

A Comprehensive National Study of Special Olympics Programs in China

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INTRODUCTION

For 40 years, Special Olympics has been a worldwide leader in providing year-round sport training and competition opportunities to athletes with intellectual disabilities. In 1968, the First International Special Olympics Games were held at Soldier's Field in Chicago with 1000 athletes from 26 states and Canada competing in three sports. Today, Special Olympics has grown to serve over 2.9 million people with intellectual disabilities in over 180 countries, through 30 summer and winter sports.

Since 2000, global program growth has been one of Special Olympics' primary objectives. In fact, a strategic goal was set by Special Olympics to reach two million athletes worldwide by the end of 2005, a goal which as of 2008 is on the brink of three million athletes. Special Olympics China in particular has demonstrated the most substantial growth of their athlete base, making them at present the largest Special Olympics program in the world. Specifically, while approximately 28,000 athletes participated in Special Olympics Programs across mainland China in 1998, that number rose to over 600,000 in 2006.

In addition to their goal for growth and documenting the quantity of athletes participating in the movement, Special Olympics, Inc. has also been committed to a line of research documenting the quality and impact of Special Olympics athletes' experiences worldwide. One such study, the U.S. Special Olympics Impact Study (Harada & Siperstein, 2008; Siperstein, Harada, Parker, Hardman, & McGuire, 2005), was the first of its kind to inform Programs about not only their athletes' experiences in Special Olympics, but also their lives outside of sport. More specifically, the Special Olympics Impact Study provided U.S. Programs with a wealth of information about athletes, families, and coaches, with specific attention to athletes' experiences in Special Olympics over time. This information is useful to Programs in that it can be used to ensure that athletes' interests continue to be met and to improve Programs' outreach in the community to people with intellectual disabilities of all ages, particularly those who are not currently involved in Special Olympics. One of the most notable findings from the U.S. study was that most athletes with intellectual disabilities participate in Special Olympics through school programs, and that they participate for a significant part of their lives (on average 11 years). Another interesting finding was that Special Olympics athletes share the same motives for participating in and leaving sport as athletes without disabilities.

More recently, the Special Olympics Impact Study was expanded to include China. Special Olympics China, established in 1985 as a program of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, became part of the Chinese Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF) in 1998, an organization which supervises educational, vocational, and community programs for people with disabilities. There are presently Special Olympics Programs in each of the 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities, with the largest Programs located in Shanghai and Beijing. In addition to offering training and competition opportunities in 27 sports, Special Olympics China also offers Family Support programming, Unified Sports[®], Athlete Leadership Program (ALPs), Young Athletes[™], Healthy Athletes screening, Motor Activities Training Program (MATP), and Special Olympics *Get Into It*[®], and has targeted outreach to students from the kindergarten to university levels. While Special Olympics Programs in China have clearly demonstrated significant growth over the last ten years, there is still very little known about participating athletes.

Conducting the Special Olympics Impact Study in China provided an opportunity to not only replicate and complement the line of research begun in the US, but also to expand the focus. Specifically, the survey in China was further documented in greater detail athletes' experiences off the field in education, employment, and community involvement. A multi-source approach was employed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of athletes' experiences in Special Olympics in China?
2. What motivates athletes to participate in Special Olympics?
3. What is the importance of Special Olympics Programs as perceived by families and coaches?
4. What are the experiences of Special Olympics athletes off the field in education, employment, and community life in China?

METHODS

A multi-source approach, involving athletes, families, and coaches was used to a document the Chinese athlete's Special Olympics experience and their life experiences off the field. This study included 331 family members, 223 athletes, and 89 coaches participating in Special Olympics Programs throughout mainland China.

Survey Development

Two survey instruments were developed by project staff, with assistance from Special Olympics International (SOI), Special Olympics East Asia (SOEA), and Special Olympics China (SOC) staff. One survey instrument was designed for use with athletes and family members, and a second survey instrument was designed for use with coaches.

Items included in the questionnaires for all three respondent groups were adapted by project staff, at the UMass Boston Special Olympics Global Collaborating Center (SOGCC), with assistance of staff at SOI and SOC, from the survey questionnaires employed in the "Comprehensive National Study of Special Olympics Programs in the United States" (Siperstein, Harada, Parker, Hardman, & McGuire, 2005). A thorough review of the literature about sport in China was conducted by project staff, as well as a review of the literature about people with disabilities across China including their education, employment, and inclusion in society. This review helped shape the survey questions on education, employment, and available services for people with disabilities and ensure their relevance.

This final survey instrument consisted of one section for family members and one section for athletes. The section for families included items on demographics and sport history and motivation for participating in Special Olympics and the importance of Special Olympics Programs to athletes and families. The athlete section was similarly structured but had a smaller focus on demographics. The survey instrument for coaches included items on: demographics and sport and coaching history; motivation for coaching in Special Olympics; perceptions of athletes' motivation for participating in Special Olympics; and the importance of Special Olympics to its participants.

At the end of the survey development phase, the survey questionnaires were translated into Chinese by The Gallup Organization and reviewed by professional translators on staff at the SOGCC as well as staff at SOEA and SOC. Staff translated the surveys back into English and made adjustments or revisions based on cultural appropriateness and Special Olympics terminology. Below are detailed descriptions of the survey instruments for athletes, family members, and coaches.

Athlete Survey

The purpose of the athlete survey was to document not only athletes' participation in sport, but provide a glimpse into athletes' lives off the playing field. Questions were included to obtain information about athletes' background (family life, school attendance, and employment), prior sport experience, reasons for joining Special Olympics, participation in training and

competition, and the impact of participation in Special Olympics. In addition, athletes were asked questions about their social interactions with other team members, peers, and family members, as well as participation in sport and leisure activities outside of Special Olympics.

Family Survey

Family members were asked about athletes' prior sport participation, reasons for participating in Special Olympics, participation in training and competition, their goals for the athletes, and their perceptions of their athletes' experiences in Special Olympics. Family members were also asked about their own involvement in Special Olympics and their perceptions of their athlete's improvement in a variety of skill areas. In addition, family members were asked questions about their athlete's social interactions with teammates both during and outside of training and competition, and athletes' participation in sport and leisure activities outside of Special Olympics. Finally, family members were asked about athletes' experiences in the community, including their education and employment status.

Coach Survey

The purpose of the coach survey was to gather information about Special Olympics Programs and to learn about the experience, knowledge and level of expertise coaches bring to Special Olympics. Questions about team composition included items on the structure and content of training, skill assessment, competition, and team goals. Finally, similar to family members, coaches were asked about their own experiences in Special Olympics including their educational, sport, and coaching background. Finally, coaches were asked about the experiences of their athletes.

Participants

Project staff worked with The Gallup Organization to develop a sampling plan that would provide for an adequate sample of telephone contacts for Special Olympics athletes throughout mainland China based on the findings in the "Validation Study of the 2005 Special Olympics Census" (Harada & Siperstein, 2006). In the sampling plan counts of athletes were first examined for all provinces with a Special Olympics Program. [Note: Provinces with fewer than 100 athletes were eliminated from consideration.] Based on these counts a sample of six provinces (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Sichuan, Heilongjiang, and Shaanxi) was selected by project staff with the assistance of SOI and SOC staff based on the size of the Special Olympics program and geographic location. Project staff provided SOC with this list of six provinces and asked them to provide a complete list of athletes who were active in Special Olympics during 2006 from each of these six provinces.

In accordance with the sampling plan, the lists received from the provinces were to be cleaned for usable telephone numbers and from the list of usable numbers, 300 athletes would be randomly selected by project staff from each province (for a total of 1800 athletes) to participate in a validation survey conducted by SOC. This validation survey had two purposes: (1) to verify the athlete's involvement in Special Olympics and (2) to obtain consent from the family to participate in the Gallup survey. Once the validation survey was completed, SOC would compile

a list of families which would be provided to the Gallup Organization. From this pre-screened list, Gallup would randomly select 500 families to interview. However, due to time constraints and SOC staff availability around World Games, the sampling plan was reassessed and the validation survey was eliminated.

In the revised sampling plan, project staff requested that SOC provide telephone contacts to Gallup from the six identified provinces as follows: 300 from Beijing and Shanghai, and 200 each from the remaining four provinces (Guangdong, Sichuan, Heilongjiang, and Shaanxi), for a total of 1400 contacts. This decision was based on Gallup's expectation that four telephone contacts would be needed for every one completed interview, due to the accuracy and availability of telephone contact information and availability of caregivers who could respond to the survey.

