



Special Olympics

Fitness Implementation Guide

Updated April 2026

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How To Use This Guide

Special Olympics Fitness supports individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) to maximize their health and wellbeing by developing the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to lead a healthy and active life. The Fitness Implementation Guide contains guidelines, resources, and strategies to assist Special Olympics Programs with effectively implementing fitness initiatives in a variety of settings. The Guide also provides tools to engage multiple audiences in fitness programming, including athletes, coaches, educators, and fitness professionals.



Special Olympics Mission And Fitness

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with ID, *giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills, and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes, and the community.*

Special Olympics defines fitness as “optimal health and performance through adequate physical activity, nutrition, and hydration.” The definition is intentionally broad and dynamic so that each athlete can achieve a state of fitness in their own way.

- “Optimal” refers to a state that is most favorable for a given athlete at any given time.
- “Performance” refers primarily to sports performance; however, it may also include activities of daily living or work-related performance.
- “Adequate” may vary depending on an athlete’s level of fitness and may change over time with an athlete’s goals. This definition allows fitness to be tailored to each athlete.

Fitness falls under Special Olympics Health, which strives to improve the overall health and well-being of people with ID through a PATH to health equity — Prevention, Assessment, Training, and Health Systems. Through its health work, Special Olympics has the goal of engaging **1 million athletes in ongoing preventive health and social-emotional wellbeing programming by 2031.**





The Three Components Of Fitness

The Three Components Of Fitness: Physical Activity, Nutrition, And Hydration

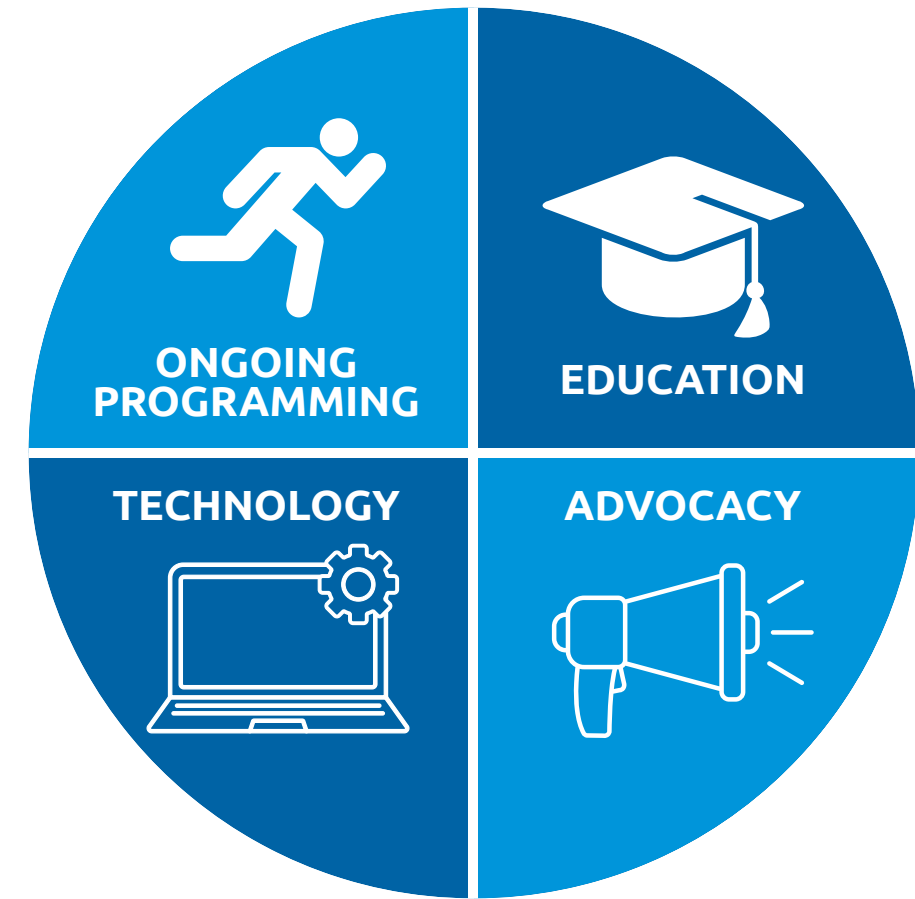
Special Olympics Fitness comprises of three components that focus on healthy lifestyle behaviors: **physical activity, nutrition, and hydration**. Together, these components form the foundation of Special Olympics' fitness programming. Regular physical activity, healthy eating, and sufficient water consumption play significant roles in maintaining a healthy weight, reducing risk for chronic diseases, improving cognitive and physical functioning, and enhancing sport performance.^{1,2,3} By engaging in fitness activities, Special Olympics athletes and their supporters are empowered to take control of their health and wellbeing.

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, December 4). About healthy weight and growth. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-weight-growth/about/>
- 2 World Health Organization. (2023). Physical activity. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/health-topics/physical-activity#tab=tab_1
- 3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, December 28). Tips for healthy eating for a healthy weight. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-weight-growth/healthy-eating/>





Fitness Strategic Areas



The [Fitness Guiding Strategy](#) includes four strategic areas to direct programming and implementation:








- 1 Ongoing Programming:** Providing high quality programming that supports Special Olympics athletes in achieving higher levels of fitness.
- 2 Education:** Educating Special Olympics leaders to promote adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors among athletes.
- 3 Technology:** Utilizing technology to build awareness of fitness and health behaviors to facilitate health behavior change.
- 4 Advocacy:** Increasing accessible fitness opportunities for all people with intellectual disabilities.



Health And Fitness For People With ID

The Challenge

People with ID experience poorer health than the general population and are at greater risk for chronic conditions. These disparities are due in part to unhealthy lifestyle behaviors. Recent research indicates that people with ID, compared to those in the general population, have:

-  **Higher rates of overweight and obesity (as high at 1.5 to 2x)**
-  **Higher prevalence of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and asthma⁴**
-  **Higher rates of depression and anxiety (as high as 3-4x)**
-  **Lower levels of physical activity⁴**
-  **Higher rates of sedentary behavior**
-  **Less likely to eat a balanced diet⁵**
-  **Overall low health-related physical fitness including strength and endurance⁶**

Special Olympics athletes are no exception to these trends of poorer health. Special Olympics Healthy Athletes[®] global data from 2015-2025 shows that 33.7% of athletes have low bone density, 48.5% have hypertensive blood pressure readings, and only 46.7% report being active four or more days most weeks.⁷

4 Jacob, U. S., Pillay, J., Johnson, E., Omoya, O. (Tomi), & Adedokun, A. P. (2023). A systematic review of physical activity: Benefits and needs for maintenance of quality of life among adults with intellectual disability. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2023.1184946>

