

# Practice

## People Power

- ▶ Physiotherapists team up with Special Olympics

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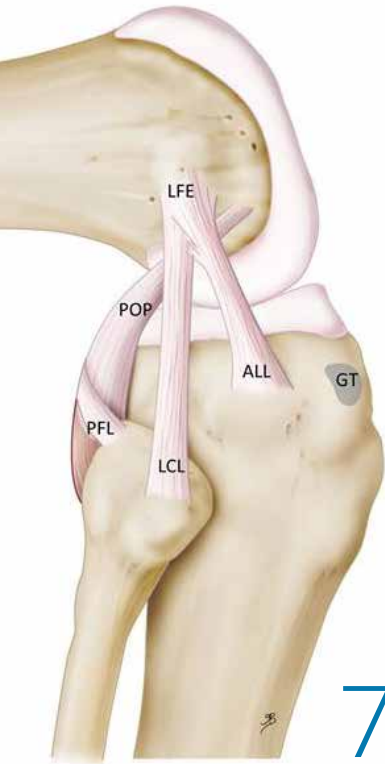
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# PHYSIOTHERAPY Practice



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“It was a magical sport moment I would never have experienced if I didn't volunteer for Special Olympics.”



# People Power

Physiotherapists team up with Special Olympics to make a difference for athletes with intellectual disabilities

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## BILLED AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS,

Special Olympics has a mission to enrich the lives of people with intellectual disabilities through sport. But it's also enriching the lives of thousands of volunteers, including physiotherapists like Shanna Thompson, who was selected as mission staff for Team Canada at the 2013 World Special Olympics Winter Games in South Korea.

That's where her favourite Special Olympics memory was made, courtesy of young Montréal speed skater, Philip Ste-Marie. The morning of his qualifying race, Philip admitted that the pressure to do his country proud was making him scared. But he went on to achieve a personal best and found himself in the finals later that same day.

"He was seeded fourth and was fighting for a third-place finish," Thompson recalls. "Just near the end of the race the two leaders fell. He comes flying around the corner, crosses the finish line, realizes he's got the gold and throws his hands in the air. And I'm in the stands with the rest of the team, including Catriona Le May Doan, hugging and high-fiving. It was a magical sport moment I would never have experienced if I didn't volunteer for Special Olympics."



▶ The emphasis is on providing every athlete, regardless of ability, the opportunity to succeed through sport.

#### About the athletes

To participate in Special Olympics programming, athletes must have significant limitations in both intellectual functioning (generally an IQ test score below 70 to 75) and adaptive behaviour (limitations in conceptual, social and practical skills) that originated before age 18. Associated disabilities may include autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome and fetal alcohol syndrome.

Limitations may define the participation criteria, but they don't define the athletes or their accomplishments. Carolyn King, co-chair of CPA's Paediatric Division, remembers a conference she attended recently where two medal-winning Special Olympics athletes gave the closing address. "I was in tears through the whole thing," she says. "Special

Olympics gives these individuals a way to excel, which isn't something they get a lot of in other aspects of their lives. We all need that self-confidence and knowledge that if I work hard at this, I, too, can be a champion."

Being a champion isn't only measured in medals. There are more than 36,000 children, youth and adults registered in Special Olympics programs running daily in Canada and most participate in local, regional and provincial/territorial competitions as opposed to attending national or international events. The emphasis is on providing every athlete, regardless of ability, the opportunity to succeed through sport. Fun, friendship and achievement—in that order—are the primary reasons athletes participate, according to a 2009 study published

in *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*. While many athletes take their training seriously, daily programs keep the focus on personal bests, making friends and staying active for life.

#### Benefits of programming

Special Olympics programs meet a diversity of needs in ways that are consistent with the principles of physiotherapy: starting young, teaching parents as primary caregivers, and taking a holistic approach to physical health that encourages lifelong activity, community participation and achieving client goals.

Active Start is a play-based program that helps develop basic motor and movement skills in children aged two to six.



International stats from Special Olympics indicate that 49 per cent of athletes have problems with flexibility, 38 per cent with balance and 29 per cent with strength. Fifty-three per cent of athletes require physical therapy.





