



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

Week 4: ECD across the Health Strategy

Where the Special Olympics Journey Begins

Early Childhood Development in Health

Early childhood is a critical period for establishing the foundation for lifelong health and well-being. For children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), access to early intervention, developmental supports, and family-centered services can positively influence health, development, and participation outcomes across the lifespan. Given the importance and value of this time period, early childhood is a critical component of Special Olympics Health.

Special Olympics' health strategy is built on the understanding that the health disparities experienced by people with IDD are complex, interconnected, and often begin early in life. Through its **PATH to Health Equity** framework, Special Olympics works to improve health outcomes and access to care by focusing on **Prevention, Training, Assessment and Care Coordination, and Health Systems Strengthening**.



Early childhood development is embedded throughout this strategy.

While early childhood is explicitly included within the Prevention pillar through programming like Young Athletes, there are also strong alignments across the PATH, including building a more inclusive health workforce, strengthening early identification and care pathways, generating evidence to improve services, and advancing systems that better support children with IDD and their families. Through Healthy Communities, Special Olympics leverages early childhood development as both a point of intervention and a catalyst for broader systems change, creating stronger pathways to inclusive services, supports, and opportunities for children with IDD and their families.

In the following pages, you will see examples of how early childhood development work can activate across the PATH to Health Equity.

Special Olympics Family Health Education

Family Health Education helps **welcome, engage, and sustain families throughout their Special Olympics journey**. Through initiatives including **Family Health Forums**, the team supports Programs in delivering quality health education, connecting families with one another, and helping parents and caregivers access health and community resources.

Early childhood is often one of the first opportunities to build a relationship with the **entire family**, not only the child. Engaging families early also creates opportunities for **prevention and early intervention**, establishing healthy habits and addressing challenges before they become barriers to long-term health and participation.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Host **Family Health Education and Family Health Forums** alongside ECD programming to engage and educate the whole family.
- ✓ Partner with external organizations serving young children and families to expand access to **health, developmental, and community resources**.
- ✓ Use family engagement as a bridge between ECD, Health, Sport, and other programming so families experience Special Olympics as a **connected journey**.

Try This!

Start by asking families what they need. Use their feedback to identify **one health topic, resource, or connection** that could be incorporated into existing ECD programming. Then connect with your Health and Family colleagues to identify resources already available within Special Olympics.

Key Takeaway

When we engage a young child, we have an opportunity to engage their entire family. Cross-departmental planning can connect families with health education, ECD, Sport, and other Special Olympics opportunities while creating a more seamless experience. Stronger families ultimately strengthen the experience and success of our athletes.

Meet our contributor

Jennifer Pittman | Manager, Healthy Families

Jennifer manages Family Health Education initiatives, including **Family Health Forums**, and supports Regions in **delivering quality family health education and sustaining family engagement**. A Public Health Educator and Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES), Jennifer joined Special Olympics International in 2021 and brings both professional and personal experience as the mother of three, including a Special Olympics athlete.



Resources

- [Family Health Forums & Family Health Education Resources](#) Access standardized presentations, guides, and supporting materials for **Family Health Forums (FHF)**, **Family Health Forum Series**, and **Family Health Education programming**. The page also includes guidance for Programs receiving support from **Lions Clubs International Foundation**, along with Overview and Family Impact videos highlighting Program and family experiences

Special Olympics Fitness Programming

Special Olympics Fitness helps people with IDD build the knowledge, skills, and motivation to lead healthy, active lives through **physical activity, nutrition, hydration, education, and technology**.

Healthy habits start early. Introducing movement, fitness, nutrition, and hydration at a young age helps children develop fundamental motor skills and positive experiences with physical activity that can support **lifelong health and participation in sport**. Fitness also provides an opportunity to engage the entire family in building healthy habits together.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Engage **Fitness Captains** to lead Young Athletes warm-ups and cool-downs and share simple health tips.
- ✓ Incorporate age-appropriate fitness concepts into **Young Athletes and Junior Athletes** coach education.
- ✓ Use **High 5 for Fitness** to introduce hydration, healthy eating, movement, warm-ups, and cool-downs.

Try this!

Invite a **Fitness Captain** to your next Young Athletes activity or incorporate one High 5 concept into an existing session. Fitness doesn't have to be another program—it can strengthen what you're already doing.

