sport and play program with a focus on activities that are important to mental and physical growth. The program benefits the child and the family, challenges expectations, forges relationships, fosters support networks, and builds crucial skills for young children.

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**“I have found a common ground – a place where my son and I can connect – through sports.”**

— Parent of Young Athlete, United States<sup>7</sup>

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1 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

2 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

3 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston; 2008.

4 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family.* Special Olympics: Washington, DC.

5 Wade, C., Llewellyn, G., & Matthews, J. (2015). Parent mental health as a mediator of contextual effects on parents with intellectual disabilities and their children. *Clinical Psychologist*, 19(1), 28-38.

6 Feldman, M., Varghese, J., Ramsay, J., & Rajska, D. (2002). Relationships between social support, stress and mother-child interactions in mothers with intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 15, 314–323.

7 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006.* Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

# IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Children with ID often experience challenges developing motor skills.<sup>8,9</sup> Research conducted by Special Olympics and its partners has found that YA improves the motor skills of participants in both U.S. and international contexts.

- A [U.S. study](#) showed that after two months of participation in YA, children with ID experienced a **seven month gain in motor skills**. Participants in YA **improved motor skills at twice the rate** of children who do not participate.
- **The benefits from YA persisted even after the program ended.** At 5 and 10 month follow-ups, children who participated in YA **maintained a 4 month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.<sup>10</sup>
- A [study in Kenya, Tanzania, Venezuela, and Romania](#) found that **children who participate in YA outside of the United States also experienced significant improvements in motor skills**. For example, in Romania at the beginning of YA only two (18%) of 16 children were within one standard deviation of the average score for motor skills for their age and gender. At the end of the YA program, that number had risen to 11 children (69%).<sup>11</sup>
- **Skills learned in YA translate to other settings.** A 2006 study found that 50% of teachers in the United States, 60% in Romania, and 44% in Latin America (Venezuela, Panama, Chile, and Paraguay) observed skills learned in YA being used in other activities or settings (at school or home).<sup>12</sup>

## BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN WITH ID PARTICIPATING IN YOUNG ATHLETES



Children who participated in the YA program experienced a **seven month gain** in motor skills, twice the rate of children who did not participate in the program.



At 5 and 10 month follow-ups, children who participated in YA maintained a **four month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.

8 Emck, C., Bosscher, R., Beek, P., & Doreleijers, T. (2009). Gross motor performance and self-perceived motor competence in children with emotional, behavioural, and pervasive developmental disorders: a review. *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*, 51(7), 501-517.

9 Provost, B., Lopez, B. R., & Heimerl, S. (2007). A Comparison of Motor Delays in Young Children: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Delay, and Developmental Concerns. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 37(2), 321-328.

10 Favazza, P. C., Siperstein, G. N., Zeisel, S., Odom, S. L., & Moskowitz, A. L. (2011). *Young Athletes intervention: Impact of motor development*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

11 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

12 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.



In addition to motor skill development, participants benefit from learning in a social environment with their peers.

- **89% of teachers in the United States reported that a benefit of YA was children having fun with peers.** Teachers in Israel reported similar benefits.<sup>13</sup>
- **Participants in YA improve their social skills.** One teacher commented: *“Many parents and grandparents had never placed their child in a group setting or group activities...By the end of the second or third week, we all could see differences in the child’s ability to listen, participate, socialize with adults and other children, and, of course improve in their motor abilities.”*<sup>14</sup>

YA creates an environment where children with ID can play with their peers, perhaps for the first time, while developing motor and social skills.

## IMPACT ON THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

YA’s impact has a ripple effect that extends benefits beyond the participants in the program to the family and community. In this way, **YA serves as a catalyst for change in the community and a mechanism to enhance social inclusion for people with ID.**



Families benefit in a number of ways, including helping parents understand what ID is, raising parent expectations, fostering support networks, and creating opportunities for family engagement. Studies have found that through YA, parents begin to better understand their child with ID:

- A 2014 study found that by demonstrating that children with ID can participate in and benefit from group activities, **parents became more willing to bring their children into social settings.** A parent from Romania commented, *“I was surprised how much he/she changed in his/her first group experience. We clearly need to do more group activities, which prior to this, I was afraid of.”*<sup>15</sup>
- **YA raises parents’ expectations of their child with ID.** In the United States, 21% of teachers reported that a benefit of YA was raising parental expectations of their child’s capabilities.<sup>16</sup>

13 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

14 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

15 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

16 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.