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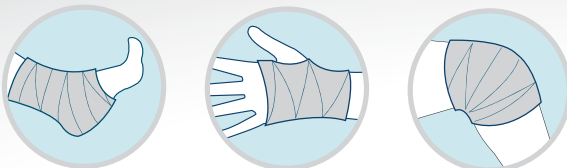
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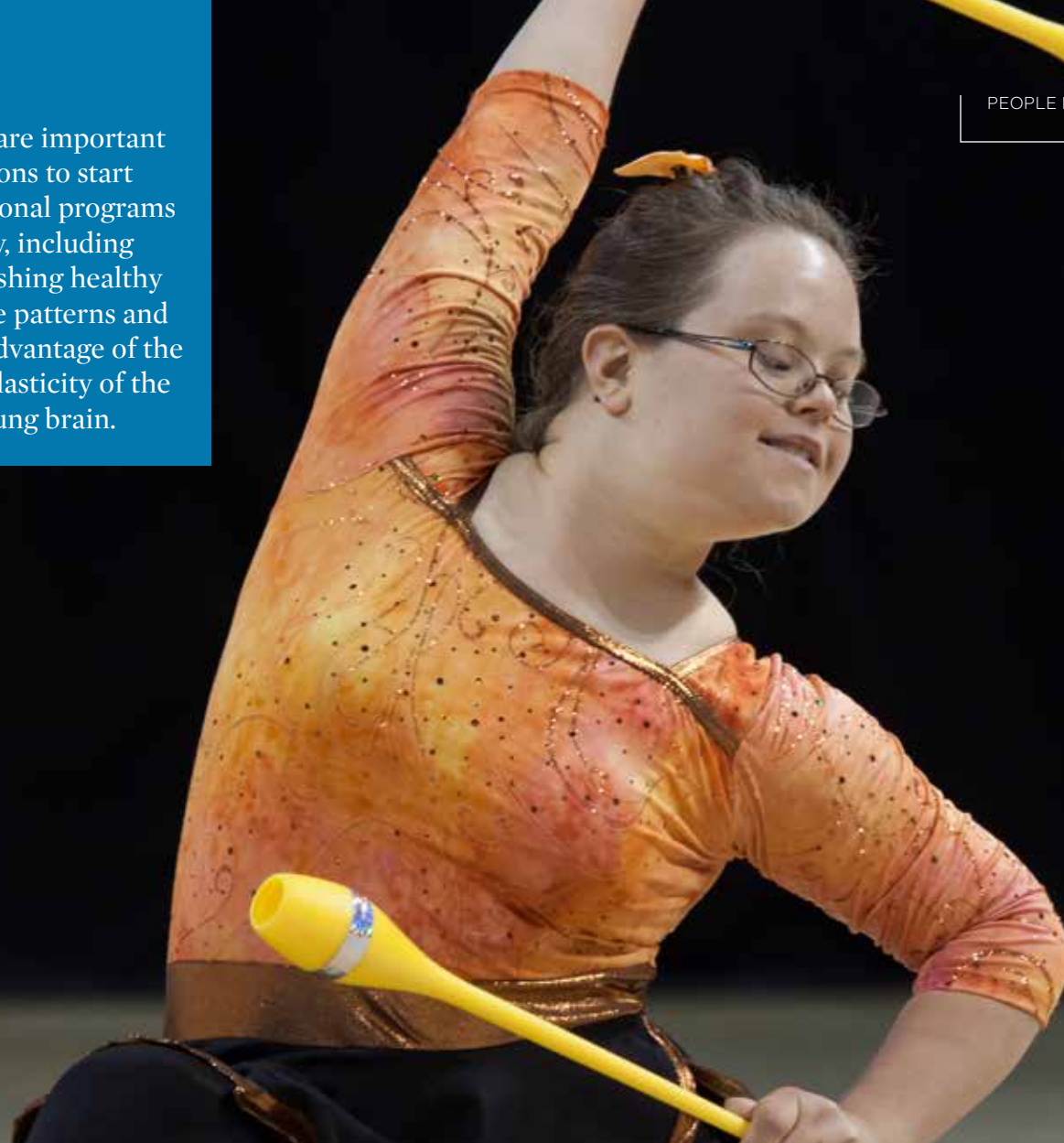
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There are important reasons to start recreational programs early, including establishing healthy lifestyle patterns and taking advantage of the neuroplasticity of the young brain.



