Special Olympics

PLAY Activities

A program to provide physical and emotional growth for children through play.

Special Olympics
The Special Olympics *Play Activities Guide* is dedicated to all those who love children—but especially those who love and care for special children. The purpose of this guide is to bring the physical and emotional joys of play to special children and the parents, family members, and friends who wish to share with them a close and creative relationship.

What better way than play for brothers, sisters, friends, and classmates to come to know the loving nature and joyous spirit of a special child? The sense of play that comes so naturally to young children has for all of history helped them build physical skills, a knowledge of self, and a knowledge of the world. These benefits are even more necessary to the special child.

Friendships are made more easily in play, which can link special children to each other, or to brothers and sisters and their friends and to neighborhood children. Play and friendship can go together.

One of the goals of the Special Olympics movement is to enable our athletes to experience the "skill, courage, sharing, and joy" that are integral to the world of sports. With the *Play Activities Guide*, we hope to introduce young children to this world, and to the fitness and confidence that in turn can engender so many positive changes in their lives and the lives of those they love. I hope this guide will give you the assurance that you can, indeed, help children grow through play.

_Eunice Kennedy Shriver_

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THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS PLAY ACTIVITIES PROGRAM IS FOR CHILDREN 6 AND 7 YEARS OLD WHO DO NOT YET COMPETE IN SPECIAL OLYMPICS.

These play activities increase young children’s strength and coordination for sports, and introduce children to group play and the cooperation and awareness of rules that it requires.

The Special Olympics *Play Activities Guide* is about games and activities rather than competition. These activities can be done in elementary schools, daycare facilities, and the home, and can be led by physical educators, recreation staff, parents, trained volunteers, and early childhood care workers.

This guide provides goals, activities, and other ideas to help you build a Play Activities Program for the children you are leading. In general, a Play Activities Program lasts eight weeks, with sessions held two or three times a week. Each session is divided into three parts: warm-up, skill stations, and group games.

Get to know the different sections of the guide and use those that are most useful to you. Experiment! Be creative! If your group enjoys an activity, expand on it! Develop similar games and share them with us! Most of all, have fun—and the children in your care will surely have fun with you.
Chapter 1
Play: What a Concept!

CHAPTER 1 —
Play: What a Concept!

Section A: The Benefits of Play
Play means so much to children! It lets them have fun, socialize, exercise, gain self-esteem, and improve movement skills. It encourages imagination, a love of physical activity, and the ability to get along with others and work together toward a goal. Play also leads to physical fitness, helping children to build muscles, burn calories, and improve motor skills—which improves strength and coordination for life skills.

Section B: Play and the Special Child
In addition to the physical benefits, play can help special children make friends in neighborhood or class groups—an opportunity many may not otherwise have. The group games teach children to communicate, cheer each other on, and show sympathy. It also encourages them to lead, think, and make decisions. Plus, the success of a group can help all the children feel important and proud of their part in the achievement.

Section C: Play and the Family
Families have very important roles in a special child’s play. They encourage the child to play and to practice play skills at home. And, as family members get involved in play, they develop an increased sense of pride and respect for the child’s abilities and potential, and become more interested and active in helping their special child achieve goals.

Siblings can be especially helpful in teaching play and socialization skills and in helping a special child to be accepted. A strong sibling relationship can also bring a family closer together, giving the parents more time to devote to activities for the entire family.

The activities and play sessions in this guide can be used at home and with mixed ability groups. Siblings, neighborhood children, or other relatives and friends can participate. Using this program three days a week will be fun for your child, and can also increase the child’s involvement with nondisabled friends.

Section D: Developmentally Appropriate Activities
The Play Activities Program is for young children with mild or moderate mental retardation and with some to average physical mobility. As play leader, you choose activities that best fit your group’s abilities. Each child performs whatever part of the movement or activity she can, and the leader and assistants provide help as needed.

(The Special Olympics Motor Activities Program is for people with severe physical disabilities; see the back of the guide for information.)

Section E: Skills Important in Everyday Life
To get the most from the program, children should learn skills that they’ll use in the home, school, and community; and that will increase self-sufficiency and acceptance. To tell whether a play activity will build
such skills, you should think about:
1. the child’s age, ability, and preferences for play activities;
2. how the family can build on those skills by continuing the activities at home; and
3. whether the community has playgrounds, swimming pools, etc., so the child can continue enjoying the activities.
As play leader, you will help the children to build on skills already accomplished and develop new skills through the play activities.

This section will give you some ideas for managing individuals and the group through a play session.

**Section A: Six Steps to Play Leading**

1. **Set Appropriate Objectives**

   Set objectives that let the children experience success. Use the Individual Skills Checklist (page 8) to determine the skills a child has, then give the next skill as an objective. Give assistance as needed, and use your judgment as to whether certain skills should even be attempted. Adaptive measures can help. For example, if a child can’t grasp an object, help her to throw a net over the object and drag it to herself.