5 Hamilton, S., Hankey, C., Miller, S., Boyle, S., & Melville, C. (2007). A review of weight loss interventions for adults with intellectual disabilities. *Obesity Reviews*, 8(4), 339- 345. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-789x.2006.00307.x>

6 Skowronski, W., Horvat, M., Nocera, J., Roswal, G., & Croce, R. (2009). Eurofit special: European fitness battery score variation among individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 26, 54-67. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.26.1.54>

7 Special Olympics Healthy Athletes Database, 2026

The Opportunity

Despite these challenges, Special Olympics Programs can leverage the factors known to facilitate physical activity participation and healthy eating among people with ID including:^{8,9}



Social support, peer mentors, and inclusion



Perceived competence



Adequate training of service providers



Accessibility (such as transportation, equipment, facilities)



Simple, concise educational materials



Goal setting



Enjoyment

⁸ Temple, V. (2009). Factors associated with high levels of physical activity among adults with intellectual disability. *International Journal Of Rehabilitation Research*, 32(1), 89-92. <https://doi.org/10.1097/mrr.0b013e328307f5a0>

⁹ Taliaferro, A., & Hammond, L. (2016). "I Don't Have Time": Barriers and Facilitators to Physical Activity for Adults With Intellectual Disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 33(2), 113-133. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2015-0050>

Fitness Programming Is Effective

Special Olympics has demonstrated the effectiveness of fitness programming through multiple evaluations, including:

- Athletes and Unified partners that participated in Special Olympics Fitness Models experienced decreased body weight and blood pressure, particularly among those with poorest baseline health.¹⁰
- Athletes who performed Fit 5 exercises in addition to regular sport practices showed reductions in blood pressure and resting heart rate.¹¹
- Adult athletes who participated in the 2018 USA Games Step Challenge lost an average of 1.0 kg, increased intake of fruits and vegetables, increased water intake, and increased exercise frequency.
- 65% of athletes who participated in the 2022 USA Games Fitness reported that their health improved and 81% reported that they were more active.

To learn more about the research that guides Special Olympics Fitness, review the [Overview on Fitness Literature](#).

¹⁰ Rubenstein, E., DuBois, L., Sadowsky, M., Washburn, K., Forquer, M., Stanish, H., & Shriver, T. (2020). Evaluating the potential of Special Olympics fitness models as a health intervention for adults with intellectual disabilities. *Disability And Health Journal*, 13(2), 100850. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2019.100850>

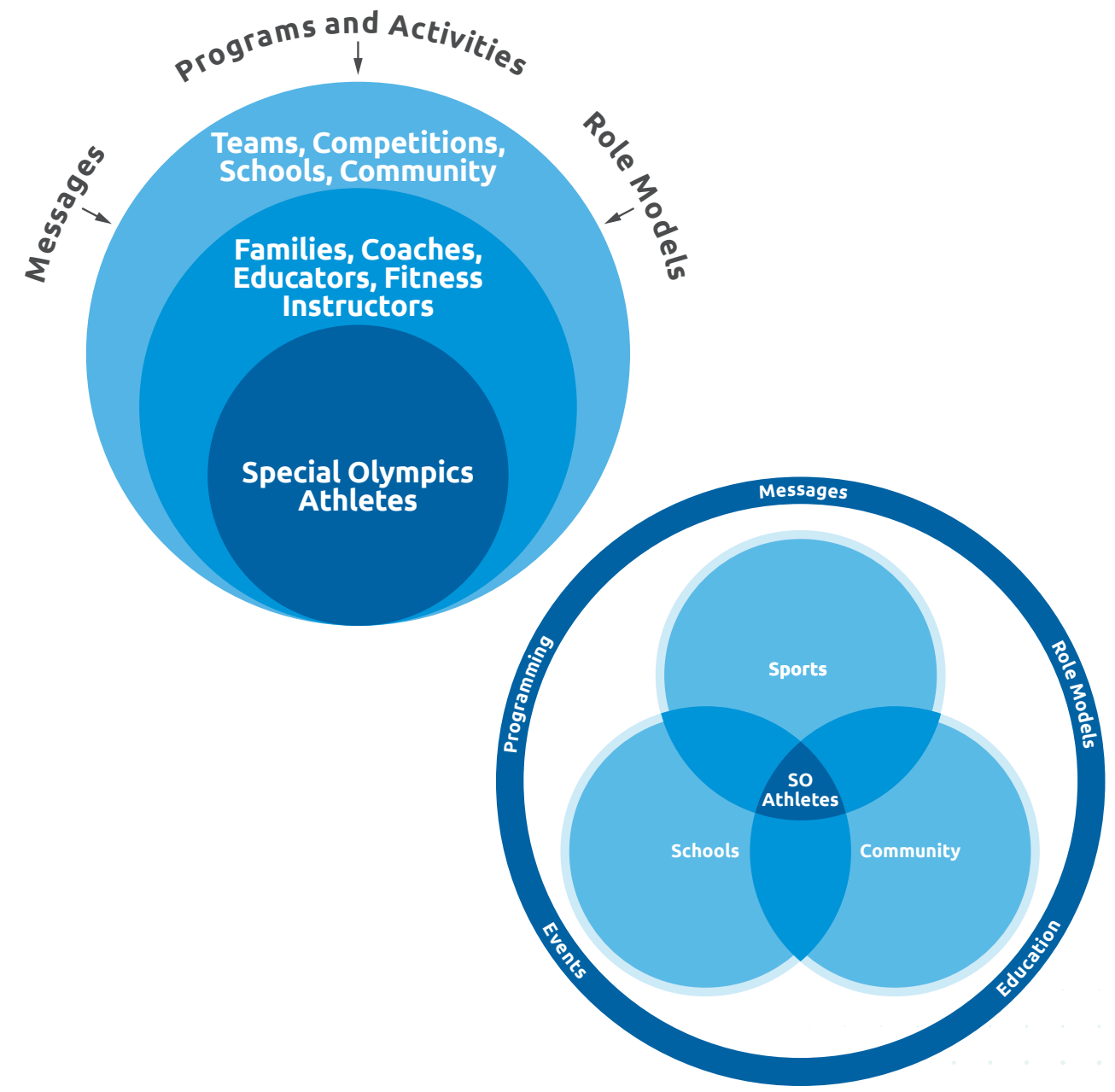
¹¹ Niemeier, B., Wetzlmair, L., Bock, K., Schoenbrodt, M., & Roach, K. (2021). Improvements in biometric health measures among individuals with intellectual disabilities: A controlled evaluation of the Fit 5 program. *Disability And Health Journal*, 14(1), 100979. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100979>





Building A Culture Of Fitness

Special Olympics strives to establish a culture of fitness. This means that all members of the movement value fitness as a part of every Special Olympics experience and that fitness is promoted at the individual, family, and community levels. It also means every athlete has ongoing opportunities to lead an active and healthy life. Families, coaches, fitness professionals, peers, and educators encourage athletes to stay active, eat healthy foods, and drink water. Athletes can join inclusive fitness programs in their community. They hear the same message of the importance of health and wellness from the time they join Young Athletes and for as long as they stay connected to the movement, with opportunities for year-round fitness in multiple settings.



