



Special Olympics
Young Athletes



Young Athletes
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LESSON PLANS

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Dear Fellow Educators,

I am thrilled to present our newly developed Special Olympics Young Athletes resource, the year-round Young Athletes lesson plans. The Young Athletes lesson plans are an instrumental tool that will transform the global educational landscape. As an educator, an advocate for social and emotional learning, and Chairman of Special Olympics, I am deeply committed to ensuring that children of all abilities flourish and thrive together.

Young Athletes, a core Special Olympics program tailored to children with and without intellectual disabilities ages 2–7, is a beacon of inclusivity, serving all children through play and motor skill development. The unveiling of the year-round Young Athletes lesson plans offers a unique opportunity to empower educators to create truly inclusive classrooms. This comprehensive resource not only hones fundamental motor skills crucial for physical development, but also seamlessly integrates social-emotional and academic learning to foster holistic growth. By embracing these unique lesson plans, schools will nurture the physical well-being of all students, while instilling the important values of empathy, understanding, and collaboration.

Please join us and champion the use of this crucial new tool within your school community to enrich the educational journey for every student. It's time to ensure that every child, regardless of ability, feels a profound sense of belonging and purpose.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy Shriver". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "S".

Dr. Timothy Shriver
Chairman of the Board of Directors
Special Olympics International

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Young Athletes is an innovative sports play program designed for students aged 2–7 years and takes place around the world. The program includes active games, songs, and other play activities that help children develop motor, social, and cognitive skills. These lesson plans are designed with the elementary school classroom in mind as it is an opportunity for students of all ability levels to come together to grow and develop in friendship, leadership, and sports skills.

This resource contains 8 units to use over the course of an entire year. It has 30 weeks of 3 lessons per week to help students fully develop all skill areas. The lessons are aligned with Common Core, SHAPE, and Head Start standards and incorporates academic standards into many of the lessons. To compliment these lesson plans, there are home connection newsletters, skill cards, and videos to easily send home to help students continue to practice these skills at home.

Each unit is divided into these areas:

- **Introduction**
Learn what this skill area is about
- **Unit Overview**
A quick snapshot into what the unit will focus on and the equipment you will need. It will also include notes to help your lesson be a success.
- **Developmental Milestones**
Focuses on the developmental milestones for each skill that is covered in this unit. The skill areas are broken down into basic, proficient, and advanced to help identify specific areas of need and progress.
- **Standards**
A list of all of the Common Core, SHAPE and Head Start standards that will be met throughout the unit.
- **Weekly Lessons**
Provides 5 key components for each lesson (see next page for details)
- **Unit Review**
Wraps up the unit and provides materials to send home
- **Home Connection**
Print or attach this to a newsletter to let families know what specific skill cards to practice at home or ways they can encourage developing this skill in their student
- **Printables**
All of the printables you will need for the lessons in this unit

There are 5 components to each lesson in this resource.

- **Leadership Time**

This is the foundation of the resource because it provides a framework to talk about social emotional learning for students and build the trust and connection throughout your classroom. Each week there is a book to help spark discussion, encourage deep thinking, and provide a bridge to further conversations and connections throughout the classroom. Use this section as either the start of a full Young Athletes lesson all at once, or do this read aloud during snack, a brain break, or any other part of your day where you have an extra 5-10 minutes. QR codes for virtual book readings can be found in the resources.

- **Strength and Endurance**

This section is our warm up activity to get our bodies ready for the skills and games. Use this to warm up, but also keep these GoNoodle links, warm up posters, or songs available for extra brain breaks you may need throughout your day in the classroom.

- **Focus Skill**

This first activity or game is designed to introduce the skill being taught. This is either an explicitly taught skill such as how to properly underhand throw a ball or it is a game that incorporates the skill.

- **Optional Activity/Game**

The next activity or game is meant to reinforce the skill or review a game or skill that has been previously taught. Depending on timing, feel free to do this activity as part of your lesson or save it for another time in your day or week. All activities can be used as stand alone games to insert in your day when you have time or taught as one cohesive lesson.

- **Cool Down/Flexibility**

Similar to the Strength and Endurance section, this cool down is an opportunity for students to transition out of their Young Athletes time and cool down their bodies. Keep these different exercises around to use for a calming brain break or way to transition in your classroom.

- **Printables**

Throughout this resource, you will be referencing different posters to help students understand certain skills or games. Print these attachments out and laminate them at the beginning of the year to be ready for the lessons ahead of time!