Photos provided by Special Olympics Canada

FUNDamentals programs extend this learning for children aged seven to 12, offering more sport-specific skill development and a focus on nutrition. Both programs are run by community volunteers (including physiotherapists) using well supported out-of-the-box curriculum that has been developed by Special Olympics Canada.

There are important reasons to start recreational programs early, including establishing healthy lifestyle patterns and taking advantage of the neuroplasticity of the young brain. “Children should be active as young as two years of age,” says Barbara Kelly, who co-chairs CPA’s Paediatric Division with colleague Carolyn King. “For children with intellectual disabilities this is particularly important. The literature has consistently demonstrated that children and youth with intellectual disabilities have higher rates of being overweight and obese than children

without intellectual disabilities.” Both Kelly and King see a definite link between the Paediatrics Division’s mission, which includes providing information for patients and families to promote participation and functional independence, and Special Olympics programming for children and youth.

It’s important to get kids with intellectual disabilities off the couch, says physiotherapist Christine Therriault-Finke, who runs FUNDamentals programs for children in rural B.C. communities. Physical benefits of participation include enhanced coordination, strength and balance, but there are also intellectual, emotional and social benefits. “You’re seeing kids challenge themselves,” she says. “They’re motivated to pursue movement and mobility. They’re learning to follow increasingly complex directions. They’re learning to interact with peers, take turns and use the right amount of force when

they greet a friend. And then there’s the self-esteem piece—to be able to let your hair down and be who you are without the added pressure of having to fit in.”

Adults also experience social and health benefits through participation in Special Olympics community sports programs and competitions. “It’s great for growth and development of everyday community living skills,” says Thompson, whose brother has Down syndrome and is a seasoned Special Olympics athlete who competes in floor hockey, power lifting, athletics and snowshoeing. “Truly, my brother’s social network comes from Special Olympics. Every day he’s got something going on.” Travelling to competitions gives athletes new experiences and a chance to work on independent living skills like following schedules. It also helps them establish and achieve goals, be it learning a new skill, a new sport, achieving a personal best or winning a medal.

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Special Olympics athletes are often able-bodied, but there's a wide range of physical abilities and general conditioning.



Photos provided by Special Olympics Canada



#### Common conditions

Unlike Paralympics athletes, Special Olympics athletes are often able-bodied, but there's a wide range of physical abilities and general conditioning. "Some athletes are elite level and could outrun me a million times," says Thompson. "Then there's athletes with poor conditioning."

Special Olympics athletes are at increased risk of multiple, secondary health issues and typically receive sub-standard health care. International stats from Special Olympics indicate that 49 per cent of athletes have problems with flexibility, 38 per cent with balance and 29 per cent with strength. Fifty-three per cent of athletes require physical therapy.

Individuals with Down syndrome often have hypotonia and



The physical therapy component of the Healthy Athletes program is called FUNfitness. Athletes are screened for strength, balance, range of motion and cardiovascular fitness at four separate stations.

ligamentous laxity, so they may be more prone to overstretching, sprains and strains and require greater joint protection. Some athletes have differential tone, compensating for a weak core by tightening up their extremities to create stability. Coordinating complex movement patterns can be challenging for many athletes. Strength—including applying the correct amount of force—and proprioception are areas that many athletes struggle with.

Rob Balogh, a Toronto-area physiotherapist and assistant professor at the University of Ontario Institute for Technology, was involved in developing the Atlas on the Primary Care of Adults with Developmental Disabilities in Ontario, which documents the

challenges adults with intellectual disabilities experience with their health and healthcare (download the atlas at <http://knowledgex.camh.net/hcardd>). He cites research that shows that balance issues in adults with intellectual disabilities can lead to increased falls and fractures.