## FAMILY NETWORKS

YA also builds social networks of families. Research has found that a major benefit of YA is **parents getting support through networking with other families.**<sup>17,18</sup> A parent of a participant in the United States remarked: *“It provided opportunities to communicate with other parents about needs of other kids with disabilities. Connecting and sharing information is really a huge benefit...it gives you an opportunity to talk to someone that can relate to what it is like to have a child with disabilities.”*<sup>19</sup>

Another study in 2014 found similar results and showed that this knowledge sharing led to an **increased understanding of people with ID.** As a YA leader in Tanzania reported, *“The families feel relieved after learning that having a child with ID is not a personal issue/problem but it is common in the community.”*



## COMMUNITY

Furthermore, YA is shown to have a **positive impact on the broader community.** Schools and community members who assisted with YA were given the opportunity to learn about and interact with people with disabilities. One volunteer remarked, *“At first, I did not know how to work [with] really young children with disabilities. So that was a new experience for me and one in which I learned a great deal.”*<sup>20</sup> YA provides the community with an opportunity to learn about ID and to embrace members of the community with ID and their families.

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**“Because of J. a whole world of kids with disabilities – a whole circle of families with children with disabilities has opened up for us. It is exciting and overwhelming to be a part of a new world – in the best way (sense). It changed my life.”**

—Parent of Young Athlete, United States

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17 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

18 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

19 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

20 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.



**Community:** Enhanced interaction with and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities by community members, particularly university partners.

**Family:** Increased understanding of intellectual disability and willingness of parents to bring their child with an intellectual disability into social settings, as well as the development of support networks among parents.

**Individual:** Improvements in participants' motor skills, social skills, cognitive abilities, and adaptive skills.

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS YOUNG ATHLETES RESEARCH



In 2014, **110,486** children participated in YA in 140 Programs.<sup>21</sup>



Participants experienced a **7 month gain** in motor skills after participation in an 8-week YA program.<sup>22</sup>



The benefits from YA continue even after the program ends. At 5 and 10 month follow-ups, children who participated in YA maintained a **4 month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.<sup>23</sup>



YA raises parents' expectations of their child with ID. In the United States, **21%** of teachers reported that YA benefited families by raising parental expectations of their child's capabilities.<sup>24</sup>



YA forms a **community of support** for parents and caregivers of children with ID by creating a more **positive** view of their child, building a network of parents, and inspiring them to imagine a better, more **hopeful** future for their child.<sup>25,26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>22</sup> Favazza, P. C., Siperstein, G. N., Zeisel, S., Odom, S. L., & Moskowitz, A. L. (2011). *Young Athletes intervention: Impact of motor development*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>23</sup> Favazza, P. C., Siperstein, G. N., Zeisel, S., Odom, S. L., & Moskowitz, A. L. (2011). *Young Athletes intervention: Impact of motor development*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>24</sup> Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

<sup>25</sup> Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

<sup>26</sup> Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

# Special Olympics Families Research

## WHY FAMILIES?

Families are an important source of support for people with intellectual disabilities (ID), many of whom continue to live with their families into adulthood. For example, in the United States approximately 60% of adults with ID live with their families.<sup>1</sup> In order for families to thrive, social supports are essential for parents of people with ID to maintain good mental health and positive parenting relationships with their child. Special Olympics provides opportunities for families to strengthen relationships within their family and to forge supportive communities with other families of children and adults with ID.<sup>2,3</sup>

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**“We felt helpless before, because we did not know what his future would be. Since participating in Special Olympics, he [has changed] significantly, and we see the hope. They [people with intellectual disabilities] can merge into society.”**

—Parent, Special Olympics China<sup>4</sup>

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## BENEFITS OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS TO THE FAMILY

Families are crucial to the success of Special Olympics and evaluations have found that **families of athletes are actively involved** in the organization. For example, the majority of families in Peru (80%), Argentina (85%), Brazil (59%), and the United States (82%) reported attending competitions.<sup>5,6</sup> In the United States, 75% of family members were involved beyond watching competitions, with 42% serving as Special Olympics coaches.

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1 Siperstein, G. (2012). [Special Olympics Household Study]. Unpublished raw data.

2 Wade, C., Llewellyn, G., & Matthews, J. (2015). Parent mental health as a mediator of contextual effects on parents with intellectual disabilities and their children. *Clinical Psychologist*, 19(1), 28-38.

3 Feldman, M., Varghese, J., Ramsay, J., & Rajska, D. (2002). Relationships between social support, stress and mother-child interactions in mothers with intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 15, 314–323.

4 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

5 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics Inc.

6 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family.* Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

**While families are critical to the success of Special Olympics, Special Olympics also plays an important role in supporting families** by creating family networks, raising expectations of their family member with ID, strengthening family relationships, and creating knowledge about ID and related issues.



## CREATING FAMILY NETWORKS

Both Young Athletes and traditional Special Olympics sports have been shown to create networks of parents, fostering a support system where they can forge new relationships, learn about available support services, and connect with a community that understands their experience as a parent of a person with ID.