The number of contacts actually provided to SOC before World Games was 723. These contacts were not drawn exclusively from the six targeted provinces however, but represented the original six as well as four others (Shanxi, Henan, Hubei, and Fujian). After World Games, additional contacts were requested from SOC to complete the study. At this time SOC provided another 842 contacts to Gallup, drawn from seven provinces that provided contacts before the World Games in addition to 11 others (Shanghai, Guangdong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Heilongjiang, Sichuan, Fujian, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Guangxi, Shandong, Gansu, Jiangsu, Tianjin, and Qinghai). The final number of athlete contacts provided to project staff by SOC was 1565, representing 21 provinces.

SOC was also asked to provide a list of no fewer than 500 coaches from the same six provinces as the athletes who participated in the survey. Before World Games, SOC provided 156 contacts from 4 provinces (Guangdong, Sichuan, Heilongjiang, and Shaanxi). Additional contacts were requested from SOC to complete the study, which were provided after World Games. At this time, SOC provided another 530 contacts, drawn from 3 provinces that provided contacts before the World Games, in addition to 19 other provinces (Beijing, Guangdong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Sichuan, Fujian, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Jilin, Ningxia, Guangxi, Shandong, Gansu, Tianjin, Chongqing, Anhui, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Xinjiang). The total number of coach contacts provided to project staff by SOC was 686, representing 20 provinces.

The lists of athlete and coach contacts were cleaned by project staff, by checking for missing area codes and removing entries without telephone numbers. These cleaned lists were then sent to The Gallup Organization. The Gallup Organization cleaned the lists again by flagging duplicate entries, removing entries with incomplete phone numbers, and identifying incorrect area codes. As needed, Gallup staff requested additional assistance from Program staff in checking or completing area codes. Gallup staff also flagged entries of different athletes who had the same caretaker, as this person could only be contacted once. Similarly, Gallup staff flagged entries of coaches who had the same phone number, as each phone number could only be used once. At the end of this process, Gallup created a file of "working" numbers, entries with complete, correct area codes and connected telephone numbers. These numbers were entered into their computer system to be used for the calls. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the provided telephone contacts and working numbers for each round of interviewing.

Table 1. Telephone Contacts and Working Numbers Provided to Gallup.

	Athletes		Coaches	
	Pre-Games sample	Post-Games sample	Pre-Games sample	Post-Games sample
Total Numbers Provided to Gallup	723	842	156	530
Working Numbers	604	494	102	180

Of the 1,098 working phone numbers provided, Gallup staff were able to contact 1,034 families. Of those contacted, 219 families and 133 athletes were surveyed before the World Games and 112 families and 90 athletes were surveyed after the World Games. Of the 282 working phone numbers for coaches provided to Gallup, staff were only able to complete interviews with 89 coaches. Many of the telephone contacts provided by SOC for coaches were telephone numbers at schools, and in nearly all cases multiple coaches were listed with the same telephone contact information. As a result, only one coach from each school could be interviewed, as each telephone number could only be used once.

Procedures

The Gallup Organization conducted interviews with all three constituent groups – athletes, their families, and coaches. The interviewers attended a training session at the Gallup Call Centers in Shanghai and Guangzhou, China where they were presented with a training manual created specifically for use in China. The first half of the training session included information about intellectual disabilities and Special Olympics. Project staff also provided information about best practices for interviewing athletes with intellectual disabilities as well as a detailed review of each question included in the survey. During the second half of the training session, mock interviews were conducted with Special Olympics athletes to help prepare Gallup interviewers for any issues that could arise during an actual phone interview (i.e. the need to rephrase questions, keep participants’ attention, adjust their rate of speech, or the need to probe for more information). Mock interviews were also conducted with families during this training session.

For each phone call, the Gallup interviewer followed a scripted protocol where they introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the survey. Participants were informed that their responses were voluntary and confidential, and that they may decline to answer any question or terminate the call at any time. Family members were interviewed first. At the conclusion of the family interview, a screening for athlete participation was administered. It was at this time that the interviewer spoke to the family member about the athlete’s ability to participate and what assistance, if any, the athlete would need. Due to variation in the receptive and expressive language abilities of athletes, there were some cases where only a family member was interviewed. In over two-thirds of households, both an athlete and a family member were interviewed (67%). Of those athletes who were interviewed, nearly three-quarters (74%) did so with the assistance of a family member.

The same procedure was followed when the Gallup interviewer spoke to coaches, using a scripted protocol where they introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the survey.

Coaches were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential, and that they may decline to answer any question or terminate the call at any time.

RESULTS

At the beginning of each interview, questions were asked to assess whether athletes were involved in Special Olympics whether they participated during 2006. The survey was only continued with those family members whose athletes were active in Special Olympics in 2006, meaning that they participated in either training or competition activities. The percentages of those who appeared on the list as athletes but had never participated in Special Olympics or who did not participate during 2006 are presented in Table 2. Because this study was completed in two phases – before and after the 2007 Summer World Games in Shanghai – these data are shown for each sample separately. Overall, of the 1034 families contacted, 34% (347) did not participate in Special Olympics in 2006 in either training or competition activities and therefore did not meet the validation standard.

Table 2. Distribution of Athletes Not Meeting Validation Standard.

	Pre-Games sample (N = 540)	Post-Games sample (N = 494)
Never Participated in SO	22% (120)	18% (90)
Did Not Participate in 2006	13% (72)	13% (65)
Total	36% (192)	31% (155)

The final sample for this study included 219 families, 133 athletes, and 30 coaches surveyed before the World Games and 112 families, 90 athletes, and 59 coaches surveyed after the World Games. Because data collection occurred in two phases, responses were first examined separately to determine whether there were any differences between the two samples. There were very few differences found between the two samples. Therefore, the results of the athlete, family, and coach responses are reported as one sample unless otherwise stated.

Description of Special Olympics Families

The characteristics of Special Olympics athletes and their experiences in school, employment, and community life were reported by family members¹. Two-thirds of the family member respondents were female. Nearly all athletes (92%) lived in their family homes, while only a few (8%) lived in a residential school. This is similar to the findings from the Comprehensive National Study in the United States. In over a third of families (37%), the athlete with an intellectual disability has a sibling. The majority of these siblings (60%) are younger

¹ Of the family member/caregiver respondents, only 2% were caregivers in a group home or supervised living environment for athletes. Because the respondents were primarily family members, this group will be referred to as “family members” throughout this report.

than the athlete. This is not surprising as it is consistent with the exceptions to the Chinese government’s one-child policy, where families who have a child with a disability have the option of having another child.

Most family members (79%) report knowing other people with intellectual disabilities. As might be expected, these are primarily schoolmates of their children but also include people from their neighborhoods. Family members also had some involvement in Special Olympics during 2006, either by attending training sessions or competitions, participating in the Family Support Network, or assisting with Special Olympics in other ways, such as by providing transportation for the athlete, volunteering, coaching, assisting in fundraising. This is not surprising as the Census Validation Study found that Chinese families were involved in their children’s Special Olympics Programs in a variety of ways.

Table 3. Family Characteristics: Relationship to Athlete and Involvement in Special Olympics (N = 331).

	Frequency (%)
Respondent’s Relationship to Athlete	
Family Member	98%
Staff/Other Caregiver	2%
Respondent’s Involvement in SO	
Attended Trainings	51%
Attended Competitions	43%
Provided Transportation	50%
Volunteered	34%
Coached	15%
Played in SO as Unified Partner	19%
Participated in the Athlete Leadership Program	16%
Participated in the Family Support Network	40%
Assisted in Fundraising	24%
Assisted in Some Other Way	10%

A few families (9%) reported receiving services through a special support center in their communities. Those services included rehabilitation training and family support groups, as well as vocational training and a variety of therapies available for their child’s specific needs. A few families (8%) also reported being involved in support groups for families of people with disabilities organized by groups other than Special Olympics. These groups were organized by local Disabled Persons' Federations (DPF), the provincial/city government, or their child’s school.

Description of Special Olympics Coaches

The characteristics of coaches and their experience and knowledge provide information about the level of expertise they bring to Special Olympics. Coaches are also able to provide important insight into the structure and functioning of local Special Olympics Programs. Many Special Olympics coaches in China are male (58%), with a mean age of 37 years. A large majority of these coaches (91%) have received a degree from a university, primarily in the areas of physical education and general education, and 75% of coaches are teachers. As might be expected, due to the structure of Special Olympics Programs in China, nearly two-thirds of these coaches (65%) are teachers in special schools. This is similar to what was found in several European countries in the Unified Football Evaluation, where almost all Special Olympics coaches were teachers. In contrast, in the US only one-third (35%) of coaches have an educational background or occupation working with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Perhaps due to their role as teachers, it is not surprising that most coaches (85%) know other people with intellectual disabilities, beyond those athletes on their Special Olympics teams. Interestingly, a third of coaches (33%) reported having a friend with an intellectual disability, but very few (2%) have a family member with an intellectual disability. Again, this is in contrast to the U.S. where almost half of the coaches (44%) have a family member with an intellectual disability. Moreover, coaches stated that they were originally motivated to coach in Special Olympics because it fulfilled a part of their job responsibilities (56%) as well as their interest in helping people with intellectual disabilities (16%). Coaches reported that they became aware of Special Olympics through their local DPF or a school where they were employed.