Knowing that athletes have distinct healthcare needs and barriers, Special Olympics developed Healthy Athletes, the largest global health program for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In Canada, Healthy Athletes events are free, fun and welcoming ways for athletes to be assessed for problems with vision, hearing, oral health, feet, healthy lifestyles and physical fitness. Events are organized and staffed by healthcare volunteers and held as stand-alone events and in connection

with other Special Olympics programs and competitions.

The physical therapy component of the Healthy Athletes program is called FUNfitness. Athletes are screened for strength, balance, range of motion and cardiovascular fitness at four separate stations. Pretty much every athlete leaves with at least one set of exercises to address an area of concern, says physiotherapist Kate Gaudie, who volunteers to coordinate Ontario's FUNfitness events along with Balogh. Without the involvement of physiotherapy volunteers, there wouldn't be a program, she says.

Balogh credits the program's success to the involvement of physiotherapy students. "They're the backbone of our events," he says. "We didn't know how interested

## Special Olympics Canada

### ► **Fast Facts**

**36,739** children, youth and adults with an intellectual disability are registered in Special Olympics Canada programs.

**17,398** volunteers, including more than 13,000 trained coaches, deliver Special Olympics programs across Canada.

**2,177** children are enrolled in Active Start (ages 2–6) and FUNdamentals (ages 7–12) programs in Canada.

**1969** was the year Special Olympics came to Canada (the movement was founded in 1968).

**50** per cent of adult Special Olympics athletes work. They're five times more likely to work than adults not enrolled in Special Olympics programs, according to Special Olympics International

**125** medals were won by Team Canada at the 2011 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Athens, Greece.

**3** new sports (basketball, golf and bocce) were added to Special Olympics Canada in 2013, bringing the total number of sports to 18.

**300** athletes aged 8–21 years are screened by physiotherapy students and physiotherapists at a FUNfitness event in Markham in 2013.

**4,364** basketball players are registered with Special Olympics Canada. Five-pin bowling is one of the most popular sports, with 13,437 players.



they would be, but the first time we held an event we had a waiting list for the waiting list.” Under the supervision of a physiotherapist, students administer fitness tests, help motivate the athletes and write recommended exercises on the athlete’s “scorecard.”

#### **Top tips for the physio**

There are some basic strategies that physiotherapists can use when treating clients who have an intellectual disability. Use simple words and break complex instructions into small, easy-to-understand steps. Address clients directly, even if they bring someone else with them to their appointment. Use person-first language (for example, say “people with a disability” rather than “disabled people”). Treat adults with an intellectual disability like adults, not children. And demonstrate exercises yourself and have clients show you they can do the movements correctly before they leave the office. (There are language guidelines available from the Special Olympics Canada website, [www.specialolympics.ca](http://www.specialolympics.ca))

In the end, however, it’s important to recognize that each person is an individual and take the time to get to know him or her. “I interact with athletes the same way I want people to interact with me, regardless of age or ability,” says Thompson. Talk about politics, what’s on their iPod, how badly the Leafs are doing—whatever the client is interested in—to develop a rapport.

Therapists working with Special Olympics athletes in particular should tailor their approach to the level of athlete, focusing on global functional skill sets for movement with the general athlete population and helping higher-level athletes with sport-specific skills. “You’re still following the principles of specificity,” says Thompson. “All the things we learn in school about training athletes are true of Special Olympics athletes, too.”

Physiotherapists working with children who have an intellectual disability should focus on motivation above all else, says Therriault-Finke. “We’ve got to make it both functional and fun,” she says. “It’s not about 15 minutes of therapy twice a day, it’s about teachable moments. If you’re working on balance, don’t say ‘Now is the time to stand on one foot.’ Instead, get them to kick a ball. They’re having fun, working on motor skills and standing on one foot, all at the same time.”

It’s important to pass this information on to parents as well—to get them to follow their child’s lead, integrate interventions into everyday life, and focus on their child’s small gains rather than on how the child measures up against peers. “Parents respond best when they’re part of the team,” says Therriault-Finke. “I always try to take a family-centred approach, engaging the family and working towards their goals for their child.”



