



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

*Week 2: Sport & Leadership & Organizational
Development (L&OD): Families, Athlete Leadership, and
Unified Leadership*

Where the Special Olympics Journey Begins

Understanding Early Childhood Development Across Our Movement

In the following pages, you'll hear from colleagues across **Sport and Leadership & Organizational Development (L&OD)** and explore how their work connects with Early Childhood Development.

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 Sport Programming

The Sport Development Team supports Special Olympics sport across five key areas: **Coach Education & Development, Competition Management, Sport Development, Sport Partnerships, and Sport Operations.**

How Special Olympics Sport and ECD Programming Connect

Early childhood programming helps children develop fundamental movement and sport skills, confidence, and a love of being active—**creating a strong foundation for lifelong participation in sport and physical activity.** Sport also helps build the **pathway** from Young Athletes and Junior Athletes into more structured, age-appropriate sport.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ **Plan for the transition** from Young Athletes and Junior Athletes into more structured sport.
- ✓ Work closely with Regional and Program Sport teams to **create sustainable, age-appropriate youth sport opportunities.**
- ✓ **Use Sport expertise** to strengthen Junior Athletes, Fitness, youth coaching, and other cross-departmental resources.

Try This!

Connect your ECD and Sport teams and map **what happens after Young Athletes and Junior Athletes.** Is there a clear next step for children to continue into sport? Identify one gap you can work on together.

Key Takeaway

For athletes, coaches, and families, **Special Olympics should feel like one seamless experience.** Strong collaboration between ECD and Sport helps create a developmentally appropriate pathway from early movement experiences to **lifelong participation** in sport

Meet our contributors

The Sport Development Team brings expertise across coach education, competition, sport development, partnerships, operations, grants, data, and planning.

Jon-Paul St. Germain, Vice President, Sport Development
 Maggie Brennan, Senior Manager, Sport Development
 Jack Duffy, Manager, Sport Development
 Marie Merritt, Senior Director, Sport Operations,
 Cyndi Mendoza, Manager, Sport Grants and Projects
 Benjamin Leshan, Coordinator, Unified sports and Sports Grants
 Fiona Murray, Senior Director, Coach Education and Development
 Jeff Lahart, Senior Manager, Coach Education and Football
 Valia Vrekou, Manager, Coach and Sport Development
 Niamh Mourton, Senior Manager, MATP
 Christian Guiralt, Senior Director, Sport Competition
 Venisha Bowler, Director, Sport Competition
 Brittany Pair, Senior Manager, competition Management
 Kester Edwards, Manager, Sport and Development



Resources

- [Sport Resource Pages](#) — sport-specific coaching guides, sport rules, warm-up and cool-down resources.
- [Special Olympics Online Learning Portal](#) — access to coach education and learning opportunities.
- [Coaching Course Information Page](#) — information on available coaching courses.
- [Coach Recruitment and Retention Guide](#) — guidance to strengthen local coaching capacity.
- [Coach Webinar Series Dashboard](#) — coaching webinar content, also available on YouTube.

Overview of Athlete Leadership & Unified Leadership

Leadership & Organizational Development supports Special Olympics Programs by strengthening leadership, organizational capacity, and inclusive practices. **Athlete Leadership** develops athletes' skills so they can lead within Special Olympics and their communities, while **Unified Leadership** helps people without IDD build inclusive mindsets and behaviors that create more opportunities for people with IDD to lead.

How Athlete Leadership, Unified Leadership, and ECD Programming Connect:

Leadership begins early. Childhood experiences help build the **cognitive, social-emotional, and self-determination skills** that provide a foundation for future leadership. Athlete Leaders can also serve as powerful role models for young children and families, demonstrating what is possible for people with IDD and helping establish expectations of inclusion, independence, and leadership from an early age.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Engage **Athlete Leaders as Young Athletes coaches or volunteers**.
- ✓ **Invite Athlete Leaders to speak** or facilitate sessions with families and caregivers, including at Family Health Forums.
- ✓ **Create leadership pathways** that allow athletes to build skills while supporting ECD programming.