Fitness Guidelines

Guidelines have been created to standardize fitness programming aligned to the current evidence base. The guidelines correspond directly to the Special Olympics Census and Healthy Communities Impact Grant metrics and definitions. As part of building a culture of fitness, Programs should strive to offer a variety of fitness programs throughout the year, with a focus on ongoing programming of 6 weeks or longer.

Fitness Component	Definition and Guidance	Example: USA Games Fitness Challenge
Structured	Structured fitness programming is “any organized activity that specifically aims to improve athlete wellbeing and sport performance by intentionally promoting healthy behaviors in physical activity, nutrition, and hydration.” All aspects of programming should be planned with goals, strategies, resources, and training and a focus on improving health and fitness outcomes (Please see “Evaluation” section on pg. 46). Throughout this guide, all reference to fitness programming means structured fitness programming.	Special Olympics International conducted a 20-week fitness challenge using the SO FitNow mobile app to promote fitness among athletes, Unified partners, and coaches leading up to the 2022 USA Games. Participants were challenged to achieve 1 million steps and used SO FitNow to track steps, fruit and vegetable intake, and water consumption. Health education tips were communicated via email and the app.
Promotes WHO Physical Activity Guidelines for People With Disabilities	See specific physical activity guidelines below.	Special Olympics provided health education tips for athletes that promoted the Physical Activity Guidelines. This included education around types of exercise, including strength, endurance, flexibility, and balance.
Promotes healthy nutrition and hydration behaviors and education	Fitness programming integrates health education with topics covering physical activity, nutrition, and hydration. Other health topics, such as sleep or mental health, can also be covered.	Athletes were encouraged to track their fruit, vegetable, and water intake. Health education was delivered by Challenge Leaders and through email and app communications and provided challenge participants with several resources, including videos from athletes about healthy drink choices and ways to consume more fruits and vegetables. Special Olympics Fitness has developed a variety of health education tips and resources, found here .
Integrates behavior changes	In addition to knowledge, behavior is influenced by motivation, confidence, social norms, and the environment.	Social support was fostered in the challenge through peer learning, athlete leadership, and tracking behaviors. Participants also committed to their next health goal by signing a pledge wall and completing a personal goal worksheet.
If on-going, program meets at least once per week for a minimum of 6 weeks	Programming that lasts 6 or more weeks offers athletes an opportunity to establish habits through repetition, and greater exposure to information and skill building.	The USA Games Fitness Challenge ran for 20 weeks to support long term behavior change and readiness for a national-level competition.

Frequency And Duration Of Fitness Programming

Both short and long term programming increase fitness and healthy behaviors.

One-time events and short-term fitness activities are useful for building athlete awareness, understanding, and motivation around fitness. They are ideal for reaching large groups and may inspire athletes to start engaging in fitness. Programming that lasts 6 weeks or longer is more likely to result in changes in behavior, improved wellbeing, and enhanced sports performance due to the opportunity to form healthy habits.

Programs should track attendance for each fitness activity. Final reporting includes the total number of athletes participating in all structured fitness programming, as well as the number of athletes participating in programming that is 6 weeks or longer. Athletes who participate in multiple sessions or programs should only be counted once in final reporting numbers.



Guidance On Physical Activity

Special Olympics athletes have a range of fitness levels and different experiences with physical activity. Regardless of an athlete's present level of fitness, communicate the message of **move more** to promote a culture that celebrates **any** amount of physical activity. [2020 World Health Organization's \(WHO\) Guidelines](#) on physical activity and sedentary behavior can be used to support increased fitness and health outcomes. The guidelines recommend:

Youth and Adolescents Living with Disability (aged 5-17)

- An average of 60 minutes per day or more of moderate- to vigorous-intensity, mostly aerobic, physical activity across the week.
- Muscle and bone strengthening activities, as well as vigorous aerobic activities, at least 3 days per week.

Adults Living with Disability (aged 18-64)

- At least 150-300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity, or at least 75-150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity or an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous-intensity throughout the week.
- Muscle-strengthening activities at moderate or greater intensity that involve all major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week.

Older Adults Living with Disability (aged 65 and older)

- In addition to the guidelines for adults, older adults with disabilities are advised to include balance and strength training at moderate or greater intensity on 3 or more days a week, to enhance functional capacity and prevent falls.

The WHO Guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behavior include key components of an effective training program and are aligned with the FITT Principle: Frequency, Intensity, Time, and Type. The FITT Principle is helpful when structuring a fitness program to support athletes in achieving the guidelines. The FITT Principle is a structure for fitness improvement by varying the *frequency, intensity, time, and type* of physical activity.

More guidance and examples can be found below:

Component	Definition and Guidance	Example
Frequency	How often physical activity is performed. To reduce injury risk, frequency should be gradually increased over time.	An athlete lifts weights <i>twice a week</i> .
Intensity	How hard the body works during physical activity. Intensity can vary between light, moderate and vigorous. It can be measured through a Rating of Perceived Exertion (typically a scale ranging from 0- the state of rest to 10-maximal effort) or heart rate.	The basketball team performed <i>sprints</i> at the end of practice. This is vigorous activity.
Time	The duration of one session of physical activity. While the WHO guidelines include minutes of physical activity per day or per week, <i>it is important to note that if children, adolescents, adults, and older adults living with disability are not meeting these recommendations, doing some physical activity to start will bring benefits to health.</i>	An athlete went on a brisk walk for <i>30 minutes</i> .
Type	The specific physical activity being performed. Incorporating different types of exercise (including endurance, flexibility, strength, and balance) can improve fitness outcomes.	An athlete participates in many physical activities. She <i>runs for endurance, does circuit training with strength and balance exercises, and does yoga for flexibility.</i>



Guidance On Nutrition

Healthy eating is an important component of fitness. A healthy diet means eating nutrient-dense foods. Nutrient-dense foods contain high levels of micronutrients per calorie. Special Olympics promotes WHO and US dietary guidance which encourages a diet high in plant-based foods, including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, and is limited in saturated fat, salt, added sugar, and processed foods.^{12 13}

The core elements that make up a healthy dietary pattern include:

- Vegetables of all types—dark green; red and orange; beans, peas, and lentils; and other vegetables
- Fruits, especially whole fruit
- Fiber-rich whole grains
- Dairy, including full-fat dairy with no added sugars, such as milk, yogurt, and cheese, or lactose-free versions and fortified dairy alternatives, or calcium-rich foods like spinach
- Protein-rich foods at every meal, including lean meats, poultry, and eggs; seafood; beans, peas, and lentils; and nuts, seeds, and soy products
- Healthy fats, including olive oils and those found naturally in food, such as seafood, nuts, and avocados

These core recommendations apply to individuals of all ages, varying only in the size of the serving. To learn more about serving sizes for different age groups, visit the [WHO's nutrition guidelines](#) or [United States dietary guidelines](#).