## ► **The student scoop**

FUNfitness volunteers give the lowdown on the highlights

**FUNfitness** is a physical therapy screening program offered across Canada to athletes, some as young as age eight, as part of the Special Olympics Healthy Athletes program. In Ontario, physiotherapy students are critical—and enthusiastic—contributors to program success. Kayla Vermeltfoort and Ceilidh Kinlin, now physiotherapists practicing in Ontario and Alberta respectively, volunteered to help run fitness stations and provide training recommendations to Special Olympics athletes at FUNfitness events while they were students at U of T. Here's what they told us about their experiences.

### **Favourite memory...**

**Kayla:** Definitely the amount of fun every single person involved with the event had—I've never seen so much enthusiasm about fitness testing!

**Ceilidh:** I ran a balance testing station and many of the participants ended up watching and cheering on one little girl. To me, that really showcased the spirit of sport.

### **Biggest challenge...**

**Kayla:** Adapting the testing to the diverse range of abilities of each individual athlete.

**Ceilidh:** Varying communication needs was a challenge.

### **Greatest benefit...**

**Kayla:** I learned so much from the athletes that I felt I could take forward and apply to my career. It gave me a hands-on opportunity to work with a population that I didn't have much experience with before. It really increased my confidence.

**Ceilidh:** It was fun to have the athletes showcase their abilities and get to know them and their Special Olympics journey. They're pushing their bodies in many different ways and can benefit from specific training based on their fitness levels, which is something FUNfitness helps provide.

### **Impact on the way you practice physiotherapy...**

**Kayla:** It's made me a more well-rounded therapist and given me a more positive attitude regarding the different roles physical therapists have with this population, especially the overall wellness and prevention side of the picture.

**Ceilidh:** I think I'm a more effective communicator. The skills I developed during these volunteer events have even translated to situations where English was not a common language with my patients.

### **Top tip for students considering volunteering...**

**Kayla:** Do it! The Special Olympics website is full of a variety of volunteering opportunities.

**Ceilidh:** Seize the opportunity!

Physiotherapists can still use a number of objective measures and assessment tools with clients, including children, who have intellectual disabilities, says Kelly of the CPA Paediatric Division. Accelerometers, pedometers and heart rate telemetry are all useful tools to measure activity levels. The Gross Motor Function Measure and six-minute walk test are valid for children and adults with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities. Choose assessment tools the client will understand and skip the more intricate word-based measures.

### **Change lives, including your own**

Professionally, physiotherapists benefit from connections and networking that happen through Special Olympics events, as well as their experiences with the athletes and opportunities to take leadership roles in the organization. Seeing athletes achieving their goals through sports is also a wonderful way for therapists to keep a focus on ability, rather than disability, and a rare chance to gain insight into individual personalities that would never be possible in a clinical setting. Working with Special Olympics athletes also helps therapists develop positive relationships and communicate effectively with clients of all ages and abilities. "Special Olympics has provided me with opportunities to develop skill sets I wouldn't otherwise have," says Thompson. She cites communication, priority setting, operations and logistics, interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership as specific skills she's honed through Special Olympics. "Those experiences have helped me with every job interview I've ever had."

Then there's the personal side. Special Olympics events are full of laughter, fun and entertaining moments. "FUNfitness events are a bit of a party," says Balogh. "We get energy from the kids with intellectual disabilities. They're so positive and happy that people are there to help out." "I don't think I've ever had anyone say, 'I'm not coming back,'" says Gaudie, who felt like she was "floating" after her first time volunteering at a FUNfitness event. Thompson, who has played a number of roles from coach to medical liaison over the past decade, can't imagine her life without Special Olympics. "People will say, 'You're such a special person, those people are so lucky to have you,' but really I'm lucky to have them. They've changed my life."

Volunteers are critical to the success of every aspect of Special Olympics programming, and physiotherapists are well-suited to the task, given their ability to develop training programs, assist with injury management and work effectively on interdisciplinary teams. If you do decide to give it a try, Thompson cautions, be prepared. "Anybody that comes out finds it pretty hard to leave," she says. "Once you're in, you're in for life."