- A [U.S. study](#) found that 75% of parents reported that Special Olympics had a **positive impact on their social relationships outside the family**. Parents reported developing friendships with other parents of athletes who often share common experiences and whose children face similar challenges.<sup>7</sup>
- In Romania, 40% of teachers reported that **parents of Young Athletes participants benefit from the program by getting support through networking with other families**.<sup>8</sup>



## STRENGTHENING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to building external relationships, Special Olympics provides opportunities for family members to connect with one another and strengthens the bonds within families. A [U.S. study](#) found that<sup>9</sup>:

- Parents and siblings of athletes felt **Special Olympics provided opportunities for the family to come together, thereby strengthening family relationships**. They also reported that it provided opportunities to connect with other families and be meaningfully involved in the community.
- Over half of athletes' siblings (57%) felt that participation in Special Olympics had **brought their family closer together**.
- Nearly one quarter (22%) of siblings reported that Special Olympics had **improved their own relationship with their brother or sister with ID**.
- 52% of athletes' siblings said that attending Special Olympics events gave them the **opportunity to see and be proud of their brothers' and/or sisters' abilities and accomplishments**.

7 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

8 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

9 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

Young Athletes also helps build family relationships. In Romania, teachers reported that Young Athletes improved communication between parents and participants and increased parents' trust in the abilities of their child.<sup>10</sup>

## RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Special Olympics provides athletes with the opportunity to develop skills and demonstrate their abilities. This, in turn, can lead to raised expectations from parents:

- In the United States, parents reported that **Special Olympics allowed them to see their children's independence and competence.**<sup>11</sup>
- A [study in China](#) found that parents reported that participation in Special Olympics had brought them **more hope about their child's future.**<sup>12</sup>
- 70% of teachers in Romania and 21% of teachers in the United States stated that **Young Athletes benefited families by raising expectations of their child's capabilities.**<sup>13</sup>
- A 2014 Young Athletes evaluation found that **by demonstrating that children with ID can participate in and benefit from group activities, parents became more willing to bring their children into social settings.** A parent from Romania commented, *"I was surprised how much he/she changed in his/her first group experience. We clearly need to do more group activities, which prior to this, I was afraid of."*<sup>14</sup>

## BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Special Olympics creates an opportunity for families to share knowledge amongst each other and in some cases learn about ID. Furthermore, some of Special Olympics' programs target improving knowledge around specific issues related to ID, such as health. This gain in knowledge can benefit not only the athlete, but the entire family.

- According to one [U.S. study](#), Special Olympics families reported that **connecting with other families opened a valuable source of information about school and community services and programs.**<sup>15</sup>
- An evaluation of Young Athletes found that **parents improved their understanding of people with ID** as a result of participating in Young Athletes. As a Young Athletes leader in Tanzania reported, *"The families feel relieved after learning that having a child with ID is not a personal issue/problem but it is common in the community."*<sup>16</sup>

10 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

11 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics Inc.

12 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

13 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

14 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

15 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics Inc.

16 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). *Young Athletes Globalization Project*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

- Some Special Olympics programs, such as Family Health Forums, seek to educate families on issues relating to ID. A survey conducted after Family Health Forums found that **94% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the health of their family would improve as a result of participating.**

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS FAMILIES RESEARCH



As of 2014, Special Olympics had more than **49,000 family members** serving in leadership roles in Programs around the world.<sup>17</sup>



**75%** of parents in the United States said that Special Olympics had a **positive impact** on their social relationships outside the family.<sup>18</sup>



Young Athletes can help new parents improve their understanding of people with intellectual disabilities by providing them with a **community of families** with experiences similar to theirs.<sup>19</sup>



**70%** of teachers in Romania and **21%** of teachers in the United States reported that Young Athletes benefited families by **raising expectations** of their child's capabilities.<sup>20</sup>



Parents learn about their child's athletic capabilities through Special Olympics. Parents of athletes in the United States reported being **impressed**, and often **surprised**, by their child's athletic ability.<sup>21</sup>



Over half (**57%**) of athletes' siblings in the United States felt that participation in Special Olympics had **brought their family closer together.**<sup>22</sup>



Families of Special Olympics athletes are often **actively involved** in Special Olympics. The majority of families in Peru (**80%**), Argentina (**85%**), Brazil (**59%**), and the United States (**82%**) reported attending competitions.<sup>23,24</sup>

17 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

18 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

19 Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). Young Athletes Globalization Project. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

20 Citation: Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

21 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

22 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

23 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics Inc.

24 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC.: Special Olympics Inc.

# Special Olympics Demographics Research

## PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

People with intellectual disabilities (ID) comprise approximately 1% of the global population. The prevalence of ID varies widely, for example the prevalence in low income countries is 1.5 times that in high income countries.<sup>1</sup> While some research is available, little is known about people with ID. Oftentimes, national monitoring systems (e.g. government censuses and household surveys) provide basic information on different populations. Yet, a study assessing 131 monitoring systems of 12 countries around the world found that less than 25% of these systems tracked people with ID.<sup>2</sup> **Thus, left unmeasured and uncounted it can be difficult to determine the status of people with ID for crucial issues that affect quality of life, such as employment, health care, and income level.** As one of the largest organizations focused on people with ID globally, Special Olympics seeks to understand the demographics of its athletes (e.g. where they live, gender, age, etc.), as well as the demographics of supporters of the movement, such as coaches and volunteers. By knowing who our athletes are, and what their needs are, Special Olympics and its supporters can advocate more effectively on behalf of athletes and all people with ID.

