



Young Athletes Globalization Executive Summary

Young Athletes (YA) is a motor play program for 2 ½ to 7 year old children with intellectual disabilities (ID). It uses fun activities in a group setting to provide opportunities for mental, physical, and social development. YA was created in the US in 2004 to reach children who are not yet old enough to participate in traditional Special Olympics programming. Connecting with this younger population is crucial because during this time the developmental trajectory of the child is being established, and early intervention can support physical, social, emotional, self-help, cognitive, and communication development. Moreover, during this phase parents are learning about what it means to raise a child with a disability and are setting expectations that will affect key decisions they make for their child, such as whether or not to send them to school. YA paves the way for social inclusion by demonstrating the abilities and potential of children with ID from a young age, and YA engages the child, family, and community to create inclusive communities that support people with ID to reach their full potential.

The effectiveness of YA in a US school-based setting has been proven, with a recent study showing that after two months participation in YA, children with ID experienced a seven month gain in motor skills.¹ As YA expands into other countries and into family and community settings, it is necessary to understand the effectiveness and feasibility of conducting the program in diverse contexts. The execution of YA will differ in numerous ways that must be accounted for when expanding the program, such as variations in resources, which require adaptations to equipment and materials. One significant discrepancy is the status of children with ID in different countries, ranging from general acceptance in the community to immense stigmatization resulting in children with ID being hidden in their home. Each of these variations can affect the impact of YA. Thus, to address queries about the globalization of YA, a study was conducted by the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass) on the implementation of YA in five Special Olympics Programs: Kenya, Tanzania, Venezuela, Romania, and Malawi.

YA Program Implementation

In total, 128 Young Athletes participated in programs in Kenya (20 participants), Tanzania (15 participants), Venezuela (33 participants), Romania (35 participants), and Malawi (25 participants), and nearly all participants had some form of developmental delay. The program was administered over the course of 8 weeks using the YA Curriculum in a school or community setting. It included 187 motor activities and 24 detailed lesson plans and was typically delivered for one hour, three days per week over an eight week period. In each Program, YA Leaders were encouraged to make adaptations to the curriculum as needed. Throughout the program several adaptations were made to accommodate cultural considerations, participant ability levels, and practical constraints. For example, Kenya included education on hand washing and hygiene, added sign language, and used a piece of wood and tires rather than a balance beam. Additionally, in some Programs, YA was conducted two days per week for longer periods of time to accommodate the families traveling long distances to participate.

Data Collection Methods

UMass worked with a local evaluation team in each country to conduct baseline assessments of participants' developmental delays through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and/or the ABILITIES Index, and to track improvements in motor skills using the Test of Gross Motor Development (TGMD) and the Young Athletes Motor Checklist (YAMC). Skill acquisition was documented by YA Leaders through the Young Athletes Progress Monitoring Chart to help tailor the YA curriculum to meet the needs of the participants. YA Leaders also

¹ Favazza, P.C., Siperstein, G.N., Zeisel, S.A., Odom, S.L.Sideris, J.H. Moskowitz , A.L. (2013). Young Athletes Program: Impact on Motor Development *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 30, 235-253



measured the fidelity of curriculum implementation and described any success or challenges of their program using the YA Leader Log (YALL). Families and YA Leaders completed a survey at the conclusion of the intervention to document what they perceived to be the benefits of the program for their child. Finally, one or two site visits were conducted by UMass to observe each program and to conduct interviews with YA leaders, university student volunteers, and local evaluation partners.

Results

Results were collected across four Programs (Kenya, Tanzania, Venezuela, and Romania). Due to technical difficulties, results from Malawi were not used. In the remaining four Programs, progress was measured in 60 children with IDD participating in YA. Findings show that, similar to the US, children participating in YA in these countries experienced significant improvements in motor skills. For example, in Romania, pre-project initial assessments of participants' motor skills (using TGMD) showed that only two out of 16 children were within one standard deviation of the mean score for their age and gender, and the remaining 14 were more than two standard deviations below the mean. At the conclusion of the YA program, 11 children (69%) were within one standard deviation of the mean score for their gender and age.

Results from the perceived benefits survey given to families and YA Leaders indicated additional changes at the individual level, as well as changes at the family and community levels:

- **Individual:** Improvements in participants' motor skills, social skills, cognitive abilities, and adaptive skills.
- **Family:** Increased understanding of intellectual disability and willingness of parents to bring their child with ID into social settings, as well as the development of support networks among parents.
- **Community:** Enhanced interaction with and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities by community members, particularly university partners.

Reports of improved motor skills, social skills, cognitive abilities, and adaptive skills were themes across all four Programs. In Venezuela, a YA Leader reported that, "C.M. had trouble jumping over the obstacles, doing it almost walking but now he is able to jump alternating without help," and, "S.M. could not concentrate and follow directions and now she can." A parent from Tanzania reported that his/her child, "Can express himself better when he wants something!" In addition to these individual developments, YA impacted families and communities. YA helped families understand what intellectual disability is, as one parent in Tanzania reported, "Through YA, our family has benefited by having more knowledge about people with intellectual disability and how to live with them." 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," (pp. 33). Furthermore, by interacting with other parents of children with ID, parents built support networks. 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. More over the families made friends among each other and have started to cooperate," (pp. 50).

These results show that YA can be adapted and implemented in different cultural settings, including ones that are resource poor. Furthermore, given the enormous stigma and isolation people with ID face in developing countries, implementing YA can be a crucial step to social inclusion for these children and their families. In many developing countries it is believed that children with ID cannot learn and are consequently denied access to educational programs and social opportunities. Exclusion from education leads to further developmental delays, creating a vicious cycle. By demonstrating that children with ID can in fact learn and improve their motor skills, YA challenges these misperceptions and shows family and community members that children with ID ought to be included and educated in their communities.



*Recommendations*²

The results of this study yielded several recommendations on how to continue to improve YA in both US and international contexts. Recommendations include:

- Integrate local adaptations into the curriculum for knowledge-sharing purposes
- Develop materials to support parents learning about intellectual disability
- Expand the YA program from 8 to 12 weeks
- Set criteria for funded YA Programs as part of the expansion and sustainability of YA
- For younger participants, frame YA activities through the lens of a cooperative motor play program, rather than a sports program
- Create two levels of YA: a motor play program and a developmental sports program
- Create a school readiness measure for YA
- View YA as a catalyst for social inclusion and address this in the program delivery

Among these recommendations, concerns were raised about viewing YA only in the context of sports. Younger participants in YA are in a period of development in which they do not play in competition or on teams with their peers, but rather alongside them. Accordingly, the evaluators suggest framing YA as a motor development program for younger participants around the ages of 2-5, using the context of cooperative games and motor play. A Young Athletes Developmental Sports program could be created for children approximately 5-7 years old who might be ready to engage with the sports-related concepts that will prepare them for participation in traditional Special Olympics. Additionally, the evaluators advised the development of a school readiness measure for YA. Since YA contributes to improved school readiness, tracking this measure will help debunk the common myth in resource poor countries that children with ID are not capable of learning and therefore should not be allowed to attend school. Finally, the evaluators recommended viewing YA as a catalyst for social inclusion at the family and community level and that attitude change should be addressed as a key part of YA. Each of these recommendations can be examined to help strengthen the YA model moving forward. As evaluator Paddy Favazza suggests, “While the road to social inclusion is well worn, it now has many new, smaller feet treading on it. Let’s place these little ones and their families on a fresh path, with solid footing ensuring multi-level developmental impact on children, families and communities.”

² For a complete list of recommendations, see page 60 of the Young Athletes Globalization Report.