Many coaches have also been involved in sports throughout their lives. Most (81%) coaches reported playing sports competitively themselves; the sports played vary widely and include athletics and basketball, with many (63%) having played multiple sports. Interestingly, these are the same sports that are most popular among Special Olympics athletes in China, suggesting the social value of these sports in China. The competitive nature of coaches' sports involvement has also varied. Almost a third (28%) played sports at the university level, and surprisingly nearly a quarter of coaches (24%) have even played professionally or on a national team. This finding is very different from Special Olympics coaches in the United States and Europe; only 3% of coaches in the U.S. and 4% in Europe had ever participated in sports at the professional or national team level. This finding suggests that coaches in China have extensive experience in competitive sport which provides them with a great deal of knowledge of training and competition. This finding also calls attention to the difference between the U.S. and China in terms of the professional experience expected of physical education teachers and sport coaches.

Table 4. Coach Characteristics: Age, Education, and Sports Competition (N = 89).

	Frequency (%)
Age *	
30 and under	11%
31 to 40	35%
41 to 50	20%
51 and older	10%
Level of school completed	
Middle school/High school graduate	8%
College graduate	87%
Post-graduate study	5%
Levels of competitive sport participation	
Recreational	20%
School	54%
University	28%
Professional/National team	25%

* Total does not equal 100% due to “don’t know” or “refused” responses.

Almost all coaches (94%) completed some type of training in coaching, whether through Special Olympics or another organization. It is interesting to note that nearly half of coaches (44%) received training from another organization in addition to training through Special Olympics. This might be expected due to these coaches’ own sport experiences and the cultural expectation for coach education and training in China. Further, nearly half (46%) also have extensive training in disabilities either through workshops, internships or college-level courses. Generally, coaches are involved with more than one sport in Special Olympics with athletics, basketball, and football the most common.

Table 5. Coaches’ training in sports and disabilities.

	Frequency (%)
Training in coaching	
General SO orientation	80%
SO Sport-specific training	78%
Unified Sports training	65%
Non-SO workshops	28%
Non-SO sport internships	30%
College courses	24%
Sport federation licensure courses	24%
Training in disability	
Workshops	33%
Internships	23%
College courses	12%

Many of the coaches who participated in the study were relatively new to Special Olympics, with an average participation of five years. More specifically, coaches spent an average of four years coaching traditional Special Olympics and an average of two years

coaching Unified Sports. In contrast, in the US the average coach has participated in Special Olympics for thirteen years. However, the fact that most coaches in China have become involved with Special Olympics during the past ten years is in line with the significant Program growth that has taken place during this time. In addition to their work with Special Olympics, some coaches in China are also active at the community recreation level with just over a third (36%) having coached teams in sport organizations outside of Special Olympics. More specifically, 21% have coached school teams and 10% have coached at the professional level. Again, this points to the cultural differences in the experience expected of physical education teachers and sport coaches outside of the United States.

Table 6. Coaches’ involvement in coaching: Special Olympics and other organizations.

	Frequency (%)
Years coaching in SO	
5 years or less	64%
6 to 10 years	29%
11 years or more	7%
Coached Unified Sports	30%
Coached outside SO	36%
Levels of coaching outside SO	
Recreational	10%
School	21%
University	3%
Professional/National team	10%

When asked about problems they experienced while coaching in Special Olympics, all coaches cited at least one challenge, including finding transportation to events, having access to adequate facilities and equipment, and recruiting athletes. In addition, coaches reported that they were interested in receiving additional training to work with athletes with intellectual disabilities. However, these challenges were outweighed by the many successes. In fact, coaches reported that they felt satisfied and accomplished when their athletes achieve on the field. Coaches also felt that their expectations of their athletes had become more positive, and they hoped that through participating in Special Olympics, their athletes would be able to become more confident, independent, and have a better chance to become integrated into society.

Description of Athletes’ Experiences in Special Olympics

Athletes’ experiences in Special Olympics were reported by family members, the athletes themselves, and coaches. [Note: Most athletes who participated in the survey did so with the assistance of someone in the household (72%).]

Overall, most athletes are currently between 11 and 21 years of age, with a mean age of 17 years. Athletes join Special Olympics as youth and adolescents, with a mean age at entry of

13 years. Athletes are primarily male (71%) and have participated in Special Olympics for an average of three years. As might be expected considering the duration of their involvement, most athletes (77%) have participated in Special Olympics with the same group since joining. In addition, most athletes (89%) participate in a Special Olympics program organized through a school, with only a few (8%) involved in a program organized by the local DPF. This is consistent with the findings of the Comprehensive National Study in the U.S., which found that Special Olympics athletes became involved in Special Olympics primarily through school programs and programs run by community groups. These findings are also similar to what was found in the Census Validation Study, where over two-thirds of athletes participated in Special Olympics through school programs, with the majority having participated for five years or less.

Table 7. Athlete Characteristics: Age, Years of Involvement, Entry into Special Olympics, School Status (N = 331)

	Frequency (%)
Age at Entry into SO*	
Under 18	82%
18 and over	9%
Years Involved in SO	
5 years or less	87%
6 to 10 years	11%
11 years or more	2%
Current involvement in SO	
School-based program	89%
DPF/Government-based program	8%
Independent/Other	3%
School Status	
Regular public/private school	2%
Vocational school	1%
Special/residential school	68%
Out of school	29%

* Total does not equal 100% due to “don’t know” or “refused” responses.

Athletes participate in a wide range of the 27 available sports, with many athletes participating in at least two sports during their time with Special Olympics. The most popular sports are athletics and basketball, a finding which is also supported by the results of the Census Validation Study and confirmed by coaches. Within Special Olympics, athletes can participate in different ways, including training and competition. The training experiences of these athletes were similar to those profiled in the Census Validation Study, as these athletes attended training for an average of four days per week, with training sessions lasting between one and two hours. In fact, 31% of athletes participated in training lasting two or more hours per session.

While competition opportunities range from local tournaments to World Games, approximately one-third of the athletes (35%), have participated only at the local or regional

levels, and another 34% have had the opportunity to compete at the national level. With the 2007 Summer World Games held in Shanghai, many athletes had a unique opportunity to compete on the global stage. Therefore, it is not surprising that while only 9% of families interviewed prior to the Summer Games had an athlete who participated in a World Games event, 28% of families who were interviewed after the Games in Shanghai reported having an athlete who participated.

In addition to these training and competition activities, 20% of athletes have also participated in Unified Sports. While this may seem like a small percentage of athletes, it is important to consider that most Special Olympics Programs in China are primarily organized through special schools and local DPFs, organizations which provide services exclusively for people with disabilities. It is also important to note that the push to develop Unified Sports in China only began in 1999, and really did not gain momentum until 2002 when a partnership was formed between SOEA and the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation. SOC has worked in recent years to broaden the conceptualization of Unified Sports to be a platform for community inclusion, not only team inclusion.

Table 8. Athletes’ involvement in Special Olympics (N = 331).

	Frequency (%)
Frequency of Training*	
1 to 2 days per week	19%
3 to 4 days per week	17%
5 or more days per week	32%
Intensity of Training*	
Less than 1 hour	15%
1 to less than 2 hours	27%
2 to less than 3 hours	17%
More than 3 hours	14%
Highest level of SO competition*	
Local	16%
Province/Regional	18%
National	34%
World	15%

* Total does not equal 100% – due to “don’t know” or “refused” responses.

To more fully understand athletes’ involvement in Special Olympics, coaches were asked to describe the characteristics of an average Special Olympics team and their communication with others about their team. The team profile provided allows a unique glimpse into local Special Olympics Programs, explaining the size and structure of teams, and offering insight into athletes’ participation experiences.

The average Special Olympics team has eight athletes, primarily males (75%). Most teams are composed of mixed age groups (71%), with participants ranging in ages from adolescent through adult, with primarily mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. Since most

athletes become involved with Special Olympics through schools, it is not surprising that teams are primarily organized by schools as well as local DPFs. It is interesting to note that more coaches cited DPFs as the organizing agency of Special Olympics Programs rather than schools, which was reported by families. It is likely that families assume that their children's Special Olympics team was organized by a school because it occurs at a school and is coached by a school teacher. However, the actual origination of most teams can most likely be traced to a DPF. Each team had an average of three coaches, and about half of teams (49%) also had volunteer assistance. That assistance came primarily from family members but also by staff from the local DPF. Training sessions were held regularly, on average twice per week. During training, coaches implemented a variety of activities, including strength, endurance, and flexibility training, team-based drills for skill development, and team-building activities. To help coaches better structure the training sessions and drills and to make position assignments, most coaches (88%) assessed athletes' skills on a quarterly basis or more frequently, most often through the use of a sport federation checklist or a form they themselves created. As far as competition, teams competed an average of 11 times per year, with most competing once per month or less frequently. Coaches reported that they frequently communicated with the family members of athletes, as well as school administrators and other Special Olympics coaches about team activities. Coaches most often disseminated information about their teams to family members through telephone calls and mailings.