## WHO ARE OUR ATHLETES?

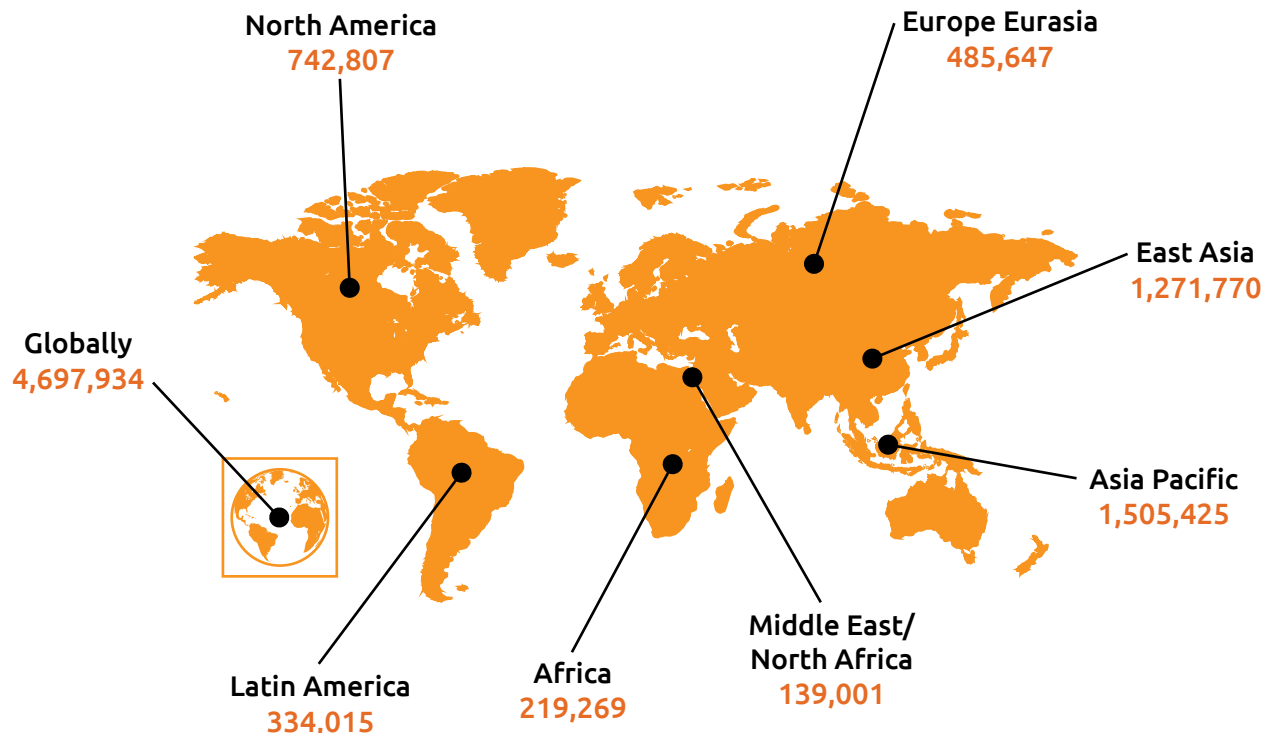
Special Olympics continues to grow the number of athletes served. **In 2011, Special Olympics served close to 4 million athletes; five years later in 2016, that number rose to close to 4.7 million athletes. This constitutes 18% growth in five years.** For more historical figures reference our [number of Special Olympics athletes from 2000-2013](#). Special Olympics has athletes of all ages, with a fairly even split among the age groups collected in the census: 8-15, 16-21, and 22+. Females represent a minority of athletes and comprised 39.2% of all athletes in 2013. See the [2015 Reach Report](#) for more detailed information.

1 Maulik, P. K., Mascarenhas, M. N., Mathers, C. D., Dua, T., & Saxena, S. (2011). Prevalence of intellectual disability: a meta-analysis of population-based studies. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 32(2), 419-436.

2 Fujiura, G. T., Rutkowski-Kmitta, V., & Owen, R. (2010). Make measurable what is not so: National monitoring of the status of persons with intellectual disability\*. *Journal Of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 35(4), 244-258.