In addition to the core elements above, a healthy diet for Special Olympics athletes should include all six essential nutrients: carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, minerals, and water, each day. Each country has their own established healthy nutrition guidelines based on principles of nutrition science, their culture, and local availability of foods. Programs are encouraged to follow their country's nutrition guidelines, which can typically be found through their Ministry of Health or other governing body.

Additionally, Programs can use the [Special Olympics Nutrition Guidelines](#) to provide specific guidance and resources to staff procuring meals, snacks, and beverages provided at Special Olympics events. Please note that Programs can email fitness@specialolympics.org to request an editable version of the guidelines so that they may adapt them to reflect the foods and guidelines custom to their country.



¹² World Health Organization. (2023). Healthy diet. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet>

¹³ U.S Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2025). Dietary guidelines for Americans. U.S Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/>

Guidance On Hydration

Hydration is keeping the amount of fluid you need in your body. Drinking the right amount of water is important for overall health and performance. On average, adults need to consume between 2-4 liters of water per day.¹⁴ With regular physical activity, there is a need for increased hydration to replace fluids lost through sweating. Although some foods, such as fruits and vegetables, contain water, most water comes from beverages. To achieve adequate hydration, sufficient water intake is key. Avoid sugar sweetened beverages,¹⁵ such as soda, sports drinks, or energy drinks, which can contribute to weight gain when consumed regularly. Below are the general guidelines for youth and adults regarding hydration.

Youth

- **Ages 4-8:** Drink at least 1 bottle of water per day (5 cups, or 1.18 liters)
- **Ages 9-13:** Drink at least 2-3 bottles of water per day (7-8 cups, or 1.66-1.89 liters)
- **Ages 14-18:** Drink at least 3-4 bottles of water per day (8-11 cups, or 1.89-2.60 liters)

Adults

- **Ages 19 and older:** Drink at least 4-6 bottles of water per day (9-13 cups, or 2.12-3.07 liters)¹⁶

Water is lost from the body when going to the bathroom, sweating, and breathing. If water is lost without replacement, then the body will not function properly. Thirst is not the sole indicator of hydration and athletes should be encouraged to drink water throughout the day. The signs and symptoms of dehydration can be found [here](#).

¹⁴ Seal, A. D., Colburn, A. T., Johnson, E. C., Péronnet, F., Jansen, L. T., Adams, J. D., Bardis, C. N., Guelinckx, I., Perrier, E. T., & Kavouras, S. A. (2023). Total water intake guidelines are sufficient for optimal hydration in United States adults. *European journal of nutrition*, 62(1), 221–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00394-022-02972-2>

¹⁵ Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. (2022, June 23). How much water do you need? Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. <https://www.eatright.org/health/essential-nutrients/water/how-much-water-do-you-need>

¹⁶ Institute of Medicine. (2005). Dietary reference intakes for water, potassium, sodium, chloride, and sulfate. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10925>



Promoting Behavior Change

Several theories of behavior change promote understanding of health behaviors. Applying elements of common behavior change theories to your fitness programming will increase the chance that athletes will be more active and improve eating habits. Below are common strategies to promote positive behavior change. Consider incorporating these strategies in fitness programming to enhance impact. [Additional strategies can be found in the appendix.](#)



Behavior Change Strategy	Definition	Example
Set gradually increasing tasks	Break down the goal and action plan into smaller, more attainable tasks that gradually get more difficult over time.	An athlete lifts weights <i>twice a week</i> .
Offer rewards for attempts or successful behavior changes	Provide rewards or incentives for efforts or successful behavior changes. Share the incentive/reward structure in advance and set a graded system in which achieving rewards becomes more challenging over time.	Everyone that signs up and tracks their physical activity for 6 weeks gets a pin. Everyone who accomplishes the goal of 1,000 minutes of physical activity earns a water bottle.
Track progress	Encourage athletes to keep track of their progress towards their goals.	Behavioral tracking: Athletes use the Fit 5 tracker, the SO FitNow app, or a fitness device as part of a program. Outcome tracking: Health measures (e.g. blood pressure) or fitness testing (e.g. 6-minute walk test) is conducted every few weeks to track progress related to outcomes of the program.
Provide regular encouragement to practice behavior	Use verbal or written encouragement to reinforce the behavior.	A coach sends a weekly email reminder to get in a workout or eat a healthy snack.
Build social support	Develop programming or plans that include social support.	Invite family members or Unified Partners to be part of fitness programming. Send a weekly newsletter to program participants to share updates from the fitness program.





Fitness activities can be implemented within a variety of settings and contexts, including sports, schools, at home (including group homes and supportive living settings), community fitness and recreation centers, day and employment programs, and more. Special Olympics has primarily focused on fitness programming in sport and school settings to reach the greatest number of athletes. However, as fitness gains momentum, there has been a need to extend programming to new settings and populations. As such, tips and opportunities for fitness programming in community settings are also presented.

Fitness through Sport

Fitness through Sport (FTS) aims to enhance fitness activities within sports settings to maximize impact on the sports performance, health, and wellbeing of Special Olympics athletes. Fitness through Sport has three main strategic areas: sports practices, competitions, and key supporters. Please refer to the [Fitness through Sport Guiding Strategy](#) for more information.



Guidelines For Implementation

When integrating Fitness through Sport, consider these guidelines:

- **Minimum “Fit” Practice Standards** define the components that should be included in every sports practice. These can be led by coaches, or other key leaders, like [Fitness Captains](#), and are part of providing a quality sports experience.
- **Fitness Programming in Sports Settings** are guidelines to count fitness programming in the sport setting.

Minimum “Fit” Practice Standards	Fitness Programming in Sports Settings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5-minute warm-up with dynamic stretches • 5-minute cool-down with static stretches • Conditioning integrated into practice • Encouragement to be active and healthy outside of practice • Focus on active practice • Water breaks every 15-20 minutes • Healthy foods encouraged at team functions, including field of play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programming should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Take place before or after a sports practice ◦ Be at least 15 minutes long, 6+ weeks ◦ Integrate physical activity, nutrition and hydration • Following Minimum “Fit” Practice Standards does not count as fitness programming • Some components can be virtual, such as an additional Zoom session and/or step challenge

Strategies

Integrating Fitness through Sport and creating a culture of fitness can be as simple as using these four strategies:

1. Training Sport Coaches

- In the [2022 SO Fitness through Sport Evaluation](#), 75% of sport coaches surveyed wanted more training on health and fitness. Consider offering training bi-annually or before the start of every sports season.
- Training can be sport-specific or applicable to multiple sports. Encourage the adoption of Minimum “Fit” Practice Standards.
- Stay in contact with your sports coaches after training. Send periodic reminders, resources, and best practices in newsletters, emails, or other forms of communication.
- Complete a 3-module [Fitness through Sport eLearning series](#) for coaches. This includes Fitness for the Sport Coach, Sports Nutrition, and Physical Activity for Sports Coaches
- Remind coaches and staff that they are role models for athletes. Be sure they demonstrate a commitment to healthy behaviors, such as promoting healthy foods and beverages at team functions, including practices and competition. They should model healthy behaviors and use athlete leaders, like Fitness Captains, to further set a good example.