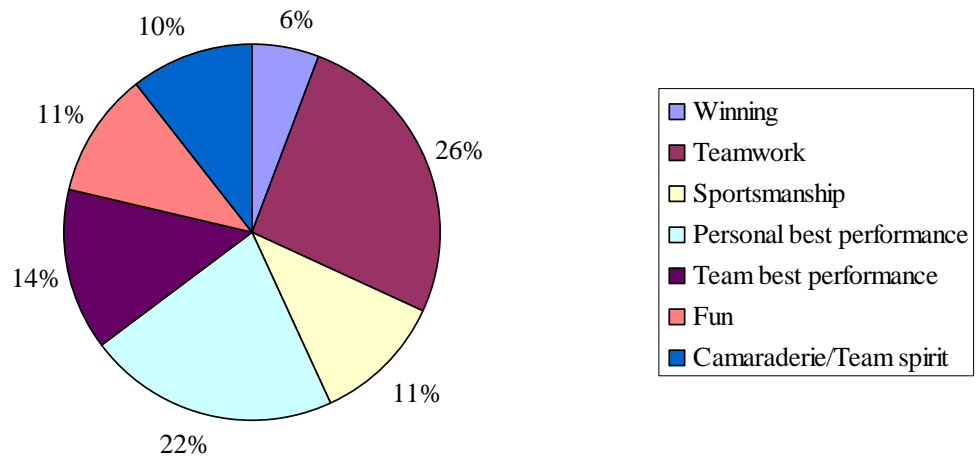
Table 9. Characteristics of the average Special Olympics team.

	Frequency (%)
Age Groups	
Same age groups	29%
Mixed age groups	71%
Organizer of team	
School	20%
Local DPF	60%
City/Local government	17%
Other organization	3%

* Coaches were not asked to distinguish cognitive ability from impairments that would affect sport participation or performance (e.g., motor, vision, hearing).

Coaches were also asked about what aspects of sport they emphasized to their athletes during training and competitions. Most coaches emphasized performance and team-oriented goals. More specifically, coaches most often reported that they emphasized teamwork, followed by personal best performance and team best performance. Coaches' emphasis on teamwork was similar to what was found the Unified Sports Evaluation in Europe.

Figure 1. Coaches’ emphasis during competition (N = 89).



Another element of Special Olympics competition events, particularly those at the provincial, national, and world level, is the availability of Healthy Athletes screening. Nearly two-thirds of athletes (63%) reported participating in a Healthy Athletes screening event. This is not surprising given the number of athletes who had participated in events at the provincial level or higher. Of those athletes who received Healthy Athletes screening, Opening Eyes was the most common (90%) while Fit Feet was the least (51%). Fifteen percent of families who reported that their athletes who received a screening also reported being given a referral to a doctor or dentist for further care, but only a third (36%) of those referred got the suggested medical care.

Table 10. Athletes’ Visits to Healthy Athletes Screening (N = 141).

Healthy Athletes Screening	Frequency (%)
Opening Eyes	90%
Healthy Hearing	79%
Special Smiles	67%
Health Promotion	62%
Fun Fitness	60%
Fit Feet	51%

* Total does not equal 100% – due to “don’t know” or “refused” responses.

Families, athletes and coaches were also asked about the reasons that athletes participate in Special Olympics. Families and athletes were asked the open-ended question: “Why does/did [name] participate in Special Olympics?” Coaches were asked to consider the question in the context of all of the athletes they have ever coached.

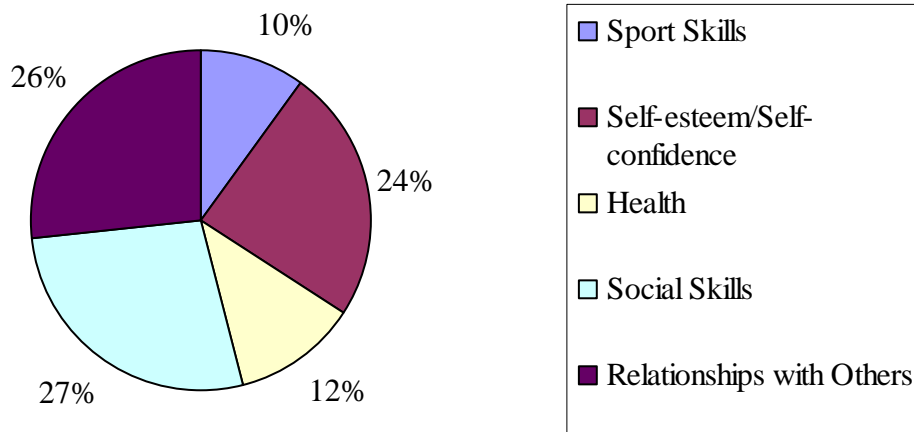
Families most frequently reported that their athletes participated because Special Olympics was a school-organized activity (47%), because of the opportunities it offered for athletes to be fit and physically active (26%), and because the athlete enjoyed playing sports (21%). Similarly, athletes reported that they participated in Special Olympics because they wanted to exercise and be healthy (33%), it was a school activity (19%), and the athlete enjoyed playing sports (13%). Coaches most frequently reported that the athletes they coached participated because Special Olympics provided them with opportunities to be with their friends and make new ones (31%), because they enjoyed playing sports (26%), and because they wanted to exercise and be fit (22%). Overall, not only did athletes, their families and coaches essentially agree on their reasons for participating in Special Olympics, but these reasons were consistent across gender, age, and sport. These findings also mirrored what was found in the U.S., although a greater number of Chinese athletes became involved because Special Olympics was a school-related activity. This is perhaps in part due to the fact that the majority of Special Olympics athletes in China are school aged. It is also interesting to note the greater emphasis on health and fitness among this population, which may be due, in part, to the importance of health and fitness for a balanced lifestyle in the Chinese culture. The value of sport in promoting health and fitness has also been demonstrated throughout the cross-cultural literature on motivation for sport participation among athletes without disabilities (Chi, 1992; Kirkby, Kolt, & Liu, 1999; Kolt, Kirkby, Bar-Eli, Blumenstein, Chadha, Liu, & Kerr, 1999; Yan & McCullagh, 2004; Yan & Thomas, 1995).

The Importance of Special Olympics to Athletes and Families

In addition to being asked about the reasons athletes participate in Special Olympics, families and coaches were asked about their goals for athletes' participation in Special Olympics, and in what areas they saw improvement. First, families and coaches were asked to rate the top goal they held for athletes' participation in Special Olympics from a list of five (improved sport skills, self-esteem and self-confidence, health, social skills [adaptive behavior], and relationships with others). Then, they rated athletes' improvement in each of the five goal areas.

The most important goal families held for their athlete was improved social skills (adaptive behavior) (27%) (see Figure 2). The next top goals were improved relationships with others, reported by 26% of families, and improved self-esteem and self-confidence, reported by 24% of families. Considering that Special Olympics is a sports program, it is interesting that for the majority of Chinese families, their top goal focused on the social and personal aspects of sport participation, and *not* on sport skill development. Surprisingly, only 10% of families rated improved sport skills as their number one goal for their athletes' participation in Special Olympics. These findings are similar to those from a number of studies, including the Comprehensive National Study in the United States, the Unified Sports Evaluation in the United States and Europe, and the Census Validation Study.