## NUMBER OF ATHLETES BY REGION (2015)



### Evaluations in China, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and the United States have found that there is no “typical” Special Olympics athlete<sup>3,4,5</sup>:

- In some countries, such as China, Peru, and the United States, the majority of athletes participate through their schools, yet in other countries this is not the case. For example, in Argentina only 19% of athletes participated in Special Olympics through their school.
- The length of participation in Special Olympics varies, although in most countries participants remain involved for many years. Athletes participated for an average of 9 years in Argentina, 8 years in Peru, and 11 years in the United States.
- While the profiles of athletes varied, **a clear majority of athletes in all countries had never participated in organized sports before Special Olympics**, demonstrating that Special Olympics is meeting a need.

3 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

4 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

5 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics Inc.

Some research has delved deeper into understanding the characteristics of Special Olympics athletes. Recent research conducted in the United States surveyed over 1,000 people with ID and found that **38% of people with ID currently participate in Special Olympics or had participated in Special Olympics at some point in their lives.**

Additional results found that in the United States<sup>6</sup>:



**The majority of Special Olympics athletes in the United States were male.**



**The majority of athletes in the United States were white (86.3%), followed by two or more races (6.1%), followed by African-American (5.5%).**



**74.7% of athletes in the United States completed high school, compared to 62.7% of adults with ID who had not participated in Special Olympics.**



**The majority of athletes in the United States reside with their family (58.9%) and large numbers also live in group homes (25.8%).**



**70% of athletes in the United States were rated to be in good or excellent health, compared to 55% of adults with ID who had not participated in Special Olympics.**

For complete comparison tables, see the [Demographic Tables for U.S. Athletes and Non-Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities](#).

<sup>6</sup> Siperstein, G. (2012). [Special Olympics Household Study]. Unpublished raw data.

# WHO ARE OUR VOLUNTEERS?

Volunteers offer crucial support to help Special Olympics provide year-round quality practices and competitions. **In 2014, 1,482,126 volunteers worked with Special Olympics, including 300,521 youth volunteers, 97,000 law enforcement volunteers, and 20,911 health volunteers.** One important group of volunteers is Special Olympics' coaches. Coaches play an important role in Special Olympics and in the lives of athletes. Globally, in 2014 Special Olympics had a coach to athlete ratio of 1:12. **In total, over 375,000 coaches supported Special Olympics in 2014.**<sup>7</sup> Similar to athletes, the background of coaches varies considerably from country to country.

- Evaluations from 2005 and 2008 found that while most coaches in the United States (71%) and China (81%) reported playing sports competitively themselves, nearly one quarter of coaches in China (24%) had played professionally or on a national team compared to 2% in the United States and 4% in Europe.
- While nearly half (44%) of U.S. coaches reported having a family member with ID, that number fell to only 2% of coaches in China.<sup>8,9</sup>

Regardless of their background or location, Special Olympics coaches strive to create a quality sports experience for all athletes.

7 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

8 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report.* Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

9 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). *Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report.* Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics, Inc.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### SPECIAL OLYMPICS DEMOGRAPHICS RESEARCH



People with intellectual disabilities comprise approximately **1% of the global population.**<sup>10</sup>



**38%** of people with intellectual disabilities in the United States currently participate in Special Olympics or have participated in Special Olympics at some point in their lives.<sup>11</sup>



Studies have found that a majority of athletes in China, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, and the United States had never participated in organized sports before joining Special Olympics, demonstrating that **Special Olympics is meeting a need.**<sup>12</sup>



In total, over **375,000 coaches** supported Special Olympics in 2014.<sup>13</sup>



In 2014, Special Olympics served more than **4.5 million athletes.**<sup>14</sup>

10 Maulik, P. K., Mascarenhas, M. N., Mathers, C. D., Dua, T., & Saxena, S. (2011). Prevalence of intellectual disability: a meta-analysis of population-based studies. *Research in developmental disabilities, 32*(2), 419-436.

11 Siperstein, G. (2012). [Special Olympics Household Study]. Unpublished raw data.

12 2013 Reach Report (2013). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

13 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

14 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

# Special Olympics Brand Research

**Special Olympics is among the most well-known and well-respected brands in the United States**, with familiarity and favorability ratings on par or even exceeding the most prolific brands like McDonalds and Starbucks Coffee.<sup>1</sup>

While much of the brand research has been conducted in the United States where familiarity with Special Olympics is high, the general public's awareness and understanding of the organization around the world is increasing. For example, in 2015 Special Olympics won a Webby for a media campaign surrounding the Special Olympics European Games 2014. Special Olympics is a recent introduction in many geographic locations, growing from 1.3 million athletes in 2003 to more than 4.5 million athletes in 2014.<sup>2</sup> For more information, take a look at [Numbers of Special Olympics athletes 2000-2013](#).

Special Olympics has positive relationships with a wide variety of corporate sponsors with more joining locally, nationally and globally all the time, which has helped to expand the organization's reach and impact.

