



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

*Week 3: Global Youth Engagement (GYE), International
Development, and Global Government Relations*

Where the Special Olympics Journey Begins

Understanding Early Childhood Development Across Our Movement

In the following pages, you'll hear from colleagues across **Global Youth Engagement (GYE), International Development, and Government Relations** 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 Global Youth Engagement Programming

Global Youth & Education (GYE) advances inclusion by empowering young people with and without intellectual disabilities to **learn, play, lead, and create change together**. GYE supports Programs through education, youth leadership, and school-based programming, including **Unified Champion Schools and Unified Sports**, while providing technical assistance, resources, training, and partnership support.

How Special Olympics GYE and ECD Programming Connect

ECD is an important starting point in a young person's journey toward **lifelong inclusion**. Early experiences help children develop their understanding of friendship, belonging, and difference. **As children enter school**, GYE can build on that foundation through inclusive education, Unified Sports, and youth leadership—**creating a continuum that begins in early childhood** and continues through school and beyond.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ **Create intentional pathways** from Young Athletes, Junior Athletes, and ECD programming into Unified Champion Schools and Unified Sports.
- ✓ Connect ECD families with school-based opportunities as their **children transition into primary school**.
- ✓ Engage shared **schools, educators, coaches, and community partners** across ECD and education programming.
- ✓ Share **relationships, data, resources, and stories** so ECD and education efforts reinforce one another rather than operate separately.

Try This!

Think about the **next step for the children currently participating in your ECD programming**. Where will they go when they enter school? Connect with your Regional GYE colleagues to identify existing Unified Champion Schools, Unified Sports, or youth opportunities that could help children and families remain connected to Special Olympics as they grow.

Key Takeaway

Our biggest opportunity is to create a **continuum of inclusion**. A child's experience with Special Olympics should not feel like a series of disconnected programs. From their earliest experiences of inclusive play through school, sport, youth leadership, and beyond, we can create pathways that allow young people to continue **belonging, participating, and growing**. **Your Regional GYE colleagues can be important partners in building the bridge between early childhood and what comes next.**

Meet our contributors

GYE works globally and through Regional teams to strengthen inclusive education, youth leadership, and school-based programming. The department provides technical assistance, resources and tools, training, program guidance, partnership support, and opportunities for global learning and collaboration.

Resources

- GYE provides Programs with **technical assistance, resources and tools, training, program guidance, partnership support, and opportunities for global learning and collaboration**, working closely with Regional and local teams.

Overview of Special Olympics International Development

International Development & Global Government Relations positions Special Olympics as a **trusted implementation partner** for governments, multilateral organizations, development banks, UN agencies, and international NGOs. The team helps Programs strengthen partnerships, identify funding opportunities, and expand disability-inclusive development through health, education, sport, youth leadership, refugee inclusion, and social cohesion.

How Special Olympics International Development and ECD Programming Connect

ECD programming provides practical, evidence-informed solutions that can help external partners advance **inclusive child development, early learning, responsive caregiving, family support, health equity, and disability inclusion**. Programs such as **Young Athletes, Child and Family Health, and family engagement initiatives** demonstrate that Special Olympics can support children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families from the earliest stages of life.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Position ECD programming to **align with the priorities of governments**, UN agencies, development banks, and international NGOs.
- ✓ Identify **funding opportunities and develop partner-ready concept notes and proposals**.
- ✓ **Build partnerships** that expand ECD programming in schools, community settings, and family environments.
- ✓ Strengthen **outcomes, budgets, implementation plans, and reporting** to demonstrate measurable impact for children and families.

Try this!

Identify one local or national partner whose priorities include early childhood, education, health, disability inclusion, or family support. **Connect with your Regional and International Development colleagues to explore how your existing ECD work could align with that partner's priorities.**

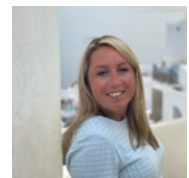
Key Takeaway

Special Olympics **ECD programming can be more than a stand-alone program**—it can be a solution to broader development priorities. By connecting our work to the language, goals, and funding priorities of external partners, Programs can build partnerships that **expand reach, strengthen sustainability, and create greater impact** for children and families.