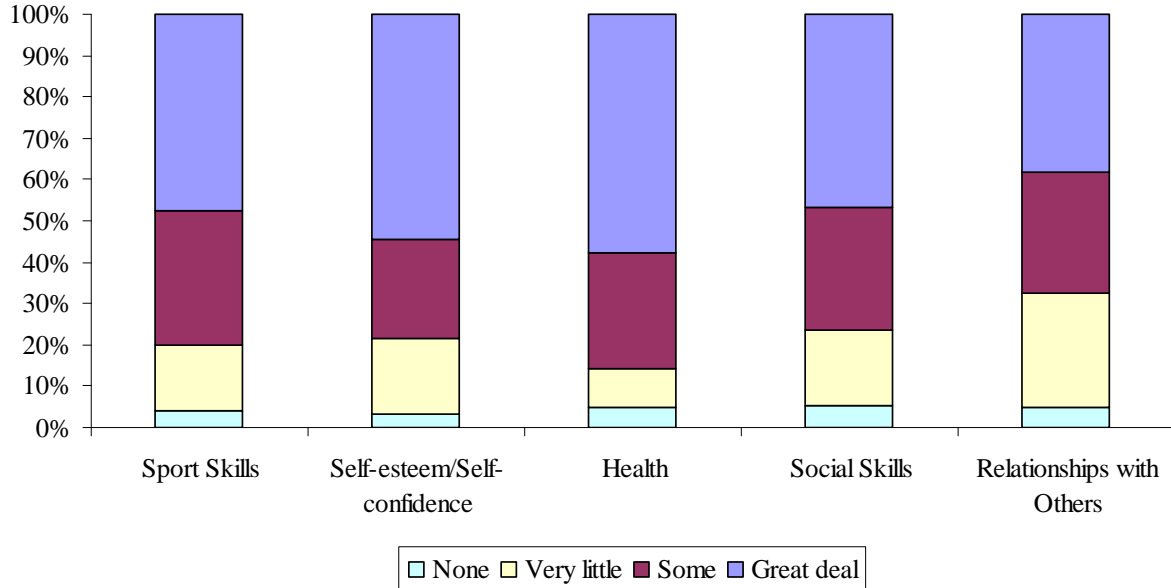
Figure 2. Family’s top goal for athlete participation (N = 331).



Families were asked to rate the extent to which their athlete had *improved* in five separate areas as a result of their participation in Special Olympics on a four-point continuum from no improvement to a great deal of improvement. Overall, families saw improvement in their athlete for every goal they ranked as important. As can be seen in Figure 3, it is interesting to note that families saw the most significant improvement in their athlete’s health, although this was not one of the top three identified goals. Significant improvement was also seen by families in the areas of social skills and self-esteem/self-confidence. Similarly, family members also reported that their athletes improved a great deal in their relationships with peers from school and the workplace, as well as in their relationships with other members of the family. Finally, although not a top goal, families also saw a lot of improvement in athletes’ sport skills as a result of their participation in Special Olympics.

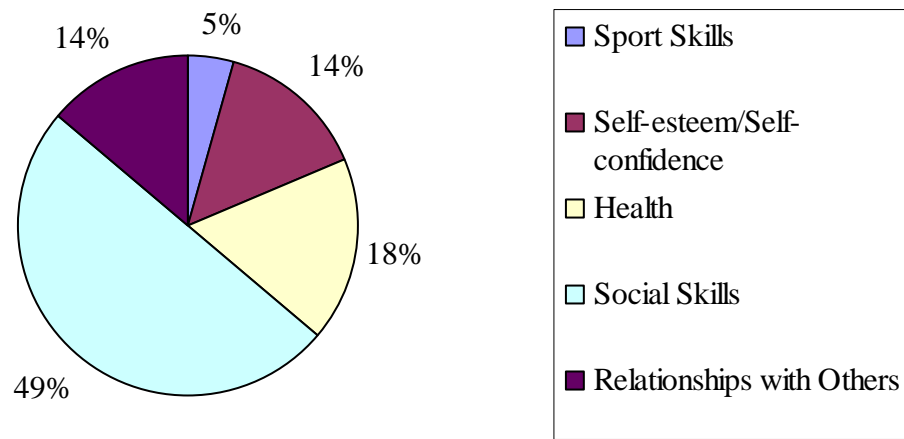
Overall, these results are similar to the findings of the Comprehensive National Study in the United States and the Unified Sports Evaluation in the United States and Europe, which also found that athletes have improved self-esteem and self-confidence, social relationships, and sport skills as a result of their participation in Special Olympics.

Figure 3. Family perceptions of athlete improvement.



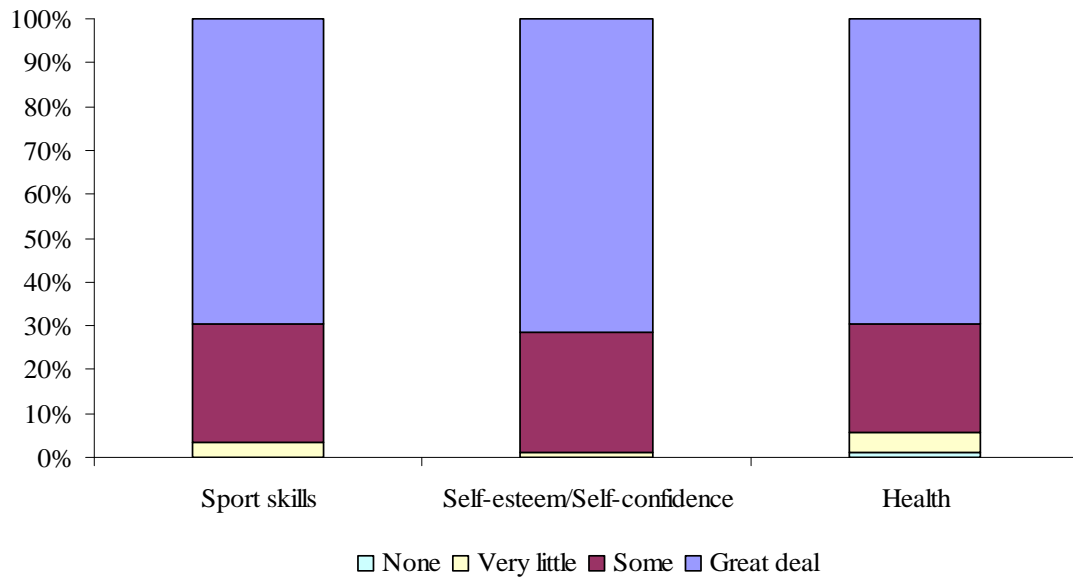
While coaches shared some similarities with families in the goals they held for the athletes on their teams, it is clear that there were also some differences. The most important goal coaches held for their athletes were improved social skills (adaptive behavior) (49%) (see Figure 4). The next top goals were improved health (18%) improved self-esteem and self-confidence (14%) and relationships with others. Considering that Special Olympics is a sports program, it is interesting that for the majority of coaches, as was the case with families, their goals focused on the social and personal aspects of sport participation, and *not* on sport skill development. While they may not have stressed sport skill development, however, coaches did emphasize the health and wellness aspects of sport participation more so than coaches in the U.S. This approach to sport as a way to promote physical well-being aligns with the cultural value of physical activity in China.

Figure 4. Coaches' top goal for athlete participation (N = 89).



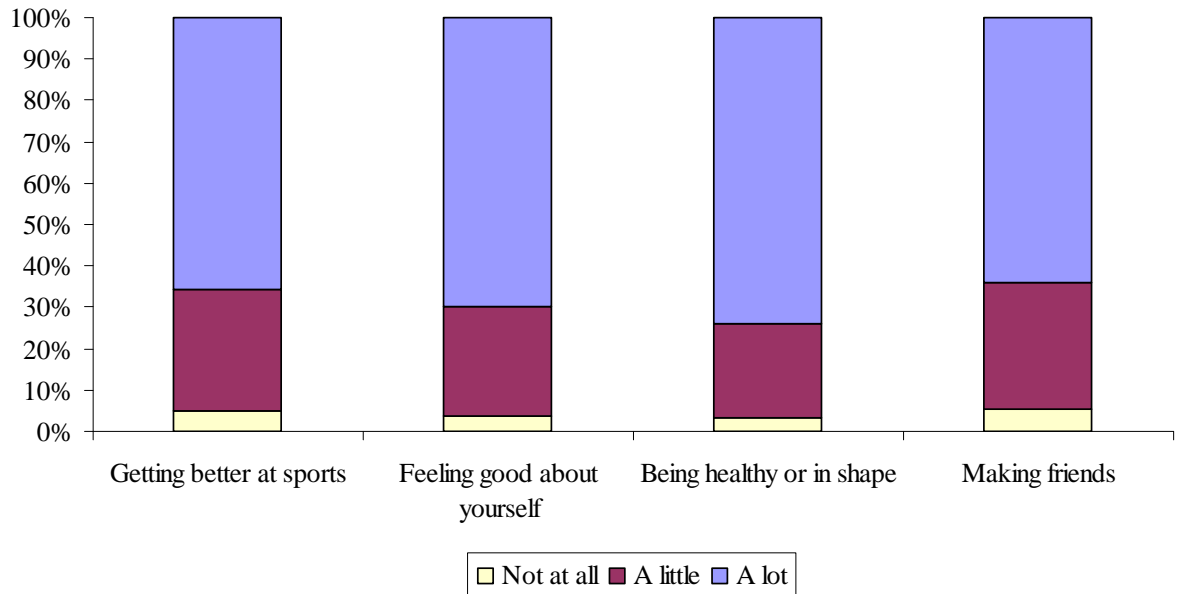
Coaches were asked to rate the extent to which their athletes had *improved* in all five separate areas as a result of their participation in Special Olympics on a four-point continuum from no improvement to a great deal of improvement. Overall, coaches saw improvement in their athletes in every goal area, as can be seen in Figure 5. It is important to note that the majority of coaches opted not to provide a rating of improvement in athletes' adaptive behavior or in their relationships with others, even though they rated adaptive behavior as a major goal for the athletes participating on their teams. However, it is clear that coaches saw significant improvement in the athletes on their teams across the board – in sport skills, self-esteem and self-confidence, and health.