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**“The thing I’ve always admired about Special Olympics is the spirit and message of optimism, acceptance and inclusion that are at the heartbeat of this great organization. What could be nobler than promoting the ideals of living a life to its fullest?”**

— Muhtar Kent, Chairman and CEO, The Coca-Cola Company

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<sup>1</sup> Special Olympics awareness data . Washington, DC: Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, Inc.; 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The Webby Awards Gallery + Archive (The Webby Awards) <http://www.webbyawards.com/winners/2015/>

# WHAT YOU CAN TELL POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Special Olympics is an organization that provides value to partnering organizations.
- **Reaching global and local communities.** A strategic corporate partnership with Special Olympics offers a unique branding opportunity for any organization. By developing an integrated branding and marketing strategy with Special Olympics, corporate partners are able to extend their brand with campaigns to reach diverse local communities while signifying global strength and presence.
- **Measurements of success.** Special Olympics' community-based programming, initiatives and World Games provide corporate supporters with real and tangible opportunities to show their support makes a difference during a time where "corporate social responsibility" has become an increasingly visible corporate metric.
- **Reach the global community.** For marketers of global businesses and brands interested in building awareness and growth, Special Olympics strategically links them to their target audience worldwide with seven regional offices including — Africa, Asia Pacific, East Asia, Europe/Eurasia, Latin America, Middle East/North Africa and North America.
- **United through employee volunteerism.** Special Olympics offers unique employee volunteerism opportunities worldwide through [local Special Olympics Programs](#). Employees are united through experiences ranging from serving on a board of directors to coaching an athlete or awarding medals.
- **Find the right level of sponsorship.** There are many forms of partnerships including local, regional, national, World Games or global. All partnerships have the potential to reach hundreds of thousands of athletes, their coaches, families, friends, volunteers and spectators from around the world.
- **A loyal and passionate customer base.** By partnering with Special Olympics organizations tap into a wealth of consumers, crossing all racial, ethnic, educational, social and economic lines at more than 94,000 events per year, including the Special Olympics World Games every two years where thousands of athletes compete with the support of volunteers, coaches, officials, family and fans.<sup>3</sup>

Access and share a related [slideshow online from Special Olympics](#).

# WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT SPECIAL OLYMPICS

- 2011 top nonprofit organization serving people with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>
- 2013 Community Leadership Award by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition.

<sup>3</sup> 2014 Reach Report (2014). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

<sup>4</sup> Special Olympics (Philanthropedia) <https://www.myphilanthropedia.org/top-nonprofits/national/people-with-disabilities/2011/special-olympics>

- [New York Times featured Special Olympics' #PlayUnified campaign](#) in 2014.<sup>5</sup>
- Ranked #8 for brand image in Cone's Nonprofit Power Brand 100 Index.<sup>6</sup>
- Named one of "America's Greatest Brands" in 2005.<sup>7</sup>
- Direct Marketing Association Nonprofit Organization of the Year award in 2001.<sup>8</sup>
- Special Olympics is recognized by the International Olympics Committee and is the only other organization permitted by the organization to use the word "Olympics".

5 New Initiative for Special Olympics Aims for More Spontaneity, Less Marketing (The New York Times). By: Elliott, Stuart. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/business/media/new-initiative-for-special-olympics-aims-for-more-spontaneity-less-marketing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/business/media/new-initiative-for-special-olympics-aims-for-more-spontaneity-less-marketing.html?_r=0)

6 New Cone Report Values America's 100 Leading Nonprofit Brands (New Cone Report Values America's 100 Leading Nonprofit Brands) <http://www.conecomm.com/contentmgr/showdetails.php/id/2299>

7 America's Greatest Brands. American Brand Council (2005 Volume 4). <http://www.americasgreatestbrands.com/volume4/pdf/special-olympics.pdf>

8 Nonprofit Organization of the Year Award (DMA Nonprofit Federation) <http://nonprofitfederation.org/nonprofit-organization-of-the-year-award/>

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS BRAND RESEARCH



Special Olympics has a **95%** favorability rating in the United States.<sup>9</sup>



A strong majority of respondents (85%) also report being **likely to buy a product** or service from a company that supports Special Olympics.<sup>10</sup>



A strong majority of respondents (70%) **feel more positively** about companies that support Special Olympics.<sup>11</sup>



**73%** of people in the United States ages **55+** 55 and up are familiar with Special Olympics.<sup>12</sup>



**64%** of people in the United States ages 18-34 are familiar with Special Olympics.<sup>13</sup>



Both males (72%) and females (64%) report a **high familiarity** rate with Special Olympics in the United States.<sup>14</sup>



While Unified Sports remains a relatively new brand, familiarity with it is increasing, with **one of five** individuals ages 18-34 reporting familiarity in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

**"Our company is about reinventing productivity, to allow people to achieve more. If you think about Special Olympics and their mission to celebrate the achievements of people with intellectual disabilities, you understand that we couldn't be more aligned."**

— Jeff Hansen, general manager of Microsoft Brand Studio



Corporations who partner with Special Olympics experience a **range of benefits**, including improved employee morale, increased sales and stronger connections to the communities in which they operate, as evidenced by long-time corporate partners of Special Olympics such as Mattel Inc. and Procter & Gamble.