2. Engaging Families and Caregivers

- It is important for athletes to engage in healthy habits outside of training and competition. Family members and caregivers can support the message of fitness

at home. Encourage athletes and their families to use the [Fitness through Sport: Homeplay Activities](#) together. These can be printed and distributed at the end of sports practices or digitally sent.

- Invite parents and caregivers to be trained as [Fitness Coaches](#). Fitness Coaches work with the sports coach to ensure that fitness is a part of every practice, competition, and off-season.
- Refer to resources like [Family Health Forums](#) and the [Family Involvement Opportunities](#) tip sheet for more ideas.

3. Positive Communication

- Positive communication is crucial for keeping athletes and coaches excited about their sport and motivated to improve their fitness. To practice positive communication, coaches may ask athletes questions that remind and motivate them to be fit and healthy and celebrate their success. For example, “Did you have a healthy snack before practice?” or “What are some of the healthy things we can order at today’s lunch stop?”
- It is important for teams to set rules and agreements so that all members have the same understanding of what is expected. For example, a team can agree to only drink water at practices, competitions, and other team functions.
- Coaches should acknowledge and celebrate an athlete’s success and progress towards goals, which creates a supportive team environment. Teams can have conversations like these at the start of practice as a check-in, or during the cool-down. Some teams may enjoy doing challenges together, such as trying a new fruit or vegetable prior to the next practice session.

4. Fitness Captains

- Having Fitness Captains on a sports team encourages and empowers other athletes to be healthy and fit. By using their leadership skills and fitness knowledge, Fitness Captains ensure each sports practice is a key setting for fitness programming and implementation.
- Head coaches should consider adding Fitness Captains to their team and foster peer learning and support. Coaches can nominate their athlete(s) to complete Fitness Captain training with their Program.



Fitness In Schools

Fitness in Schools involves programming for youth in school settings, including before and after school activities, physical education, sports, classroom activities, recess, and more. Engaging youth in fitness at an early age can help them form lifelong healthy habits. Further, physically active students tend to have better grades, school attendance, cognitive performance (e.g., memory), and classroom behaviors (e.g., on-task behavior).¹⁷ Within schools, fitness can be a means to accelerate inclusion efforts and promote healthy lifestyle behaviors in youth. An inclusive fitness program that brings together students with and without ID can lead to improved fitness and health outcomes, as well as foster social and emotional development, such as teamwork, friendships, and understanding differences. Inclusive fitness in schools can also be a gateway for students to participate in other Special Olympics programs and events.

There are three main goals of Fitness in Schools:

- Fitness supports youth in embracing lifelong healthy habits, improving physical activity and providing an opportunity for health behavior change.
- Fitness is an inclusive practice that raises awareness, cultivates mutual respect, and celebrates ability.
- Fitness is part of the solution for engaging youth with and without intellectual disabilities to be agents of change for acceptance, respect, and inclusion.

In addition to achieving physical activity, health education, and wellness practices, when implemented as part of the Unified Champion Schools model, fitness can support schools in accomplishing many goals outside of the physical activity realm, like reducing bullying, increasing school engagement, and providing a welcoming school environment for all. Aligning all Special Olympics Fitness initiatives with current national, state, or provincial education standards will allow schools to meet the standards. Utilizing existing physical activity guidelines can also be beneficial for implementing a fitness initiative within schools.

¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, June 2025). Student physical education and physical activity. <https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-education/about/index.html>



Fitness In The Community

Meaningful partnerships with people and organizations in the community are valuable for increasing the scope of a Program's fitness work. Residential service providers, employment and day program providers, fitness clubs, and universities are all examples of promising collaborators for building capacity in fitness programming. Identifying a good contact person within an organization is an important first step to getting support, followed by open communication about goals, interests, and resources for programming. Finding ways to align fitness with an organization's ongoing work will help to get them on board and build a mutually supportive partnership.

Fitness Centers/Gyms

Fitness centers, clubs, or gyms in the community offer a great opportunity for collaboration because they have expert fitness trainers, as well as space and equipment for exercise. These clubs are generally committed to fitness for individuals of all abilities and may have a staff member dedicated to accessibility or inclusion. However, some fitness clubs will need guidance and support to meet the needs of athletes because they lack experience in working with people with ID. Partnering with fitness clubs to create programming (such as Fit 5 classes) is a win-win because clubs become more inclusive, and athletes have ongoing access to trained staff and quality equipment in a community setting. Some fitness clubs may provide reduced membership fees for individuals with ID or free memberships for companions (e.g., coaches, parents), so it is a good idea to ask.

Consider these steps:

- Initiate a partnership through communication with the Director of Fitness or Health at the club.
- Conduct a training session on the needs of individuals with ID and encourage participants to take the [Special Olympics Learning Portal](#) Inclusive Fitness course.
- Share Health and Fitness Association's [Strategies to Expand Inclusion of People With Intellectual Disabilities in the Fitness Community](#) as a resource to enhance inclusion at their facility.
- Work collaboratively to develop a program that capitalizes on Special Olympics resources and the strengths of the fitness club.
- Encourage use of Special Olympics fitness resources.
- Involve Health Messengers in developing, organizing, and co-leading fitness activities at a gym with the staff. Encourage fitness trainers (staff) at the gym to mentor Health Messengers so that they can increase their exercise knowledge and skills.
- Include individuals with ID and their families or caregivers in the decision-making process to ensure programming fits their needs.



Residential And Supported Living Settings

Partnering with local residential service providers can increase involvement of individuals with ID (who are not currently athletes) in the Special Olympics movement. These service agencies often provide holistic care to individuals with ID, which can include fitness for health and recreation. Residential counselors, case managers, and support staff provide direct services to clients but may not know how to implement physical activity programming. By sharing fitness resources and communicating effective strategies for implementation, Programs can build greater capacity and reach in their communities.