Figure 5. Coaches' perceptions of athlete improvement (N = 89).



Athletes were asked to rate how their participation in Special Olympics had helped them personally in four areas (sport skills, self-esteem/confidence, health, and social relationships). For each area athletes were asked if their participation in Special Olympics did not help at all, helped a little, or helped a lot. Almost all athletes saw improvement in all four areas. As can be seen in Figure 6, it is interesting to note that athletes reported the most significant improvement in being healthy, which matches with their reasons for participating in Special Olympics as well as the improvement noted by families and coaches.

Figure 6. Athlete perceptions of improvement (N = 223).



Most athletes (79%) reported enjoying their Special Olympics experience a great deal, a finding that was substantiated by the athletes' family members (88%). More than 90% of athletes plan to participate in Special Olympics in the coming year. When asked what athletes liked most about Special Olympics, families reported that their athletes enjoyed playing sports (45%), making new friends and spending time with their friends (34%), and demonstrating their abilities through sports (31%). Similarly, athletes reported that they enjoyed playing sports (60%), making new friends and spending time with their friends (42%), and winning awards and being recognized for their efforts (21%). These findings were similar to those in the Comprehensive National Study in the United States.

Finally, families were asked about their perceptions of their athlete, both in terms of any changes family members have experienced in their aspirations for their child since he/she began participating in Special Olympics, as well as the positive impact having a child with an intellectual disability has on their lives and the lives of their family. Overall, families held more positive perceptions of their athletes as a result of their participation in Special Olympics. Many stated that their families had become more harmonious and that they are proud to have a child with an intellectual disability. Interestingly, family members also mentioned that having a child who participates in Special Olympics has brought honor to their families. In addition, some families witnessed changes in their athlete as a result of their participation in Special Olympics, changes they felt alleviated some of the difficulty or burden of having a child with a disability. Families whose children participated in Special Olympics held more positive hopes for their

athlete's future, the athletes' contribution to the family, and some even hoped that the athlete could become accepted as a member of society.

Table 11. Family perceptions of athletes since participating in Special Olympics.

<p>Pride and Family Honor</p>	<p>“The neighbors would praise him after he attended the activities, and we felt very proud too.”</p> <p>“She wins a gold medal and wins honor for the family.”</p> <p>“Our family feels very honored because of his participation in Special Olympics. Even children without intellectual disabilities do not have the opportunity to participate in an international competition, [but] this child has been everywhere.”</p> <p>“I feel happy and proud of her, and I did not expect that she has such a strong will [because of] her disability.”</p> <p>“He caused a sensation in Fushun. He was covered by the reporters and got mentioned in the newspaper and on TV, which I think is a positive influence on our family.”</p> <p>“When I took my son out, the people knew only me before, but now they only know my son.”</p>
<p>Hope for the Future</p>	<p>“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.”</p> <p>“[We] could not see the hope before, but after participating in Special Olympics, he made us see the hope and feel more stable. Seeing his changes, our family is very happy.”</p> <p>“His participation...is the honor of our whole family. It makes us see my child's confidence and hope...we know how to guide him...”</p> <p>“I hope he can stand on his own feet and...gains working skills, makes a living on his own and has an income.”</p> <p>“I hope she can interact and be included in society. I hope society will accept her.”</p> <p>“I hope he can make some progress in confidence and when he steps into society, he can improve his life and take care of himself.”</p>
<p>Positive Impact on the Family</p>	<p>“He makes progress in every aspect, which brings happiness to us and releases our burden.”</p> <p>“Now she is making progress in every aspect and our family life is more harmonious.”</p> <p>“Now she can do housework actively and her ability of dealing with things has improved. At the same time, she encourages me to [participate in] exercise in the community.”</p> <p>“He brings happiness to himself and...to all the family. Now we do not regard him as a burden.”</p>

	<p>“He has brought an active atmosphere to our family and we have mutual subjects to talk about now.”</p>
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Description of Athletes’ Experiences in the Community

To gain insight into athletes’ lives outside of their involvement in Special Olympics, families were asked to describe their child’s experiences in school, the workplace, and with healthcare. In addition, families were asked to describe their child’s involvement in other activities outside of Special Olympics as well as their beliefs about how society perceives individuals with intellectual disabilities.

School and Work Experiences

Over half of athletes are currently enrolled in schools (71%), with almost all of those in school attending special schools (97%). Interestingly, about half of families with children in school (54%) reported that their child had previously attended a mainstream school. The most common reason their child now attends a special school was due to academic difficulties (including poor grades and low test scores). Some of these families (16%) also mentioned the negative behaviors of other students toward their children as a factor. Family members of athletes who were no longer enrolled in school were asked about their child’s experiences in education. Most of these athletes (79%) had attended special schools and many (76%) stopped attending school because they had completed their compulsory education or graduated. A few (11%) stopped attending school because their test scores were too low for them to continue on to a higher level of education. This is perhaps more likely in rural areas, where there may be fewer opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to attend special schools.

For those athletes over age 16 and not enrolled in school, 21% are employed. Approximately one-third (37%) of those employed have been in the same job for six months to one year, and 26% have been employed in the same job for between two and five years. About half of these athletes (47%) are working in open (unsupported) employment an average of five days per week and eight hours per day. In comparison, the Comprehensive National Study in the U.S. found that only 18% (of 50% or 90% overall) of employed athletes (over the age of 21) were in unsupported jobs in businesses in their communities. The types of jobs athletes have include manual labor, food services, and cleaning and janitorial services. Nearly half of employed athletes (47%) received vocational training and services, which was provided primarily by vocational and special schools.

Healthcare Experiences

While there are documented government programs to promote the education and employment of people with intellectual disabilities in China, there is little known about their access to healthcare. The Multinational Study of Public Attitudes and the China Family Study raised the issue of adequacy of healthcare for people with intellectual disability. Respondents suggested that people with intellectual disabilities had at least the same, if not better, access to healthcare than the general population, but neither of these studies collected data about the health status of people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Therefore, in order to more fully understand their experiences in seeking out and receiving healthcare, families were asked about athletes' most recent visit to a doctor, as well as the ease of access to healthcare for their athlete. Nearly half of families reported that their athletes had access to health care within the last year (48%) and most received that care at a hospital (72%). While 64% of athletes sought care for an illness, injury, or emergency medical situation, only 27% of athletes visited a doctor for a checkup or physical. Dental care was even more infrequent, with over half (54%) of families reporting that their athlete had not visited a dentist within the last year. This is perhaps not surprising given the cultural approach to accessing medical care in China, where individuals visit the doctor only when necessary. It is interesting to note that most families felt it was almost as easy to get healthcare for their athlete (85%) as it was to get healthcare for themselves or the athlete's sibling (90%).

Over three-quarters of family members rated athletes' health as good to excellent (78%). Interestingly, family members rated their athletes' health as better than that of the athlete's sibling or themselves (64%). It is important to point out that no family members rated their athlete's health as poor, but 5% rated their own (or the athlete's sibling) health as poor. In all, these findings are similar to those from the Census Validation Survey where Chinese families reported that their athletes were in good health and had regular access to healthcare when needed.

Table 12. Athletes' Health Status and Access to Health Care.

	Frequency (%)
Last Visit to Doctor *	
Within the Past 6 Months	31%
6 Months to 1 Year Ago	17%
More than 1 Year Ago	45%
Place of Last Visit *	
Hospital	72%
Clinic/Private Practice	14%
Other	7%
Reason for Last Visit *	
Regular Checkup	27%
Illness, Injury, or Emergency Care	64%
Ease of Access to Care for Athlete *	
Very Easy	46%
Somewhat Easy	39%
Somewhat Difficult	11%

Very Difficult	3%
Ease of Access to Care for Family *	
Very Easy	51%
Somewhat Easy	39%
Somewhat Difficult	6%
Very Difficult	1%
Current Health Rating of Athlete	
Excellent	50%
Good	28%
Fair/Poor	22%
Current Health Rating of Family *	
Excellent	39%
Good	25%
Fair/Poor	34%
Last Visit to Dentist *	
Within the Past 6 Months	13%
6 Months to 1 Year Ago	10%
More than 1 Year Ago	54%

* Total does not equal 100% – due to “don’t know” or “refused” responses.