Meet our contributor

Haylie Wrubel | Vice President, International Development & Global Government Relations

Haylie works to position Special Olympics as a trusted implementation partner for governments and global development organizations while helping Programs identify partnerships and funding pathways that expand local impact. She has been with Special Olympics International for 15 years and began her involvement as a Special Olympics Coach—a role she continues today.



Resources

- **Coming in early 2027:** A modular International Development resource package will provide Programs with **sample language, talking points, key data, and positioning statements** to support funding proposals, concept notes, and conversations with global partners.
- The package will help Programs communicate how Special Olympics ECD programming contributes to **inclusive child development, family engagement, health equity, disability inclusion, and long-term community impact**.

Overview of Government Relations

Global Government Relations works with Special Olympics Regions and Programs to strengthen relationships with governments and position Special Olympics as a **strategic implementation partner**. The team helps mobilize public-sector commitments and resources, advance the **Global Coalition for Inclusion**, and create opportunities for government leaders to engage directly with Special Olympics athletes and programming.

How Government Relations and ECD Programming Connect:

Government Relations can help create the **policy, partnership, and funding environments** that allow ECD programming to reach more children and families and become sustainable over time. Because ECD intersects with government priorities in **education, health, disability inclusion, family support, sport, and social development**, it provides a strong opportunity to demonstrate that inclusion should begin early and continue throughout a person's life.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Bring Government Relations **into ECD planning early** to identify relevant government priorities and stakeholders.
- ✓ Present Young Athletes, early childhood health, inclusive education, and future Special Olympics participation **as a connected pathway**, rather than separate programs.
- ✓ Engage government partners to support ECD **through funding, policy, schools, health systems, facilities, referrals, communications, and opportunities to scale**.
- ✓ **Showcase ECD programming during government visits**, roundtables, Global Coalition for Inclusion convenings, and advocacy events.

Try this!

Bring your ECD, Health, Education, Sport, and Government Relations colleagues together before your next government engagement. Identify one shared priority and **develop a simple story that shows how your work connects to create a pathway for children and families**. When speaking with officials unfamiliar with Special Olympics, use accessible language such as “early childhood development programming” before introducing specific Special Olympics program names.

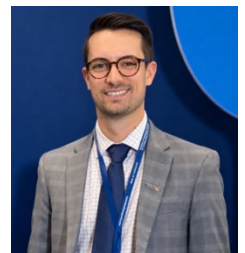
Key takeaway

ECD can help governments advance priorities across multiple sectors while demonstrating that **inclusion begins early**. A coordinated approach can position Special Olympics as more than a provider of individual programs—it can show how our movement helps governments build more inclusive communities and systems.

Meet our contributor:

Christian Clesi | Senior Director, Global Government Relations

Christian leads government engagement supporting the **Global Coalition for Inclusion** and works with Regions and National Programs to strengthen government partnerships worldwide. He also leads national and international government engagement events, including EU Day, helping position Special Olympics as a leading implementation partner and mobilize public-sector commitments and resources for inclusion.



Resources

[Global Coalition for Inclusion](#) — Learn more about the Coalition, its goals, and participating members.

Thank you to our colleagues across Global Youth & Education, International Development, and Global Government Relations for sharing your expertise and showing how collaboration can strengthen the journey for children and families. Together, these teams demonstrate how ECD can connect children to future education and youth opportunities, build partnerships and funding pathways, and engage governments to create more sustainable and inclusive systems.



3 Things We Hope You Take With You

1. Think about what comes next.

ECD is the beginning of a much longer journey. Connect early with your **Regional GYE colleagues** to help children and families transition from early childhood into schools, Unified programming, youth engagement, and future leadership opportunities.

2. Position ECD as a solution.

Our ECD programming can help external partners address priorities in **education, health, disability inclusion, family support, and social development**. International Development and Government Relations can help Programs communicate that value to funders, development partners, and governments.

3. Bring the right partners in early.

You don't have to navigate partnerships alone. Connect with your **Program and Regional colleagues**, and engage International Development or Government Relations early when appropriate. A shared approach can open doors to partnerships, resources, funding, and opportunities to strengthen and sustain your ECD work.