EQUIPMENT

Equipment	Suggested Substitutions
 <p>Balance beam</p>	<p>Tape Rope</p>
 <p>Small foam ball</p>	<p>Tennis Ball Any small ball</p>
 <p>Bean Bags</p>	<p>Small, soft toys or figures Bags filled with rice, sand, or beans Natural items like flowers or leaves</p>
 <p>Sport Cones</p>	<p>Boxes Plastic soda bottles filled with sand</p>
 <p>Large plastic blocks</p>	<p>Foam or wood blocks Bricks</p>
 <p>Plastic dowel</p>	<p>Stick Paper towel roll</p>
 <p>Paddle</p>	<p>Short stick</p>
 <p>Floor markers</p>	<p>Stickers or tape Carpet squares Chalk-drawn shapes</p>
 <p>Hoops</p>	<p>Hula hoops Bicycle tubes Old tires</p>
 <p>Scarf</p>	<p>Dish towel Small piece of cloth</p>
 <p>Playground ball</p>	<p>Beach ball Any lightweight ball Balloon</p>

EQUIPMENT

Equipment		Suggested Substitutions
	Parachute	Large piece of fabric Sheet
	6 dice	Print out these and fold to make dice
	Jump ropes	Rope
	Tape measures or yard sticks	Rulers Printable rulers
	Bowling pins	Plastic cups Plastic bottles
	Basketball for each student	Playground ball for each student
	Soccer ball for each student	Playground ball for each student
	Unifix cubes	Other math manipulatives (cubes, chips, etc.)
	Small basketball hoop	Basket Box
	Way to play music (speaker, phone, computer)	

KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER IN THE CLASSROOM

Space and Safety

- **Not too big; not too small**
Take time to read each activity. Make sure the space matches the needs of the activity and the number of children in the group.
- **Indoor versus outdoor**
Young Athletes is good for both indoor and outdoor spaces. Be mindful of spacing. Define borders for safety.
- **One space vs. two spaces**
Many teachers have run Young Athletes by dividing their class into two groups. Use a classroom and hallways to run two smaller groups of children at a time.

Structure

- **Establish a routine**
Routines provide clear expectations, consistency and comfort for many children.
- **Plan for rest breaks**
Provide a space where children can rest if they become tired or overstimulated by the environment or activity.
- **Encourage different modes of movement to transition between activities**
This strengthens different muscles and encourages children to learn a new skill.
- **Use music to signal transition**
Songs can be used to signal when one activity is finished and another is about to begin.
- **Unified partners**
Have older children or children without ID support younger children by showing activities and serving as leaders and unified partners.
- **Hydration and healthy snacks**
Offer water and fruit at the end of the session, if available. Good hydration and nutrition are important for physical health and learning.

Young Athletes App

Young Athletes has an app that is a great resource for parents and caregivers to use at home. It supports your child's growth by providing suggested activities based on your child's individual skills that you can complete at home and on your schedule. Find the [printable flyer](#) at the end of Unit 1 for the QR code and links to send home!

EQUIPMENT MODIFICATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Changes to equipment can decrease injury and increase success. Balls, Frisbees, balloons, pucks, bats, rackets, paddles, sticks, bases, nets, goals and fitness equipment can be changed to meet the needs of each child.







- **Change the ball size**
Make the ball or sport object (puck, shuttle) larger or smaller.
- **Length or width**
Change the length of the striking implement (bat, stick) to be longer, shorter or wider.
- **Weight**
Offer striking equipment or balls that are lighter or heavier.
- **Grip**
Make the grip larger, smaller, softer or molded to fit the child's hand.
- **Composition and texture**
Offer a variety of balls and striking equipment that are made of foam, fleece, plastic, rubber, cardboard or other materials.
- **Colors**
Use equipment in many colors for organization or to visually engage children.
- **Height or size**
Lower the height of a net, goal or base. Use larger bases marked with numbers or colors. Increase the size of a goal or change the height to increase accuracy in aiming at a target.
- **Sound, light, pictures, signs or colors**
Use colored scarves, pictures and other visuals to emphasize location.

INCLUSIVE ADAPTATIONS

Young Athletes provides a space for children of all abilities to be successful. In some cases, due to a range of student abilities and challenges, activities may need to be adapted so that all students can participate.