Involvement in Non-Special Olympics Activities

Athletes also had opportunities to be involved in organized sport and be physically active outside of their participation in Special Olympics. Before becoming involved in Special Olympics, nearly one-third (29%) of families reported that their athletes participated in organized sports, and 22% are currently involved in other organized sports through school teams. It is interesting to note that the participation in sport programs outside of Special Olympics for these athletes was similar to that of athletes in the United States. As most of the athletes are attending special schools, it is not surprising that these teams almost solely consisted of athletes with intellectual disabilities (75%). The athletes who took advantage of these opportunities to play sports outside of Special Olympics did so for an average of four years. In addition, approximately half of families (53%) reported that their athletes exercised outside of Special Olympics for an average of four hours per week. This exercise included playing other sports for fun with friends and family and went running, biking, or swimming.

In addition to asking family members, athletes were asked about their involvement in organized sports and physical activity outside of Special Olympics. Just under half of athletes (40%) reported participating on a sport team unaffiliated with Special Olympics. This number is higher than that reported by families. Since activities often took place at school, family members may not be aware of their child’s participation. The sports these athletes played included athletics, basketball, and table tennis. Most athletes (73%) also reported exercising and engaging in fitness activities (including running, walking, and calisthenics) and playing sports for fun with peers or their families. While these findings are similar to what was found of Special Olympics athletes in the United States, it is difficult to compare the physical activity of people with

intellectual disabilities to the general public in China because there has been no published research on the levels of physical activity of the Chinese general public outside of school-based intervention studies.

Table 13. Athletes’ involvement in sports *outside of* Special Olympics as reported by families.

	Frequency (%)
Played organized sports before SO	29%
Currently play non-SO organized sports	22%
Physical activity/exercise*	
None	27%
1 to less than 6 hours/week	30%
6 to less than 10 hours/week	10%
10 hours or more/week	8%

* Total does not equal 100% – due to “don’t know” or “refused” responses.

Some family members (39%) reported that their athletes were also involved in non-sport activities. These activities included art and handicrafts, dance, and music. Athletes reported their interests and involvement in these activities as well, with 71% stating that they were involved in the arts (including music, theater, dance, and art), and 34% enjoyed playing games. Again, the number of athletes reporting participation in non-sport activities is higher than reported by families, most likely reflecting activities that took place at school.

Families were also asked about their athletes’ social interactions with others their own age. The majority of families reported that their athlete socialized with others (75%). More specifically, 58% of families reported that their athletes engaged in social activities with members of their Special Olympics teams, and 68% of athletes socialized with peers from school. Athletes also socialized with family members, family friends, and people from their neighborhoods. More than half of families (52%) reported that their athletes socialized once per week or more with their peers, most often playing sports, watching television, or playing games. These social activities occurred in a variety of locations, including schools, parks and community centers, and the homes of both athletes and their peers.

In addition to asking family members, athletes were also asked about activities outside of Special Olympics. Two-thirds of athletes (66%) reported that they socialized with classmates or other peers from school, and 47% of athletes reported that they socialized with members of their families (parents, siblings, and other family members). One of the most common activities reported was playing sports, followed by games and watching movies together. It is important to note that athletes did not list peers from their Special Olympics team as individuals that they socialized with but, it is likely that these teammates are also peers from school.

Family Perceptions of Community Beliefs

Lastly, families were asked about their beliefs of society’s perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities. While families reported positive changes in their own perceptions of

their athletes, nearly half of families stated that they believed that society’s perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities were negative. Even when comparing the sample of families who responded to this question before the World Games in Shanghai to those who responded after World Games, there was little difference in families’ beliefs that Chinese society views people with intellectual disabilities negatively (50% versus 45%). Some families (29%) have not seen some change in societal perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities and stated that people with intellectual disabilities are now cared for and treated with more respect than in the past. Interestingly, almost one-quarter (22%) stated that while they believed many individuals hold positive views of people with intellectual disabilities, negative perceptions are still pervasive in society. It is also important to note that several families cited the efforts of the government to implement new policies, as well as the government’s decision to host the Special Olympics World Games in Shanghai, as important to promoting social change in the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities.

Table 14. Family beliefs about society’s perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities.

<p>Positive Perceptions</p>	<p>“Now people in society are very concerned about people with intellectual disabilities and willing to take good care of them.”</p> <p>“People nowadays have a much more loving heart, do not discriminate against children [with intellectual disabilities] like before, and care for children with intellectual disabilities in terms of service facilities.”</p> <p>“Now the sentiments of recognition of people with intellectual disabilities, compassion and help become more and more. [They] also can recognize their existence and are able to provide help within their abilities.”</p> <p>“Now it is different than before, people in society pay more attention and now when we come out with her, no one would say she is foolish.”</p> <p>“People in society are better now; they do not point at these children any more and care about them.”</p>
<p>Negative Perceptions</p>	<p>“[People] do not pay attention to them. They are unwilling to communicate with people with intellectual disabilities.”</p> <p>“They cannot accept people with intellectual disabilities and will exclude them.”</p> <p>“Some people look down on them and do not let their children play with people with intellectual disabilities.”</p> <p>“All look down upon them, [my son] is rejected when looking for jobs. I think society is not yet caring enough.”</p> <p>“Most people are still looking with quite different eyes. One point is that they despise, another is that they are reluctant to accept this child.”</p>

<p>Perceptions are Variable and/or Changing</p>	<p>“There are three attitudes, the first one is compassion, provide some help. The second is discrimination and repulsion, would not offer seats when seeing them and look at them with a surprising eye. The third one is non-discrimination, yet would not provide any help. ”</p> <p>“Through the propaganda of the government this year, it is better, but when he and I come out together, I still can see some strange eyesight, and the people in society still cannot help these people with intellectual disabilities actively.”</p> <p>“[The treatment of] people with intellectual disabilities has improved from before, but it does not attract the attention as in the developed cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, and the vigor is not enough.”</p> <p>“Many people discriminate against them, while many people also show understanding for them. China has made much progress in this aspect.”</p> <p>“Prejudice in society still exists, but after Special Olympics, the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities has improved.”</p>
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CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to provide Special Olympics China with a comprehensive view of athletes, their families, and coaches, as well as document the Chinese athlete's Special Olympics experience. Each of the findings in this study contributes to a comprehensive view of Special Olympics athletes in China, and provides insight into their experiences in sports, education, employment, and community membership. The major findings about athletes' experiences in Special Olympics are as follows:

- There is a successful partnership between Special Olympics and schools. The majority of athletes become involved in Special Olympics through programs organized through a special school.
- Throughout their involvement in Special Olympics, athletes take advantage of the variety of individual and team sports offered through the movement and participate in multiple sports.
- When participating in Special Olympics, athletes have the opportunity to compete not only in their community games, but also advance to regional, national, and even world-wide competitions. In fact, nearly half have competed at the national or world level.
- Special Olympics athletes are serious in their endeavor to be physically fit and competitive. On average, athletes attend training for 4 days per week, in sessions lasting between one and two hours.
- The Special Olympics experience is provided by experienced, trained coaches. Nearly one-quarter of coaches have experience playing on teams at the professional or national team level, and many have received coaching education outside of Special Olympics through university and sport federation licensing courses. In addition, coaches are prepared to work with people with intellectual disabilities through their careers as teachers, many in special schools.
- Special Olympics athletes become involved because their program is a school-organized activity and they participate because they value the opportunity to be fit and physically active and because they enjoy playing sports. This finding is especially significant because these are some of the same reasons that athletes without disabilities participate in sports.
- The benefits of participation in Special Olympics are substantial for its athletes. There is strong consensus between family members, coaches, and the athletes themselves that there is significant improvement in athletes' sense of self, social skills, and relationships with others as a result of their participation in Special Olympics.
- Special Olympics provides athletes with opportunities to interact socially with their peers from their Special Olympics team. These opportunities take place both on and off the field, as athletes play sports and games, watch movies, and "hang out" with their

teammates in their homes and in the community. These activities are similar to the social interactions of young people without disabilities. .

- Special Olympics also benefits the families of athletes. Family members' perceptions of their children and expectations for their children's future were significantly more positive after observing their participation in Special Olympics. Many family members are hopeful that their children will become more confident, more competent, and come to be accepted by society.