Try this!

Connect with your Athlete Leadership team and identify an Athlete Leader who is interested in working with young children and families. Invite them to a **Young Athletes activity**, provide appropriate training and support, and identify a meaningful role that matches their interests and strengths.

Key takeaway

Athlete Leadership should not stand alone. Meaningfully involving athletes across **ECD, health, sport, youth, and other areas of Special Olympics** helps ensure their leadership is supported, successful, and sustainable. By engaging Athlete Leaders early, we also give young children and families an opportunity to see people with IDD leading and shaping our movement.

Meet our contributor:

Cristina Rodriguez | Director, Global Leader Development, Leadership & Organizational Development

Cristina leads global leadership development strategy across seven Regions for Athlete Leadership and Unified Leadership. Her work includes education, training, cross-departmental collaboration, and external engagement designed to advance inclusive leadership and expand meaningful opportunities for people with IDD.



Resources

- **Leadership & Skills Curriculum for Athlete Leaders** — Leadership and personal development training that athletes can apply within their Program, community, and workplace. [Leadership & Skills Curriculum](#)
- **Unified Leadership Overview** — Information and resources to help people without IDD build inclusive mindsets and behaviors. [Unified Leadership Overview](#)

Overview of Family Engagement

Family Engagement helps **engage, educate, and empower families as valued members of the Special Olympics movement**. The team develops resources and leadership opportunities for parents, siblings, and caregivers while helping ensure family voices inform Special Olympics programming and initiatives.

How Family Engagement and ECD Programming Connect

Families and caregivers play a critical role in a child's development. Family Engagement helps connect families to **information, resources, peer support, and Special Olympics opportunities**, while building their confidence and capacity to support their children. Engaging families early helps create a strong foundation for development, inclusion, belonging, and continued participation in Special Olympics.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Engage **family leaders in planning** and delivering ECD activities.
- ✓ Partner on **family education, communications, events, and peer support**.
- ✓ Engage family leaders to host a Family Health Forum or develop resources for families who are new to Special Olympics.

Try this!

Start with the family engagement opportunities you already have. Ask families, **"What information, resources, or support would be most helpful to you?"** Then identify one way to incorporate that need into an existing ECD, Health, or family activity.

One thing we wish every Program knew...

Family Engagement can help **make connections between families and other areas of Special Olympics**. You don't need to create a separate family engagement effort—there are often simple ways to bring families into the work you're already doing.

Key Takeaway

When families are **connected, informed, and empowered**, they are better equipped to support their child and remain engaged over time. Collaboration between Family Engagement and ECD can create a more connected experience for families while helping Programs build on existing resources rather than duplicate efforts.

Meet our contributor:

Hannah Helton | Senior Manager, Family Engagement, Leadership & Organizational Development

Hannah leads global efforts to engage, educate, and empower families across Special Olympics. She develops family engagement strategies, resources, and leadership opportunities for parents, siblings, and caregivers and works across the movement to ensure **family voices help shape programs and initiatives**.



Resources

- **Special Olympics Family Resources** — Resources and information designed to support and engage families throughout their Special Olympics journey. [Explore Family Resources](#)

Thank you to our colleagues across Sport and Leadership & Organizational Development for sharing your expertise and helping us demonstrate what collaboration can look like in action. While our teams may sit in different areas of the organization, our work connects around a shared goal: creating strong, inclusive pathways that allow children and families to grow with Special Olympics.



3 Things We Hope You Take With You

1. Think beyond your department.

ECD is strengthened when Sport, L&OD and other teams bring their expertise together. Start by making the connection—you don't have to create something new.

2. Build the pathway, not just the program.

Consider what comes before, during, and after a child's current experience. From Young Athletes to Junior Athletes, Sport, Health, Leadership, and beyond, families should experience Special Olympics as one connected movement.

3. Use the people and resources already around you.

Connect with your Program and Regional colleagues, collaboration can start small and grow over time.