2. **Use “Shaping” in Teaching Play Tasks**

   *Shaping* is rewarding a child for doing steps that lead to completing a task. This way, the child succeeds even though he may not independently finish the task. For example, If a child is trying to hit a ball off a tee, you praise him for holding the bat, then for moving the bat toward the ball, then for touching the ball, and finally for hitting it.

3. **Use Positive Reinforcement**

   Using positive reinforcement (a reward of some kind) after each successful try helps a child to learn a new task. Random reinforcement, such as after every third success, will help the child continue to do the task correctly.

   *Primary reinforcement*, the most basic type, is a reward such as food treats, toys, or getting to hear a favorite song. Next comes social reinforcement — words of praise, pats on the back, and gestures such as smiles and nods of approval.

4. **Provide Physical Assistance**

   The type of help you provide will depend on the children’s abilities and the task.

   In **verbal** or visual cueing, you ask the child to perform the task or show a picture of the task. In demonstration, you perform the activity so the child understands what to do.

   In **physical prompting**, you touch or assist the child through part of the movement. Finally, in physical assistance, or “hand-over-hand” assistance, you actually move the child’s body, such as moving his arms to hit the ball in volleyball.

   The ultimate goal is for all children to take part in as many activities as possible with as little assistance as possible. Try to gradually fade assistance.

5. **Correct Inappropriate Behavior**

   Inappropriate behavior can range from not doing what is asked to severe outbursts. In
general, you should try to reward positive behaviors while ignoring the negative.

For example, if a child is screaming while waiting to hit the ball, ignore her screaming while helping her hit the ball so she can earn a reward. The child will soon link hitting the ball with getting a reward. Gradually try to replace the reward with social praise.

On bad days, you may need to remove the child from the activity to let her calm down or not do certain activities if they provoke inappropriate behavior.

As play leader, you must avoid physical punishment. It could cause a child to develop avoidance behaviors, such as running away from you rather than looking to you for help. Also, physical punishment may cause a child to be aggressive toward others.

6. Chart Performance

An important part of the program is charting the children’s performance at least once a week. This helps you keep track of the skills each child has learned, what activities your group can do, and what assistance is needed. Use the Individual Skills Checklist on page 8.

You may want to use a reward chart with stars or stickers to give the children a visual record of their success. This can also help them work toward a group reward—an ice cream treat at the end of the session, or a Play Day when they invite family and friends.

You may use any of the charts in the guide, changing them as necessary and copying them for parents.

Section B: Play Planning Tips

Good preparation will help you become a more confident and energetic play leader, able to offer lots of support and enthusiasm to the children and your assistants. For best results, carefully plan both the program as a whole and the play sessions themselves.

1. Preparation for the Program

- Read this guide, and have your assistants do so as well.

- Find a place, such as a school or recreation center, with room and equipment for play sessions. List everything you will need, right down to a music cassette player and water cooler. Obtain all necessary equipment before the program begins.

- Recruit volunteer helpers from special education centers, related agencies, the Best Buddies program, high schools, and colleges.

- Schedule at least two play sessions per week for a minimum of eight weeks.

- Acquaint yourself with all the children who will be in the program. Ask parents, teachers, and therapists for information on each child’s health, behavior, and play skills.

- Make sure all children have had physical examinations before the first session. Get parental and medical releases, and highlight conditions that affect a child’s participation. Forms are available from your local Special Olympics Program.
2. Preparation for the Play Sessions

- Check your play area for safety. Arrange for any unneeded items to be put away.

- Give yourself plenty of time to set up before the children arrive.

- List activities for the session, with alternates in case some don’t work for the group.

- Go over each session in advance with assistants. Use the same basic structure for each session: warm-up, skill stations, group game, cool down. Children value routine!

- Introduce children to one another, show them the area, and tell them the schedule.

- Record each child’s abilities on the Individual Skills Checklist. Then organize play stations by ability, so children can move on to new skills as a group. You may want to name these groups for colors rather than using ability labels.

- Keep it fun! Use music, turn activities into games, and create group goals. If an activity is going well, stop it while interest is high. Keep things moving!

- When children attempt a skill, face them away from the other stations so they are not distracted. Demonstrate the play activities whenever possible.

- End each session with all the children playing a group game. Play each game a few sessions in a row so the children get used to it. Then introduce new games that call for skills the children have been working on. Go back to favorite games periodically.

- At the end of the eight-week program, you may choose to hold a Play Day. If you don’t, give the children a recognition award. Also evaluate the children’s progress and the program’s effectiveness; then make any changes before the next program begins.