Consider these steps:

- Initiate partnership through communication with a Director of Recreation or Health and consider formalizing the partnership with a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Provide access to Special Olympics fitness resources that can easily be used at home, such as School of Strength, Fit 5, SOfit, and Unified Fitness Clubs.
- Conduct a staff training session on fitness resources for use in residential settings. Direct them to relevant Special Olympics Learning Portal courses described in this guide for additional information.
- Instruct the residential center to track attendance of fitness programming being implemented.
- Consider conducting a site visit to see if programming is being delivered as intended.
- Include fitness programming conducted by any site trained in Census and HCIG reporting.
- Programs can invite staff and clients to participate in any offsite fitness programming offered by Special Olympics and support their participation by assisting with anticipated needs, such as transportation.

Universities And Colleges

Partnering with universities and colleges is a mutually beneficial and cost-effective way to expand fitness programming, which also leads to more inclusive future fitness professionals. Community-engaged service is a strategic priority for many academic institutions and Programs can take advantage of this by offering collaborative opportunities to faculty and students. One-time events, like Performance Stations, as well as ongoing fitness activities, like weekly exercise programs, walking clubs, or cooking classes, can give students opportunities to build their professional skills while benefiting athletes. Working with universities and colleges can also create support for coaches with fitness assessments and guidance on sport-specific fitness training.

Consider these steps:

- Identify local universities or colleges with programs in Physical Education, Exercise Science (Kinesiology, Sport Sciences), Physical Therapy (Physiotherapy), Athletic Training, Nutrition, or Public Health, and initiate partnership through communication with a program director or faculty member.
- Share a link to the Special Olympics Learning Portal Inclusive Fitness training and request that students receive credit for completing the course.
- Inform universities and colleges about the [Fitness Coach role](#) and share relevant resources. Following the Activation Guide, support them in completing all training requirements and connecting with local team(s).
- Work with departments to create an on-campus or community-based exercise program where athletes and students workout together. Engage students in creating exercise plans for athletes based on present fitness level as part of the course outcomes.

Day And Employment Programs

People with ID, including athletes, may participate in supported day and employment programs in their community. These programs may include some physical activity as part of employment tasks (e.g., cleaning, carrying, yard work), or in a structured way, like going for a walk during the day. However, day program activities can also be sedentary with extended sitting time. Introducing physical activity throughout the day can address some of the obstacles that people with ID face to being active by providing built-in social support and a space to be active. Programs can help support fitness opportunities for people with ID in day and employment programs by sharing resources and ideas with staff who may have limited experience with physical activity. Acting as a resource for day and employment programs that are interested in health and fitness is an important role for Programs to contribute to athletes' participation in ongoing fitness in the community.

Consider these steps:

- Initiate partnership through communication with a director of community or health services, or a therapeutic recreation specialist, if applicable. Consider formalizing the partnership with a [Memorandum of Understanding](#).
- Provide access to Special Olympics fitness resources that can easily be used in a day or employment program setting, such as School of Strength, Fit 5, or fitness challenges.
- Conduct a staff training on fitness resources for use in day or employment settings. Direct them to relevant Special Olympics Learning Portal courses described in this guide for additional information.
- Instruct the residential center to track attendance of fitness programming being implemented.
- Consider conducting a site visit to see if programming is being delivered as intended.
- Include fitness programming conducted by any site trained in Census and HCIG reporting.



Fitness Programming For Athletes With Diverse Needs

Special Olympics athletes represent a diverse population who differ across age, cognitive and physical ability, health status, fitness level, motor skill, motivation, and more. As such, one approach to fitness programming will not fit all athletes. Providing optimal support for such a diverse group can be challenging, but the use of appropriate instructional strategies and modifications can assist in successfully implementing fitness programs to athletes of all ability levels. As Programs aim to increase the reach and impact of their fitness work, consider athletes with more complex support needs and ensure that fitness opportunities are accessible. Keep in mind that structured fitness programming can take many forms and is likely to look different for athletes with diverse needs. Yet, all athletes can benefit from fitness activities.

Athletes With Physical Disabilities

While the exact data on the number of people with physical and intellectual disabilities is unknown, it is important to consider how to ensure people with physical disabilities, as well as ID, can participate in fitness. Many of the Special Olympics fitness resources include guidance and accommodations to support athletes with various physical disabilities, including athletes who use wheelchairs. When establishing your programming, seek accessible locations, and be willing to make modifications based upon your participants' needs. [NCHPAD](#) (National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability) offers many resources to support the integration of people with physical disabilities in fitness programming.

Athletes With Severe Or Profound Disabilities – Special Olympics MATP

Some athletes may have a combination of two or more disabilities, such as an intellectual disability and a mobility disability, sensory disability (e.g., vision or hearing), or behavioral or emotional disability. In some cases, these disabilities can be severe, and an athlete will have higher support needs. Athletes with multiple disabilities may also use assistive devices, such as walkers and wheelchairs for mobility. Special Olympics offers sports programming for this population through the Motor Activity Training Program, or MATP, which is a movement-based sensory sports program for athletes with severe or profound disabilities and complex support needs. MATP enables all athletes to participate and compete in meaningful sports-specific activities within Special Olympics. Aligning with the Fitness through Sport work, Programs can use fitness resources, such as Fit 5, to promote fitness within MATP programming and engage coaches, caregivers, and families in promoting ongoing health messaging. Programs should focus on accessibility to ensure fitness programming is welcoming for athletes with severe or profound disabilities and aligns with their individual needs and abilities. Learn more about [MATP](#).

Older Athletes

Continuing to engage athletes in sport and physical activity as they age is a priority of Special Olympics. With athletes living longer, ongoing participation in appropriate and enjoyable physical activities is important for mental and physical health, quality of life, and maintaining independence. Adults aged 65 and older should do 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity physical activity, but some activities are better than none.

Some older athletes may no longer be motivated by competition but wish to stay active and involved with teammates and coaches. Fitness can be one way for Programs to keep aging athletes participating in programming. Leadership in fitness, such as Fitness Captains, could be an especially meaningful role for older athletes to continue fostering social connections and active engagement in fitness and sport. Targeted fitness programming for older athletes must take into consideration the unique challenges that this group may face to participation, such as limited transportation, pain and discomfort (e.g., back pain, sore knees), fear of injury, limited mobility, and lack of social support. Programs are encouraged to find ways to support older athletes considering these challenges, such as:

- Offer a variety of activities of varied intensity (low to moderate), including some higher impact activities to promote bone strength, such as walking or hiking, and balance activities, like yoga or Tai chi, as well as bodyweight exercises to support two days per week of strengthening exercises.
- Involve older athletes in activity selection. Ask athletes what they want to do and do not make assumptions – maintaining autonomy and maximizing independent participation are important.
- Identify convenient and accessible facilities to make it easier for older athletes to participate in programming. Provide at-home fitness opportunities when possible.
- Infuse short-term goal setting and social support into fitness programming. Partner and group activities, such as walking clubs, help to maintain motivation.
- Lower impact sports, such as bocce and bowling, tend to have older athlete participation. Incorporating fitness into these sports settings, such as using Fitness Captains to conduct longer, more active warm-ups and cool-downs, is especially important.





