



# Special Olympics Young Athletes and Unified Champion Schools

## Special Olympics Young Athletes

Young Athletes is a sport and play program for children with and without intellectual disabilities (ID), ages 2 to 7 years old. Young Athletes introduces basic sport skills, like running, kicking and throwing.

## Special Olympics Unified Champion School

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools is a comprehensive program of the Unified Schools strategy that combines Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement to create opportunities for social inclusion and athletic competition.

## Young Athletes in a Unified Champion School

Young Athletes can serve as a key component to an elementary or pre-K Unified Champion School by providing an inclusive sports experience for children. Young Athletes introduces children to sports by teaching them age-appropriate gross motor development skills that support their future participation in Unified Sports. When conducted in schools or early childhood development centers, and combined with Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement, there is a greater potential to impact attitude change and create an environment of inclusion and respect.

There are many benefits of including Young Athletes as a Unified Champion School component, including:

- Recruiting new schools to become Unified Champion Schools, including elementary schools, preschools or early childhood development centers (i.e. Head Start).
- Enhancing existing school or district relationships by engaging pre-k or elementary schools to create a pipeline of participation within a school district.

## **Inclusive Sports**

Inclusive Young Athletes is the first stage of Unified Sports and represents the Fundamentals Stage of the Athlete Development Model. By focusing on basic and fundamental sports skills in an inclusive environment, children are developing motor and social skills that support future participation in Unified Sports. Young Athletes can be run during a designated physical education class period or during play time in the classroom. Teachers also have the flexibility to adapt Young Athletes programming to their classroom themes or lessons and can progress from basic to advanced skills based on the abilities of children in the classroom.

### *The Next Level of Inclusive Sports*

In a stand-alone pre-school or early childhood development center, Young Athletes will likely be the only inclusive sports opportunity in the school. However, for elementary schools, Young Athletes activities will likely only reach children in pre-K to first grade, leaving older grade levels without an inclusive sports experience.



In the case of elementary schools, Young Athletes should be combined with an inclusive sports experience for older children to ensure children at all age levels have access to sport development. At this age, the emphasis for older children should be placed on inclusive physical education classes, as implementing sports teams in elementary schools is often challenging and does not fit into the existing structure of the school. Programming in the physical education classes can serve as a transition from Young Athletes to Unified Sports by using the skills fostered through Young Athletes to develop a wider understanding of and skill-set in specific sports.

#### *From the Young Athletes Activity Guide*

The new Activity Guide has a large focus on schools, highlighting them as a primary delivery model for Young Athletes activities – in addition to communities and homes. Starting on page 63 in the Activity Guide, educators can find information and support for implementing Young Athletes using the new Activity Guide. This section includes a sample lesson plan template on page 68 and ideas for engaging family members on page 65.

In addition to the Activity Guide, the [Young Athletes Curriculum](#) remains as a secondary resource. The curriculum provides scripted lesson plans for use over an eight-week period in schools. The lessons are designed to be offered in sequential order to help children build skills through repetition.

### **Whole School Engagement**

Broader awareness is important to ensure Special Olympics has a wider reach and impact in schools. Whole School Engagement usually takes the form of an activity, event or rally that offers the entire student body the opportunity to learn and engage. Examples of Whole School Engagement activities that would be successful at an elementary school or early childhood development center include:

- **Respect Rally or Respect Campaign:** Invite children of all grade levels to develop skits, speeches or songs that focus on respect. Have students pledge to treat everyone with respect. *Given the age of participants in pre-K and elementary school, educators may want to focus on respect, inclusion and friendship, instead of the R-word. Many parents are sensitive to teaching children “bad words” that they do not already know.*
- **Fans in the Stands:** Invite classrooms to cheer on Special Olympics athletes or Unified Sports participants in local or state competitions. Encourage students to make posters and banners to celebrate the accomplishments of the athletes.
- **Contests between Classrooms:** Encourage classrooms to compete in a variety of activities that highlight Special Olympics and allow students to take on a leadership role. Host a door decorating competition where classrooms create a display that exemplifies respect or friendship. Or consider a poster contest and hang the winning posters from each grade level in the hallways of the school. Check out [Club Unify](#) for examples and templates.

#### *From the Young Athletes Activity Guide*

The Young Athletes Activity Guide suggests an example to incorporate Whole School Engagement into Young Athletes – a Young Athletes demonstration or celebration event. This type of end-of-year event not only highlights the skills children have developed through Young Athletes, but also provides a chance to engage all students in the activities and fun. There is also an opportunity to encourage the leadership development of older elementary students who can serve as volunteers or station managers and can work with educators to plan event activities. Visit page 71 in the Activity Guide for more ideas on planning a Young Athletes demonstration or celebration event.



### **Inclusive Youth Leadership**

While not necessarily intuitive, there are many ways to provide leadership opportunities for children participating in Young Athletes. This a critical time for children to begin learning about leadership and the introduction of such skills has the potential to enhance their experience in the program.

#### *From the Young Athletes Activity Guide*

Leadership can take on many meanings for young children, spanning from simple to more complex tasks. Consider the leadership suggestions found on page 70 of the Activity Guide:

- After repeating songs multiple times, encourage children to lead the warm-up and cool down songs.
- Within the activities, identify ways for children to begin taking on leadership roles. For example, let children take turns being the leader in “Follow the Leader” or setting the path in “Obstacle Course”.
- Use classroom time to discuss important topics that help children become better members of their classroom or community. Topics can include concepts like inclusion, respect, abilities and friendship. See [Club Unify](#) for more examples.

Young Athletes can also support older individuals in developing leadership skills.

- Older elementary school children can support Young Athletes by demonstrating or modeling skills and helping younger children to complete activities. Not only does this support leadership development, but it is also a great way to get more children in the school involved with activities.
- Middle and high school students can serve as volunteers for the activities. Volunteers are great to run individual stations or support children as they move from one activity to the next.
- Partner with a local university to enhance the Young Athletes activities. Consider working with relevant departments, such as, education, special education or physical therapy. University students can serve as volunteers or coaches, and can take leadership in creating lesson plans.

***For more information and resources about Young Athletes in schools visit Special Olympics’ Resource webpage: [resources.specialolympics.org/YoungAthletes](https://resources.specialolympics.org/YoungAthletes)***