Key Takeaway

Our goal is to build a **culture of fitness** by embedding movement, physical activity, and healthy habits into everyday settings—from schools and communities to sports and ECD programming. **Fitness can be simple, cost-effective, and integrated into existing activities** with minimal equipment. By **introducing these habits early, we can help children build a foundation for lifelong health** while giving families the tools and confidence to support their child's development and future participation in sport and fitness.

Meet our contributor

Melissa Otterbein | Director, Fitness & Healthy Lifestyles

Melissa oversees the **strategic direction of Special Olympics Fitness**, focusing on **quality growth through ongoing programming, education, and technology**. A Certified Health Education Specialist, she holds a Master of Public Health in Physical Activity and is the proud sister of a Special Olympics athlete. She has also participated as a Unified Partner and former coach.



Resources

- [Fitness Resources Webpage](#): Central location for Special Olympics Fitness resources, including fitness in sport, coach education, SO Fitness App, and youth fitness resources.
- [Fitness Implementation Guide](#): Guidance for implementing, tracking, and evaluating fitness programming.
- [Fitness Strategy 2022-2026](#): Overview of core fitness priorities, activities, and goals

Special Olympics Healthy Athletes®

Through **Healthy Athletes**, Programs provide screenings, education, prevention, and connections to follow-up care while also training healthcare professionals to better serve people with IDD. **Healthy Young Athletes (HYA)** extends this work to children ages 2–7, with and without IDD, through holistic pediatric screenings that identify health and developmental needs and connect families with education, resources, and appropriate follow-up care.

Identifying health and developmental needs early can help children access services and support when they can have the greatest impact, while giving families information and tools to advocate for their child. Healthy Young Athletes supports this approach by combining physical exams, health screenings, and developmental surveillance with family education and referrals. HYA is also a core component of **Child & Family Health** programming.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Partner with **hospitals, universities, medical schools, and government health systems** to recruit clinical volunteers, access facilities, and strengthen inclusive health practices.
- ✓ Collaborate with **schools, preschools, and early childhood partners** to bring Healthy Young Athletes screenings to children and families in settings they already access.
- ✓ Coordinate across **Sport, Education, and ECD** so screening, education, physical activity, referrals, and ongoing support create a more connected pathway for families.

Try This!

If your Program is interested in Healthy Young Athletes, **start building healthcare partnerships early**. Connect with a local university, medical school, or hospital system to identify a licensed medical professional with pediatric experience who could become a Healthy Young Athletes Clinical Director and help build a network of clinical volunteers.

Key Takeaway

Health and development are foundational to a child's ability to participate, learn, play, and thrive. It's important to identify needs earlier, connect families to support, and create a more seamless experience from screening and education to continued Special Olympics participation.

Meet our contributor

Jenna Lebersfeld | Senior Clinical Program Manager, Strong Minds & Healthy Young Athletes

Jenna leads two Healthy Athletes disciplines: **Strong Minds (Mental Health)** and **Healthy Young Athletes (Pediatrics)**. She supports Regions and Programs in developing and **implementing high-quality health screenings and contributes to the continued development of screening content**. As a licensed clinical psychologist and pediatric neuropsychologist, Jenna also provides expertise across Special Olympics in mental health and child development.



Resources

- [Healthy Athletes Resources](#) — Access resources and guidance for Special Olympics Healthy Athletes disciplines.
- [Healthy Young Athletes Resources](#) — Program and Clinical Director resources for implementing Healthy Young Athletes.
- [Healthy Young Athletes Open Office Hours](#) — Held the **first Tuesday of each month, 9:00–10:00 a.m. ET**. Programs and Clinical Directors can drop in at any point during the hour to ask questions and receive direct support.

Special Olympics Health & Education Advocacy

Inclusive Health & Education Advocacy works to strengthen **health systems and policies so people with IDD can more easily access quality health services**. The team combines Special Olympics Health programming with advocacy, strategic partnerships, knowledge transfer, and policy-focused approaches, while also training and engaging athletes as **Health Messengers**.