Special Olympics Fitness Resources

This section provides an overview of resources created by Special Olympics to support Programs in offering high quality fitness programming. Each resource can be modified and used together with other activities in a flexible manner. The resources are organized according to the four strategic areas within Fitness: Programming, Education, Advocacy, and Technology.

Programming Resources

Fitness resources were developed to appeal to the interests, abilities, and motivations of athletes across age groups, and to foster inclusion. The resources can be implemented at a low cost, require minimal equipment and space, are flexible and adaptable, and are easy to use in a variety of settings without much training.

FITNESS MODELS

Special Olympics has endorsed three fitness models: Unified Fitness Club, Fit Families and Friends, and SOfit. Special Olympics will provide targeted technical assistance and training resources to Programs on all endorsed models. To propose a fitness model for endorsement, please review [this endorsement application](#).

Unified Fitness Clubs

- **DESCRIPTION:** Developed by Special Olympics Connecticut, the Unified Fitness Club (UFC) model brings together individuals with and without ID for non-competitive physical activity. UFCs provide the platform and opportunity for individuals to challenge themselves, establish friendships, and earn rewards. This year-round program meets once per week in-person or virtually, with participants engaging in a physical activity they choose, such as walking, dancing, cycling, or strength training. Participants are motivated to stay active throughout the week by tracking progress toward goals, typically with a pedometer or fitness tracker. Clubs and participants are recognized and rewarded for achieving goals or other fitness accomplishments.
- **GOALS:** To increase physical activity, improve nutrition, and increase water consumption.
- **LINK** to [Unified Fitness Club](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: Special Olympics Mongolia has built relationships with sports associations and clubs in which athletes and family members share their stories, challenges, dreams and future plans. Through these meetings, they have established partnerships that have led to Unified Fitness Clubs that include a variety of elements, such as tennis, dance, and

powerlifting. SO Mongolia has sustained more than 30 Athletes training in Unified Fitness Clubs on a weekly basis.

Fit Families And Friends

- **DESCRIPTION:** Developed by Special Olympics Arkansas, Fit Families and Friends is a 6-week fitness challenge designed for individuals with ID and their supporters. Small groups of families or peers comprise teams that work toward a goal of engaging in physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day, 5 days per week. Each team member also creates a personal nutrition goal(s). Daily tracking and journal entries allow members to share their experiences as they make lifestyle changes. Participants earn incentives for completing the challenge to engage in a healthier lifestyle. Programs may also choose to implement this model by conducting one-time or ongoing fitness sessions with athletes, caregivers, and their supporters through activities such as fitness stations at a park or recreation center.
- **GOALS:** To increase physical activity and improve nutrition.
- **LINK** to [Fit Families And Friends](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: SO British Columbia (BC) has offered both in-person and virtual Fit Families and Friends challenges. Typically, communities offer Fit Families and Friends in the summer months, when traditional Special Olympics BC sport and youth programs are on vacation. During in-person Fit Families and Friends programs, athletes and supporters connect for weekly exercise outings, like walks or hikes, followed by fun chats about healthy eating.

SOfit

- **DESCRIPTION:** Developed by Special Olympics Minnesota, SOfit is an 8-week Unified program focused on nutrition, daily physical activity, and social and emotional wellness. SOfit coaches tailor educational topics and physical activities to the interests, goals, and experience levels of the participants.
- **GOALS:** To increase physical activity, improve nutrition, enhance knowledge of healthy behaviors, and promote social engagement and emotional wellbeing.
- **LINK** to [SOfit](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: SO South Africa, in collaboration with the Sports for Social Change Network, the National Youth Development Agency, and the Jobs Fund, created an internship program in which 4,000 athletes and Unified partners were trained over a period of 6 months to deliver SOfit as volunteer SOfit coaches. Under the guidance of master and support coaches, the interns facilitated the SOfit program twice a week in schools, providing additional fitness opportunities beyond the regularly scheduled weekly school sports day.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMING AND RESOURCES

Fit 5

- **DESCRIPTION:** Fit 5 is a resource focused on achieving fitness and personal bests through three simple goals: engaging in five days of exercise per week, eating five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, and drinking five bottles of water per day. Fit 5 is supported by fitness cards and videos that provide a series of progressive exercises in strength, endurance, flexibility, and balance. All exercises can be done in any setting with little to no equipment. The cards have simple instructions and easy-to-follow pictures, while the videos encourage participants to learn by doing.
- **GOALS:** To promote exercising 5 days per week, eating 5 total fruits and vegetables per day, and drinking 5 water bottles of water among adults.
- **LINK** to [Fit 5](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: SO China implemented an 8-week Fit 5 class at six community centers in Shanghai, China for people with ID. One or two fitness classes are offered weekly, utilizing the Fit 5 and Dynamic Stretches Guide resources. In total, the classes serve at least 600 participants. SOEA partnered with the Guangzhou Sport University to develop an online training manual to prepare fitness coaches to implement the Fit 5 programming in these community centers. The classes lead to a community fitness event where the participants demonstrated the Fit 5 exercises that had been practiced during the 8-weeks of classes.

High 5 For Fitness

- **DESCRIPTION:** High 5 for Fitness is a set of resources designed to engage students in physical activities to improve flexibility, strength, and endurance based on nutrition, and hydration, and physical activity guidance for youth. High 5 is inclusive of students with and without ID and can be used within a [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program](#). Resources are available for three age groups. These include the [8-11](#), [12-14](#), and [15-21](#) High 5 for Fitness Lesson Plans for educators to implement over 6 weeks, instructional fitness guides, exercise cards, and demonstration videos. The exercises have three levels (basic, intermediate, and advanced) to challenge students to progress their skills and engage in more complex exercises. The [High 5 Caregiver's Guide](#) provides strategies for using High 5 at home. The [High 5 Educator's Guide](#) provides strategies for educators and community leaders to implement High 5 in school and community-based settings.
- **GOALS:** To increase knowledge and adoption of physical activity, healthy eating, and hydration, and to improve fitness levels among youth.
- **LINK** to [High 5 for Fitness](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: Rockwood School District teacher Felicia Durst used High 5 exercises as warm-up activities in an inclusive PE class. Students worked in Unified pairs to complete the exercises. Each student received a set of High 5 cards to participate in physical activity outside of the school day. High 5 programming became a regular part of the inclusive PE routine leading up to a school-wide Special Olympics event.