The Inclusive Adaptations cards are a great resource to help you get started with providing suggestions for activity adaptations. The primary goal of the activity adaptations is to encourage students with the motor and sensory challenges below to participate in the SAME activity as their classmates. All students can benefit from either assisting or receiving assistance and seeing that activities can be performed, and goals can be achieved in different ways.



	<p>Limited Mobility (LM): Students with limited or uncoordinated movement of their arms or legs; a student may use a wheelchair or stander for positioning and mobility.</p>
	<p>Assistive Device (AD): Students who are ambulatory with an assistive device (walker, crutches, cane, gait trainer) or wear a brace.</p>
	<p>Hard of Hearing (HOH): Students with difficulty hearing.</p>
	<p>Visual Impairment (VI): Students with difficulty seeing.</p>
	<p>Non-Verbal (NV): Students who have difficulty with oral communication; they may use sign language or a communication device.</p>
	<p>Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD): Some students may be overly sensitive to minor environmental stimuli (touch, sounds, etc.), while others may seek sensory stimulation, including movement.</p>



Whenever you see this icon in the lower right corner of a lesson, refer to the Inclusive Adaptations cards to help you adapt the activity for all students.

MODIFICATIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Consider the following suggestions when planning Young Athletes sessions that include children with autism:

Structure and Consistency:

- Schedule Young Athletes for the same time every day to maintain consistency.
- Repeat the same structure for every Young Athletes session. Start with a warm up and opening song. Have individual skill practice and group games. Then, close with a song. A consistent routine helps children know what to expect.
- Provide a clear beginning and clear end to activities.
- Use visuals and pictures to walk children through the activities for that day's session.

Surroundings and Physical Stimulations:

- Limit distractions, like bright lights or loud sounds.
- Avoid sudden noises, like a whistle or clapping.
- Designate a quiet room or have a calm area where children can go during times of overstimulation.

Instruction:

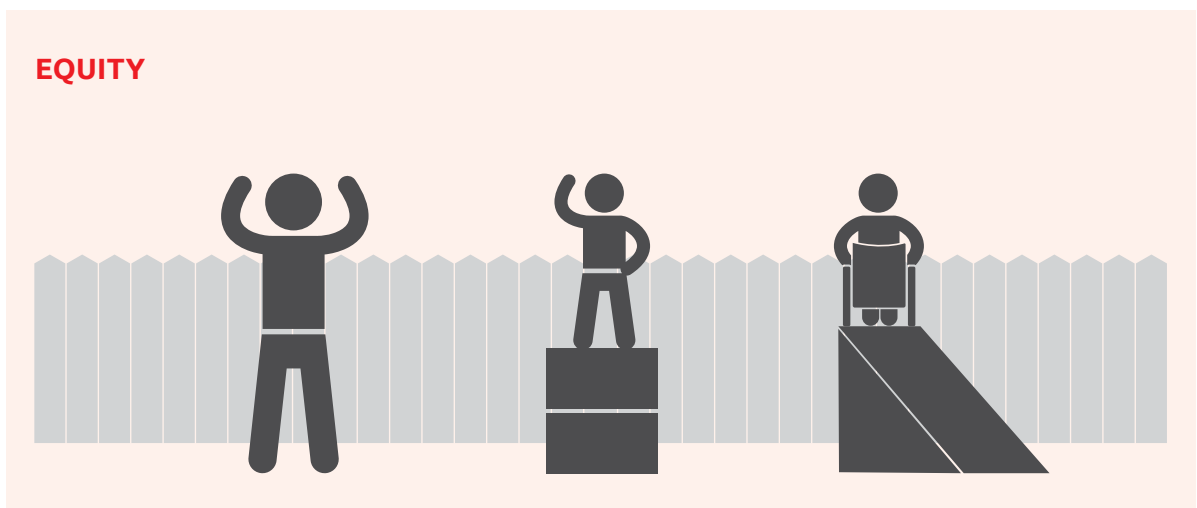
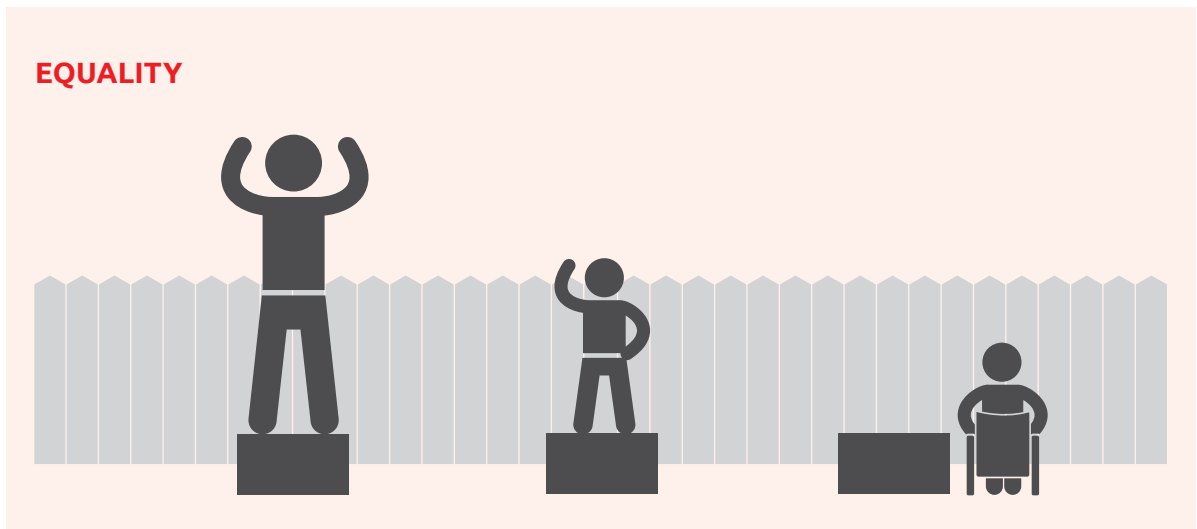
- Define clear boundaries for activities.
- Give clear and concise directions for each activity. This helps children understand what is expected of them.
- Develop rules about social interactions, behavior and communication. Use those rules to provide structure to the group.
- Provide individual support for children from volunteers, staff or other children.