Health systems play an important role in early childhood—from pregnancy and birth through vaccinations, developmental monitoring, and ongoing care. Strengthening these systems to better include people with IDD can help children receive the **services and support they need early**, while empowering families to understand and advocate for their child's health and development. ECD helps children get the right start while giving caregivers greater confidence and tools to support their families.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Work across ECD, Health, and Advocacy to identify **entry points within health and other public systems** that can expand inclusive services for young children and families.
- ✓ Engage **Health Messengers and mentors** in ECD initiatives to bring athlete voices and lived experience into conversations with families, professionals, and decision-makers.
- ✓ Coordinate outreach to government and community stakeholders so Special Olympics presents a **connected approach** rather than separate requests from individual departments.

Try this!

Learn about your local **ECD policy and institutional landscape**. Who is responsible for early childhood health, development, education, and family support? Understanding stakeholder priorities can help you identify where Special Olympics programming fits, where gaps exist, and which partners can help create sustainable change.

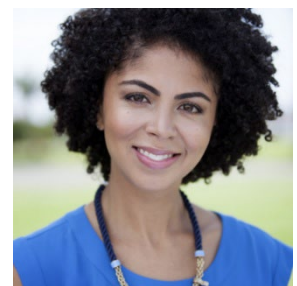
Key Takeaway

Strong communication and **shared planning across health and the organization can prevent duplication, strengthen technical assistance, and help Programs present the full value of Special Olympics to governments and partners**. Rather than approaching systems with one program at a time, collaboration allows us to demonstrate how our collective work can contribute to **more inclusive systems for children, families, and people with IDD throughout their lives**.

Meet our contributor

Anjela Jenkins | Senior Director, Global Inclusive Health & Education Advocacy

Anjela leads work to strengthen health systems and improve access to quality health services for people with IDD. Working across Health and GRID, she combines Special Olympics programming with advocacy, strategic partnerships, knowledge transfer, policy approaches, and athlete leadership, including the training and activation of Health Messengers.



Resources

- ✓ [Health Messenger Training](#) and continuing education resources that prepare athletes to advocate for inclusive health. Additional materials are planned to be available online by the end of 2026.
- ✓ [Global Report on the Health of People with IDD](#) available in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish, with information and recommendations that Programs can use when engaging government stakeholders.
- ✓ [Health System Navigation Curriculum](#) resources for people with IDD and caregivers to better understand and navigate health systems. Global templates for local adaptation are planned for September/October 2026.

Special Olympics Health Communications

Health Communications helps **amplify the impact of Special Olympics Health programming and connect our work with the audiences who need to hear about it**. Health Communications develops strategies and content that raise awareness of Special Olympics' Early Childhood Development work among families, partners, and other stakeholders.

ECD provides an opportunity to tell the Special Olympics story **from the very beginning of a child's journey**. Sharing these stories can demonstrate how early experiences build social-emotional and gross motor skills, support lifelong health and well-being, and introduce children with and without IDD to inclusion at an early age. Strong communications can also help ECD programming reach **new families, partners, supporters, and communities**.

Collaboration in action

- ✓ Work with Communications colleagues to identify **ECD stories, events, families, and milestones** that can be shared with broader audiences.
- ✓ Capture authentic content at **Young Athletes and other ECD programming activities**, including short videos and interviews with children and families.
- ✓ Use ECD-related observance days, such as the **International Day of Play**, to coordinate social media and awareness activities across departments.
- ✓ Invite **local media** to ECD events to increase awareness of Special Olympics and reach families and community partners who may not already know about the work.

Try this!

You don't need professional equipment to tell a great story. At your next ECD activity, use a **phone to capture a short video** of the experience or ask a parent why participation matters to their family. Connect with your Communications colleagues early so they can help identify how and where that story could be shared.

Key Takeaway

Great programming creates great stories—but those stories only create broader impact when we share them. Collaboration between ECD and Communications can turn everyday Program experiences into opportunities for **recruitment, fundraising, advocacy, partnership development, and community engagement**. Communicating early and often helps ensure those opportunities aren't missed.

Meet our contributors

Health Communications works with teams **across Special Olympics Health** to identify audiences, develop communications strategies, and amplify stories that demonstrate impact. The team can help Programs and ECD colleagues **identify, capture, and elevate meaningful stories** to increase awareness and engagement.