9 Special Olympics awareness data. Washington, DC: Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, Inc.; 2006.

10 Special Olympics awareness data. Washington, DC: Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, Inc.; 2006.

11 Special Olympics awareness data. Washington, DC: Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, Inc.; 2006.

12 Harris Poll. (2015). "2015 Harris Poll QuickQuery Results." [Survey report for Special Olympics].

13 Harris Poll. (2015). "2015 Harris Poll QuickQuery Results." [Survey report for Special Olympics].

14 Harris Poll. (2015). "2015 Harris Poll QuickQuery Results." [Survey report for Special Olympics].

15 Harris Poll. (2015). "2015 Harris Poll QuickQuery Results." [Survey report for Special Olympics].

# Conducting Your Own Research and Evaluation

## WHAT IS RESEARCH AND EVALUATION?

Research and evaluation has started to take on a larger role in nonprofit organizations and is becoming a requirement for more and more funders. Without knowing where to begin, research and evaluation can seem daunting. Still, with helpful resources and careful planning, it can be transformed from a requirement to a tool that can benefit your Program. So, what is research and evaluation?

The collection of information or data lies at the core of both research and evaluation. They differ in that the goal of research is to create new knowledge, while evaluation's goal is to inform decision making. It is important to note that research and evaluation constitutes a large variety of activities. Research and evaluation includes activities ranging from conducting a short survey after a sports practice with twenty athletes to working with a University partner to conduct a large-scale research project across your entire Program or multiple countries. Each activity adds its own value, and requires a different set of resources.

## WHY DO RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN YOUR PROGRAM?



### TO IMPROVE

Evaluation allows you to better understand the impact of the work you are conducting in your Program, including how effective different activities are in creating desired change.

**Collecting this information provides the opportunity to modify activities that do not work, enhance activities that drive impact, and allocate resources more strategically.**

*Example:* Surveys conducted after Family Health Forums give participants the opportunity to let the Program know how the forum can be improved and what health areas would be most useful to discuss in the future. This information allows Programs to provide content at their next event that will be most valuable, and thus most impactful, to attendees.



## TO PROVE

Today, an increasing amount of funders and partners are requesting concrete evidence of the impact of programs they are funding. Evaluation allows these funders to understand your program, who you are reaching, and how you are impacting them. **This helps funders and partners fully appreciate how their contribution has created an impact and can help justify future contributions.**

*Example:* Evaluations of the Unified Strategy in U.S. schools found that the program decreased bullying, created a more inclusive school environment, and improved the integration of students with disabilities in the school community. Moreover, as of 2014 the program has taken place in over 3,000 schools across 45 states.<sup>1,2,3</sup> These results demonstrate not only who the program is reaching but that it is creating the desired impact.



## TO ADVOCATE

Research and evaluation creates visibility for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) by demonstrating their needs and potential to those who perhaps had not previously considered this population. **This enhanced awareness brings accountability and can engage the public, institutions, and governments in implementing needed programs and policy changes.**

*Example:* Research demonstrating the efficacy of Unified Sports, its positive impact in the lives of people with ID, and the lack of similar opportunities can help shed light on the need for more integrated sporting opportunities for people with ID.

## GETTING STARTED

While you might be interested in conducting research and/or evaluation in your Program, it can be difficult to know where to begin. The following steps can provide you with some guidance on how to start this process. Remember that it is important to begin planning for your evaluation before the start of your project or program if possible. Planning ahead

1 Center for Social Development and Education (2012). *Project UNIFY 2011-2012: Final Evaluation Report*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.

2 Center for Social Development and Education (2013). *Project UNIFY 2012-2013: Final Evaluation Report*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.

3 Center for Social Development and Education (2014). *Project UNIFY 2013-2014: Final Evaluation Report*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.



will give you ample time to prepare for your evaluation and conduct activities at the right time. In addition to these steps, you can always speak with someone at Special Olympics International's (SOI) Research & Evaluation Department ([research@specialolympics.org](mailto:research@specialolympics.org)) to discuss options that are specific to your Program.