UNDERSTANDING EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Equity and inclusion play an important role in establishing a foundation for learning and understanding among students. Creating a socially inclusive environment for all students enhances the learning process and allows opportunities for all children, regardless of ability, to learn, grow, and be successful. As the YA lesson plans are implemented, it is essential to understand the principles of equity and inclusion and how these concepts translate into the everyday classroom settings.

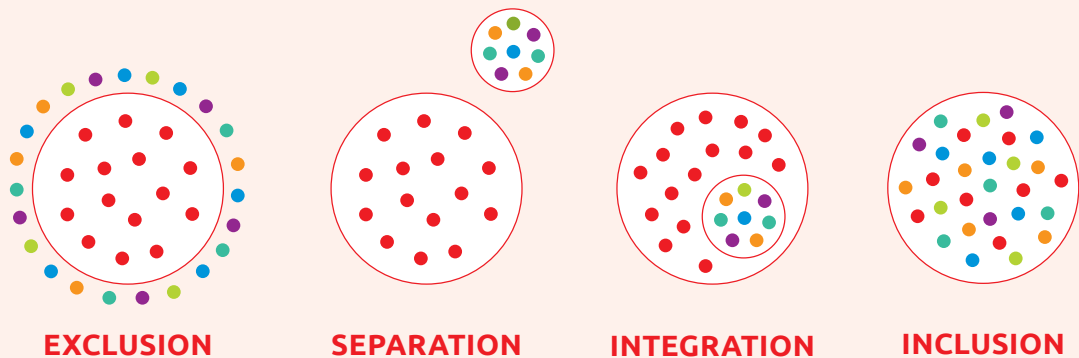
Equity:

Equality means everyone is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different needs, abilities, and circumstances and allocates the resources and opportunities needed to each individual to reach an equal outcome. Equity ensures that all students have access to opportunities, resources, and supports needed to enhance learning and support individual needs. With relation to the YA lesson plans, equity will ensure each student receives the modifications and adaptations to meaningfully participate in activities.



Inclusion:

Inclusion is accepting all people as equals—regardless of ability, ethnicity, age, religion, or gender identity—and ensuring that they have access to the same services and opportunities as everyone else. Inclusion in the classroom is the acceptance of all students, no matter their abilities, and creating a space for all students to learn and thrive. All students should be respected as valuable members of the classroom, fully participate in classroom activities, and interact with peers of all ability levels to support holistic development. With relation to the YA resource, inclusion will ensure every student can be involved in YA activities and participate in activities with their peers with and without IDD.



Exclusion occurs when students are directly or indirectly prevented from or denied access to education in any form.

Segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular or various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities.

Integration is a process of placing person with disabilities in existing mainstream educational institutions, as long as the former can adjust to the standardized requirements of such institutions.

Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences.

Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organization, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion. Furthermore, integration does not automatically guarantee the transition from segregation to inclusion.

BEST PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Creating an inclusive classroom allows for the opportunity to recognize and value the diverse learning needs of each student. For educators, it may involve adapting teaching methods and materials to ensure that all students, including those with IDD, are fully engaged and supported. Below are a variety of strategies to support building an inclusive classroom and implementing the YA lesson plans with fidelity to inclusive practices.

- Design your lessons to support and meet the needs of students with and without IDD. If you need additional support, connect with other school staff, such as special education teachers, paraeducators, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and more to create a support team.
- Follow the STEP principle to modify and adapt individual lesson and activities and ensure each student can meaningfully participate. This may include adapting implementation of the daily lessons and taking things slower to ensure students learn the skill fundamentals.
- Identify the outcome for each student in each activity. Tiered learning will allow students to work at different levels of the same task, while still playing together.
- Provide experiences where students can learn more about disabilities and the experiences children with disabilities face. For example, have everyone wear a blindfold during an activity to give the same experience as a child with visual impairment.
- Support children in taking on leadership opportunities within the activities. Allowing children to choose their roles in activities can empower children to participate in a way that feels comfortable and enjoyable for them.
- Consider the way you communicate with students and the way in which students communicate with each other. Use both verbal and non-verbal communication forms and provide consistent cues for students. Use concise and simple language to avoid confusion.
- Introduce stories and songs from various cultures to develop empathy and respect for different backgrounds and perspectives.
- Provide opportunities for each child to showcase their strengths, whether in storytelling, singing, or physical activities, fostering a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

ADAPTATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

When implementing YA activities, it is important to cater to individual needs of each student to ensure safety and create an inclusive and individualized learning environment. Every student, regardless of their skill and ability level, can participate in Young Athletes. Before beginning activities, educators should document information about the needs of their students and determine any accommodations or modifications in activities, equipment, or classroom arrangements that may be necessary to ensure meaningful participation. Adaptations to most activities can be made using the STEP principle.

Widely used in adapted physical education settings, STEP is defined as the following:

- **SPACE:**
Changing the space where an activity takes place, depending on the activity
» *Example: Modifying a field to be smaller to accommodate athlete needs.*
- **TASK:**
Increasing participation through individualization of activities during a lesson
» *Example: Depending on individual needs, allowing athletes to either walk or run while completing an activity.*
- **EQUIPMENT:**
Changing the equipment used, so that success is increased during the activity
» *Example: Using a balloon instead of a smaller ball during a striking activity to increase a student's hand-eye coordination.*
- **PEOPLE:**
Changing the number of children in an activity to allow for a better experience for everyone
» *Example: Allowing children to work alone or in smaller groups. Have students with and without IDD work as leaders and followers depending on ability.*

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE SELF-REGULATION

The Young Athletes lessons can support the development of self-regulation skills in students. Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage emotions, behaviors, and body movements when faced with a situation that is challenging or overwhelming. The lessons support self-regulation in the following ways:

- **Structured Physical Activities:** Engaging in structured physical activities helps students learn to follow rules and understand the importance of discipline, which is key in self-regulation.
- **Group Play for Emotional Management:** Participating in group activities allows students to experience emotions like excitement, disappointment, or frustration in a safe environment. This teaches them to manage their feelings effectively.
- **Routine and Consistency:** The regular and predictable structure of the lessons can be calming for students, providing a sense of security that fosters better self-regulation.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** The resource emphasizes positive reinforcement, which encourages students to understand the consequences of their actions and regulate their behavior accordingly.

Additional activities can be added to lessons and activities to support further development of self-regulation skills, based on the needs of the students.

- **Breathing Exercises:** Teach students to breathe in deeply through their nose, imagining their belly is a balloon filling up with air, and then slowly exhale through their mouth to deflate the balloon.
- **Mindful Listening:** Play a game of mindful listening where the child listens to various sounds around them (e.g., birds chirping, wind blowing) and describes what they hear. This can help children feel calm and settled.
- **Yoga and Stretching:** Introduce simple yoga poses that require concentration and balance, which can help in calming the mind and body.
- **Storytime Meditation:** Use guided stories where students have to visualize a calm and peaceful scenario. This can help them relax and manage their emotions.
- **Cool-Down Corners:** Encourage parents to create a 'cool-down corner' at home with comforting items like soft pillows, books, or soothing music. This space can be used when the child feels overwhelmed.

Intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) is a term used to describe a range of conditions that are usually present (but often not detected) at birth and uniquely affect the trajectory of a person’s physical, intellectual, and/or emotional development. This term is often used for young children who exhibit delays or missed milestones, and those that have not received a formal diagnosis.

- **Developmental disabilities (DD)** refer to a broader category of conditions that can cause an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas.
- **Intellectual Disability (ID)** is a term used when a person has certain limitations in cognitive functioning and skills, including conceptual, social, and practical skills, such as language, social and self-care skills. These limitations can cause a person to develop and learn more slowly or differently than a typically developing person. Intellectual disability can happen any time before a person turns 22 years old, even before birth. Some, but not all, children with developmental disabilities will be diagnosed with ID as they get older.

According to the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, an individual has intellectual disability if he or she meets three criteria:

- IQ is below 70.
- There are significant limitations in adaptive behavior in one or more of the following areas: conceptual, social or practical skills (skills that are needed to live, work, and play in the community).
- The condition manifests itself before the age of 22.

IDD can be caused by injury, disease, or a problem in the brain. Some causes of IDD—such as Down syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, birth defects, and infections—can happen before birth. Some happen while a baby is being born or soon after birth. Other causes of IDD do not occur until a child is older; these might include severe head injury, infections or stroke. Although the exact cause is unknown, autism may develop from a combination of genetic and environmental influences.

The most common causes of IDD are:

- **Genetic conditions.** Sometimes abnormal genes are inherited from parents, there are errors when genes combine, or other reasons. Examples of genetic conditions are Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, and phenylketonuria (PKU).
- **Complications during pregnancy.** Sometimes a baby does not develop inside the mother properly. For example, there may be a problem with the way the baby’s cells divide. A woman who drinks alcohol or gets an infection like rubella during pregnancy may also have a baby with an IDD.
- **Problems during birth.** Sometimes there are complications during labor and birth, such as a baby not getting enough oxygen.
- **Diseases or toxic exposure.** Diseases like whooping cough, measles, or meningitis can cause IDD. They can also be caused by extreme malnutrition, not getting appropriate medical care, or by being exposed to poisons like lead or mercury.

We know that intellectual and developmental disabilities are not contagious—you can’t catch an IDD from anyone else. We also know it’s not a type of mental illness, like depression. There are no cures for IDD but children with IDD can learn to do many things. They may just need to take more time or learn differently than other children.

GUIDANCE ON GLOBALIZING THE YOUNG ATHLETES RESOURCE

Special Olympics recognizes the diversity of not only our Young Athletes around the world but our educators and their schools as well. In an effort to utilize this resource globally, the guidance below has been given to create localized Young Athletes lessons that highlight games from your culture and home country. The turnkey global lesson plan template can be used to integrate additional lessons into the already created Young Athletes resource.



Throughout this resource, you will also see games from all 7 of the Special Olympics regions! Each one has this globe icon in the lower right corner. It is encouraged that everyone using this resource incorporate these fun and engaging global lessons, no matter where you are in the world.

To get started with implementation of your local stories, games, and songs into the Young Athletes resource to your part of the world, educators should follow a few key steps:

1. Review the lessons and printables in each unit.
2. Confirm that the standards align to your country or region's educational standards.
3. Assess the resources to make sure you have everything you need!
4. Identify local books, songs, games, and activities to help personalize lessons to your region.
5. Use the example and lesson templates to create lessons that have a focus on your region or country.

Global Lesson Plan Development

The Young Athletes lesson plans follow the framework below. In order to localize lesson plans, place local books, songs, and games in the following highlighted areas that align with that week's Young Athletes skill. You can print out the [blank template](#)¹ to create your own individual lesson or simply bring your own local book, game, or song to any lesson of your choice.

- **Leadership Time**

Leadership Time is used to set expectations and develop the student's personal understanding of inclusion. This is a great place to bring your own local story or song that showcases inclusion! Add local books and/or stories to this section that highlight inclusion in your local country.

- **Strength & Endurance**

Strength and endurance can be developed through music and movement! Insert a local song with movement here.

- **Equipment & Setup**

Your local book, song, or game might have localized or natural equipment specific to your home country. Use these materials to enhance this Young Athletes lesson.

- **Young Athletes Skill/Game**

Insert a local game played in your local or home country here.

- **Cool Down**

