



Special Olympics Early Childhood Development (ECD) Cross-Departmental Collaboration

*Week 1: The Early Childhood Development Team
Health-Prevention Team*



Special Olympics
Young Athletes

Where the Special Olympics Journey Begins

Understanding Early Childhood Development Across Our Movement

In the following pages, you'll hear from colleagues across the Special Olympics Early Childhood Development Team and explore how their work connects to the larger Special Olympics movement.

Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Refers to the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and language development that occurs in a child's early years.

Special Olympics has long supported this developmental period through Young Athletes.

Due to the expansion of resources for young children now offered through Special Olympics, the term *Early Childhood Development (ECD)* programming has been adopted.

Programs do not need to change the terminology they use locally; this language is for internal clarity and consistent communication about resources and strategy.

Programming Can Consist of the Following:

- Young Athletes
- Junior Athletes
- Child and Family Health model
- Healthy Young Athletes
- Family Health Forums for families of young children
- Elementary or Primary school programming administered through SONA UCS or GYE



Overview of Special Olympics Early Childhood Development

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) team supports Special Olympics programming and resources for **children from birth through age seven and their families**, with a focus on reaching families as early as possible. Through programming such as **Young Athletes, Child & Family Health (CFH), the Young Athletes App, and the Healthy Start Toolkit**, the team helps connect families to inclusive play, health, developmental resources, and the broader Special Olympics movement.

Why Cross-Departmental Collaboration Matters to ECD

ECD is often one of a family's **earliest connections to Special Olympics**, and supporting children and families is a shared responsibility. Collaboration across Health, Sport, Families, Education, Communications, Development, and other areas helps us reach families earlier and prepare future **Special Olympics athletes and Unified partners** with the foundational skills, confidence, healthy habits, and sense of belonging they need to grow and thrive.

When we reach a young child, **we reach their family too**. Parents, caregivers, and siblings can become some of our strongest **advocates, volunteers, coaches, and champions for inclusion**. By working together from the start, we strengthen the programs that follow and create **one connected Special Olympics journey for children and families**.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Use the **Young Athletes App** with current Young Athletes families so they can continue activities at home—and share it with families who are not yet participating.
- ✓ Connect families with **Healthy Start** resources that support development, health, and family education.
- ✓ Look **across departments** for existing events, relationships, and communication channels where ECD resources can be incorporated rather than creating something new.
- ✓ **Use Junior Athletes as a bridge between ECD and Sport.**
 - Junior Athletes is Special Olympics' inclusive, non-competitive multi-sport program for children ages **6–12** who are building the skills and confidence needed for future sport participation.
 - As our newest opportunity for ECD and Sport collaboration, it helps children who may not yet be ready for traditional sport continue developing fundamental sport skills while creating a more intentional pathway from **Young Athletes → Junior Athletes → Special Olympics sport**.

Try This!

Map your ECD pathway. Look at what happens from a child's first connection with Special Olympics through their next opportunity to participate. Identify **one gap or connection your team can strengthen** by working across departments.

Key Takeaway

Every Program staff member has a role in strengthening Early Childhood Development. ECD is most effective when it is connected across departments, not treated as the responsibility of one person or team. By sharing resources, relationships, expertise, and opportunities across **Sport, Health, Education, Families, Communications, Development, Leadership, and other areas**, we can reach children and families earlier and create stronger pathways through Special Olympics.

Meet our contributors

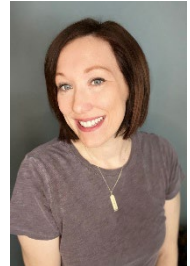
Cassandra Ryan | Senior Manager, Early Childhood Programs

Cassandra focuses on programming and family-centered resource development for children from birth through age seven, with an emphasis on reaching and supporting children and families from the moment of diagnosis. Her work includes the **Young Athletes App, Child & Family Health, and Healthy Start Toolkit**.



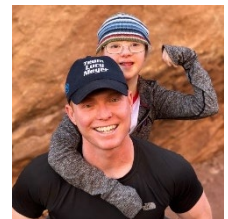
Jennifer Hansen | Director, Early Childhood Development

Jennifer leads Special Olympics' global Early Childhood Development strategy, supporting Programs and Regions in creating inclusive opportunities for young children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. Her work focuses on strengthening and expanding **Young Athletes, Junior Athletes, and leading global technical assistance** to support quality implementation, capacity building, and sustainable growth across Programs. With **more than 20 years of experience** supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Jennifer is focused on ensuring children and families have an early entry point into Special Olympics and a **connected pathway** to lifelong participation and inclusion.



Ryland Towne | Manager, Young Athletes

Ryland supports inclusive programming during the foundational early years of a child's development. His work focuses on helping Programs **strengthen and expand opportunities** for young children with and without intellectual disabilities and their families through **resources, training, technical assistance, and collaboration across the movement**. Ryland's work emphasizes ECD as a **shared effort across Special Olympics**, helping create a connected journey where every child has opportunities to learn, grow, and experience inclusion from the beginning.



Resources

- [ECD Resource Dashboard](#) — A central hub for **Early Childhood Development resources, tools, training, and program guidance** to support quality ECD implementation across Special Olympics Programs.
- [Child & Family Health](#) — Resources designed to **support young children and their families** through health and family education.
- [Healthy Start Toolkit](#) — Tools and resources **supporting inclusive health** beginning early in life.
- [Young Athletes App](#) — The Young Athletes app as a **key resource for current, new, and future Young Athletes families**
- [Junior Athletes Webpage](#) — Access the **Junior Athletes Intro Guide, lesson plans, implementation resources, and additional tools** to support children ages 6–12 as they build physical literacy and progress toward future Special Olympics sport participation.