This study also provided new information about Chinese athletes' experiences off the field, which were particularly interesting when compared to the Chinese general public. The major are as follows:

- In China, athletes with intellectual disabilities primarily attend special schools. The opportunity to attend a special school allows these children to have continued access to services and support for their mental, physical, and social development. These separate schools also provide life skills education and vocational training, in addition to academic preparation.
- Among the Chinese general public, physical activity is considered an important aspect of a balanced lifestyle. Outside of their involvement in Special Olympics, athletes participate in fitness and sport activities for an average of 4 hours per week, and take advantage of other organized sport opportunities. Sports are available for athletes in a variety of contexts. Like those for people without disabilities, these opportunities range from competitive to recreational activities. Opportunities like these promote lifelong sport and physical activity participation.
- Healthcare in China is not preventative. Similar to the general public, athletes received care when needed at their local hospitals, primarily for illnesses and injuries. Families did not perceive challenges in accessing medical care for their children due to an intellectual disability.

Overall, Special Olympics athletes in China are similar to Special Olympics athletes around the world and share similar motivations, goals, and interests in sports as athletes in any other organized sports program. Through training and competition, Special Olympics athletes are provided with new experiences and opportunities to advance in sport. Moreover, this study confirms the findings in the Comprehensive National Study of Special Olympics Programs in the United States and further suggests that the Special Olympics experience is not only universal for athletes around the world but fills a critical need in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by providing opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and demonstrating competence to themselves, their families, and the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the results of this study validate what has been intuitively known for 40 years, as well as what has been reported in other recent investigations: Special Olympics has great value and utility for people with intellectual disabilities and their families. In the following section a number of recommendations are offered to guide Special Olympics to continue to build on its past and current successes.

*Special Olympics should adopt a single, standard data management system.
The full potential of a system (e.g. GMS) cannot be realized until all
Programs are utilizing the same software/system to maintain athlete records
and are doing so at the same level of detail and frequency.*

The results of this study further support the findings from the Census Validation Study that the information systems used by Special Olympics have not kept pace with the rapid growth of Programs, particularly those outside of the United States. Special Olympics China is the most staggering example, as Special Olympics China has had the most rapid and significant growth of any Special Olympics Program worldwide. However, Special Olympics has not expanded with respect to the effective use of information technology. At the present time, data management methods vary within and between Programs and as a result it is difficult to collect information in a consistent and efficient manner that can be easily compiled and disseminated. This is a particularly notable challenge in those Programs that have experienced significant growth within the last decade. For example, in contrast to the approach used in the U.S. Special Olympics Impact Study, no standard instructions for creating the list of athletes could be provided because of the disparate nature of the data management systems utilized throughout Special Olympics China's sub-Programs. As a result of the differences in each sub-Program's data management system, this process extended over nearly one year and required two sample sets. Creating a standard, computerized, and regularly updated system would also lessen the burden on Program staff charged with collecting and maintaining athlete information and registration data, as well as providing such data for future research purposes.

Furthermore, a standard system for maintaining athlete data would allow Special Olympics to ensure that each Program collects the same data on their constituents. Currently athlete data is primarily maintained for Program and competition registration as well as accreditation through the annual census process and in general, is limited to basic demographics and contact information. Once standardized, this data collection process could be easily expanded to include more in-depth information such as the location of an athlete's current program and their involvement in sports outside the movement. Collecting information about athletes' sport experiences will empower Special Olympics Programs; they will be better positioned to access up-to-date information about their athletes including, for example, information about which local programs are reaching the most athletes and in which sport or exercise activities outside the movement athletes participate. In addition, there would be a value of such a database; programs, as well as Special Olympics, Inc., could use this data in annual strategic planning for program development and community outreach. However, information collected from constituents must be reliable before it can provide a basis for constructive planning. Finally and perhaps most importantly, data maintained by such a database must contain

a high degree of accuracy. One of the most critical issues addressed throughout the data collection period of this study was the availability of usable telephone contact information for athletes, their families, and coaches.

A more complete profile of athlete characteristics should be made available at the sub-Program level, with access nationally. Special Olympics should collect information on, for example, the average age and location of initial involvement at program entry; ability levels; participation in training and competition; competition levels; sports/LPTA activities outside the movement; educational and employment placement; and team/program social activities.

This study presents a national profile of athlete characteristics in Special Olympics Programs in China. The information contained in the profile extends beyond what is currently available in the Special Olympics annual program census. Perhaps most importantly, this profile is a reflection of athletes' total experiences in Special Olympics over the course of their lives. By considering the development of athlete profiles on a national basis, Special Olympics, Inc. will be better positioned to access updated Program information that will facilitate national, regional, and global program development and result in a broader understanding of athlete characteristics, needs, and preferences. These profiles can be maintained at the sub-Program level, and can be updated each time an athlete submits his/her medical form or registers for a competition. In addition, creating a standard method for collecting this information will assist Programs in the annual accreditation/census process by providing regularly updated information on each individual who is registered in Special Olympics, and will ensure that the athletes and participants who are counted in the annual census and recruited for future research are those who truly have been active in Special Olympics Programs.

As strategies are developed to attract new athletes around the world, Special Olympics should strongly emphasize the importance of sports competition as a vehicle for personal and social growth among people with intellectual disabilities.

Special Olympics sports training and competition is highly valued by athletes and their families. The importance of this participation, however, extends far beyond the competitive aspects of the program into personal and social development. The study results affirm that while continuing its efforts to expand the number of Programs around the world, Special Olympics must also continue to foster a better understanding of athlete characteristics, needs, and aspirations. As the results of this study indicate (as well as studies conducted in the United States and Europe), athlete motivations for participation in Special Olympics are consistent with, but also extend beyond, the movement's stated mission of sports training and competition.

Special Olympics should strongly emphasize the quality of sports training and coaching that is provided to people with intellectual disabilities as strategies are developed to form relationships with community sport organizations and sport governing bodies around the world.

Training in sports allows athletes to develop the physical and strategic skills needed to participate and excel in sports throughout their lifetime, regardless of disability. For Special Olympics athletes in China, these skills are often taught by coaches who had significant experience in competitive sport. Having coaches of this caliber demonstrates that the Special Olympics movement is committed to providing quality sport opportunities for athletes with intellectual disabilities. As Special Olympics works to foster relationships with other sport organizations that serve individuals both with and without disabilities, it is critical that Special Olympics Programs strive to attract and retain experienced coaches who can provide high quality instruction so that the movement is seen as providing sport opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities that rival those available to people without disabilities.

In conclusion, it is important that ensuring a quality sport experience for all athletes continue to be an integral ingredient in the growth of Special Olympics. There is a benefit to providing a picture of Special Olympics that is not just about the breadth of its Programs, but also about its depth. What we learned from this study supplements what we have found in past studies and is reflective of what we have intuitively known, that the Special Olympics experience is a unique part of the life of a person with an intellectual disability. However, the results of this study also call attention to the internal need for Special Olympics to implement a more systematic monitoring system to ensure that as they continue to grow, Special Olympics Programs document and share information and about its initiatives with the research community and the public.

This study is a first step toward describing the lives of people with intellectual disabilities off the playing field in China. While previous studies have attempted to document the attitudes of youth and adults toward individuals with intellectual disabilities, this study is one of the first to document the experiences of athletes with intellectual disabilities in school, the workplace, and community. In China, a country where little is known or thought to be positive about people with disabilities, the findings of this study provide a unique glimpse into the actual experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities. It is clear, for example, that children with intellectual disabilities are provided the opportunity to attend school, albeit special schools, and to receive the support and training necessary to enter the workplace upon completion of their education. However, these children are not provided with the opportunity to learn and interact alongside their non-disabled peers. In addition, although most athletes are afforded opportunities for social interactions, most of these are with peers from their special school or Special Olympics team.

Although progress is being made, there are barriers to the inclusion and participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities that cannot be ignored. The Multinational Attitude Study (2003) indicated that the attitudes of adults in China towards individuals with intellectual disabilities were quite negative. These findings were further confirmed by the perceptions of some family members participating in the present. However, there is evidence to suggest that change is occurring, particularly among youth. The China Youth Attitude Study (2007) suggested that youth without disabilities were more positive about the capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities than the general public. While many youth are still cautious about interacting with people with intellectual disabilities because of the potential stigma involved, they are more open to the idea of students with intellectual disabilities attending their schools and recognize the positive impact inclusion would have on them personally.

It is clear that combined with previous research efforts, the present study about the public's perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities reflects the reality of a society in flux. While negative perceptions of people with disabilities still prevail, it is also possible to see the promise of change for the better in the near future, as China continues to settle into its role as a global economic power. Additionally, the general public's perceptions become more positive when they see the competence and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities, as was evident from results of the 2007 World Summer Games in Shanghai. Therefore, Special Olympics can promote attitude change among the general public by presenting profiles, like those described in the present study, of their constituents that demonstrate their value – as athletes, family members, and members of their communities.

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