1. **Pinpoint your priority question(s).** Identify what information is important to you, your funders/partners, and your constituents. You will likely need to prioritize one or two key questions you want answered.
2. **Look at preexisting data and research.** Think about the information you are already collecting from your participants to see if it can help answer your question(s). Remember that data can come from a variety of places including attendance registers and financial documents. Additionally, look at [other research](#) – including work done by SOI or other Programs– to determine if there is existing relevant information.
3. **Connect with SOI and your Region.** A member of the Research and Evaluation Department can work with you to discuss options for your project given your time, resources, and goals. Additionally, SOI can share resources that can potentially save your Program time and funds. SOI can also share with you summaries of data that you are already collecting, such as results from your Healthy Athletes events.
4. **Consider who will help you to answer your question.** Is this information that you, your staff, or your coaches, could collect? Is there a University partner that you could work with? While working with a research institution, such as a University, can be helpful for large-scale research and evaluation, many evaluations can be done by yourself on a smaller scale.
5. **Identify how you want to collect this information.** There are numerous ways to collect data, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and attendance records. Take time to identify which of these methods will provide you with the information you need to answer your priority question(s). To save time and ensure quality results, be sure to take advantage of the existing tools that SOI and its partners have created. These tools include:

Tools focused on **athletes**, such as:

- A survey about how they believe participating in Special Olympics has impacted them.

Tools focused on **families**, such as:

- A survey about the impact of a Family Health Forum
- An interview questionnaire about the impact of Special Olympics on the family

Tools focused on **coaches**, such as:

- A survey about their past experience and their current Special Olympics team
- A survey about the impact of a coach health training session

Tools focused on **health care providers**, such as:

- A survey about the impact of a training
- A survey about the amount of education/training they received in school addressing people with ID

Tools focused on the **general public**, such as:

- Surveys about the attitudes of adults and youth toward people with ID

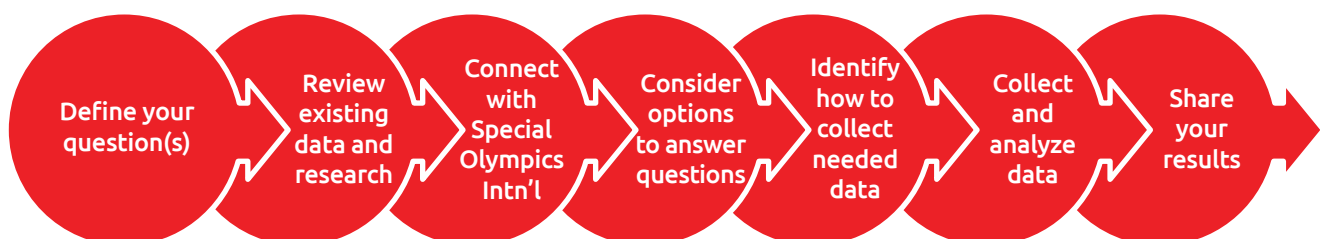
Tools focused on **Unified Sports athletes and partners**, such as:

- A survey for athletes and partners on how Unified Sports impacted them in the areas of social inclusion, sports participation, and health
- Questionnaires for athletes and partners on their Unified Sports experience

**Healthy Athletes data** from your Program is also available.

To receive these tools, or for more information on them, please contact SOI's Research & Evaluation Department at [research@specialolympics.org](mailto:research@specialolympics.org).

- 6. Collect and analyze your data.** Once you have identified who will be collecting your data and what tools you will use, you can implement your plan. As you collect and analyze your results, be sure to keep in mind your priority question(s) and the audience of the research or evaluation. This will help you get the most useful information from your data. Depending on the type of data collected and the type of analysis, you may want to work with a partner to help with this step.
- 7. Share your results.** Once you have completed your evaluation, be sure to utilize and share the results! This can be anything from creating a report for funders (see an example report from [Healthy Communities](#)) to sharing your results on how to improve the program with staff members. There are a variety of free tools (such as [Canva](#), [Infogram](#), and [Piktochart](#)) that can help you create visually appealing representations of your results. Additionally, SOI is very interested in your research and evaluation results! Please contact [research@specialolympics.org](mailto:research@specialolympics.org) to share your findings.



# INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The mission of Special Olympics is one that seeks to empower people with ID to achieve their full potential. **By including people with ID in the research process, they are transformed from being the subject of study to being active and involved partners in the process.**

SOI and Special Olympics Programs around the world have employed several methods to engage people with ID in program research. These include:

- **Participatory action research (PAR):** PAR involves inclusive research approaches where participants, who would normally be the subject of research, identify and research issues that are important to them. (Read our [PAR Information Sheet](#) for more information on PAR.) SOI conducted a [PAR project](#) with three U.S. schools, working with youth with and without ID to help them explore a social issue of importance at their school.
- **Athletes as co-researchers:** People with ID can also help with data collection. In 2012, SOI formed a partnership with the University of Cape Town to conduct an evaluation of Healthy Communities that included the use of athletes as co-researchers. These athletes interviewed other athletes about their experience with the Healthy Communities program.
- **Athletes implementing a survey:** Several Programs have worked with athletes to administer surveys at sporting competitions and other events. Athletes have carried tablets and/or paper surveys around the arena, surveying their peers and gathering valuable data for the Program.

For resources (information sheets, training documents, etc.) or more information on how to integrate people with ID in your research and evaluation, contact SOI's Research & Evaluation Department at [research@specialolympics.org](mailto:research@specialolympics.org).