Unified Fitness Kits

- **DESCRIPTION:** Unified Fitness Kits include a set of equipment with activity cards created to provide a full body workout that improves fitness and sports skills. The Unified Fitness Kit Cards provide 30 examples of basic, intermediate, and advanced activities that can be done using the items in the kit. Unified Fitness Kits include a drawstring bag, ball, jump rope, cones, hoop, agility ladder, resistance band, and fitness tracker. Kits are available for purchase through [School Specialty](#) (formerly FlagHouse, US only) or can be created using similar items from a local vendor. While the equipment kits are great incentives to encourage fitness at home, the activities can be easily performed with household items to remove barriers for participation.
- **GOALS:** To increase physical activity and improve fitness levels and sports skills.
- **LINK** to [Unified Fitness Kit](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: SO Maryland organized a 6-week challenge encouraging faculty and students of all abilities to track minutes of exercise and intentional physical activity. By participating, students competed against other teams from different schools throughout the state. Schools were encouraged to form Unified teams of 2-10 people, where teams could track their minutes separately with the times added together on a weekly basis. Unified Fitness Kits

were used as an incentive to encourage school participation and support physical activity. Unified Fitness Kits cards and other Special Olympics fitness resources were shared to encourage student physical activity.

School Of Strength & Escuela de Fuerza

- **DESCRIPTION:** School of Strength is a fitness campaign featuring four workout videos with varying levels of difficulty in flexibility, strength, balance, and endurance exercises. The videos encourage athletes to commit to a lifetime of fitness habits and include inspiration from WWE Superstar wrestlers. In partnership with WWE and led by Special Olympics athletes, this resource also includes interactive toolkits for coaches and caregivers with recipes, a fitness tracker, games, and health tips. The resource is also available in Spanish, **Escuela de Fuerza**, and was developed with Special Olympics Global Ambassadors and Major League Baseball players to target Hispanic communities,
- **GOALS:** To promote physical activity five days per week.
- **LINK** to [School of Strength](#) and to [Escuela de Fuerza](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: Special Olympics Wisconsin (SOWI) created a 4-week School of Strength Fitness Challenge, encouraging completion of the School of Strength videos 5 days per week using the School of Strength tracker. SOWI also promoted the School of Strength videos on a “Fitness at Home” Facebook group during the COVID-19 pandemic.

School of Strength: Snack Zone

- **DESCRIPTION:** Targeted to Special Olympics athletes in their late teens and 20s, School of Strength: Snack Zone helps athletes learn about the nutritional benefits of choosing healthier snacks and how healthy snacks can fuel them to feel stronger on the playing field. Videos, a Snacking Playbook, Snack Tracker, and toolkit are available for Programs and athletes to use.
- **GOALS:** To promote proper portioning and incorporating nutrient dense foods while snacking on the go or at home.
- **LINK** to [School of Strength: Snack Zone](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: During their state Summer Games, Special Olympics Colorado integrates Snack Zone resources into Healthy Athletes screenings. During HA, in areas where they provide healthy snacks and hydration, they also include healthy snack suggestions and a QR code link to Snack Zone resource to promote healthy eating at home.

Performance Stations

- **DESCRIPTION:** Performance Stations are events held at, or near, the field of play at tournaments, competitions, or Games that are designed to educate and activate athletes and their supporters in the components of fitness. Performance Stations demonstrate how incorporating fitness components can enhance training, performance in competition, and health.
- **GOALS:** To promote awareness of Fitness through Sport, enhance athlete training, improve competition readiness and sport performance, and reduce risk of injury.
- **LINK** to [Performance Stations](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: Performance Stations were a key element of the 2022 Unified Cup in Detroit, Michigan. The stations were successfully embedded into the flow of competition, providing a unique experience that directly impacted performance, prevented onsite injuries and illness, and promoted healthy lifestyle choices to athletes and Unified partners. Stations were located next to the field of play and team locker rooms, and participation in the stations was written into the competition schedule. Prior to their matches, athletes visited the Competition Readiness, Nutrition, and Hydration stations, in addition to performing proper warm-ups. During matches, water was provided for hydration and cooling towels were distributed at halftime. Following matches, athletes re-fueled at the Nutrition and Hydration Stations and completed proper cool-downs.

Fitness Challenges

- **DESCRIPTION:** Fitness challenges are a popular and effective intervention that can target different healthy behaviors, such as physical activity, fruit and vegetable intake, or water consumption. Intervention characteristics commonly include goal setting, self-monitoring, social support, and rewards for successful completion. Fitness challenges can be implemented over weeks or months depending on the goal and the target behavior, with 6-8 weeks serving as a common timeframe. Challenges can be completed in teams or as individuals and use friendly competition for motivation and enjoyment. Technology, including wearable activity monitors and mobile apps, can support the implementation of fitness challenges through automated data collection and tracking (e.g., step counting), leader boards, virtual incentives, and communication. The Special Olympics Fitness App is a useful tool available to Programs to implement fitness challenges. There are 6-8 week fitness challenge templates within the Special Olympics Fitness App to make it easy to implement fitness challenges.
- **GOALS:** To increase engagement in healthy lifestyle behaviors, such as (but not limited to) physical activity, healthy eating, and water consumption, and improve health and fitness outcomes.
- **Target Audience:** Athletes and their supporters, such as coaches, Unified partners, educators, and caregivers.
- **Settings:** Fitness challenges can be implemented in a variety of settings and contexts including schools, among sports teams, in the lead up to a major competition, and across SO Programs.
- **LINK** to Special Olympics Fitness App: [Apple Store](#) and [Google Play Store](#)



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: Special Olympics Fitness piloted the Special Olympics Fitness app with 6 US Programs in 2024. Initial app pilots found that 91% of athletes said the app helped them to improve their hydration and 72% improved their physical activity. The app has expanded to include easy wearable integration, tracking of sleep and Healthy Minds, and more! You can download this app freely on the app store using the links above.

Unified Activity Plans

- **DESCRIPTION:** The [Special Olympics Unified Activity Plans](#) are 60-minute lesson plans that pair a series of sport skills with complementary fitness drills into one activity. These plans are fully inclusive activities that combine approximately equal numbers of students with and without ID and can be used in a structured, fitness-focused, physical education class, or other Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools activities. Special Olympics Unified Activity Plans harness challenging, yet accessible, fitness activities that enhance student participation within a given sport, while also improving a student's strength, endurance, flexibility, and coordination. The activity plans combine fitness skills and drills in the following sports: Basketball, Dance, Flag Football (American), Football (Soccer), Softball, and General Fitness.
- **GOALS:** To enhance student participation in Unified Sports, Fitness, and PE.
- **LINK** to join the [Unified Classroom](#) to access the Unified Activity Plans.



Education Resources

Education resources have been developed to support athlete leaders, sport coaches, educators, fitness professionals, volunteers, and students to promote and implement high quality, inclusive fitness opportunities for athletes. Each resource includes content that is relevant to the target group, and is intended to supplement other education and training. Fitness education resources below are organized below by primary target audience.

SPORT COACHES

These resources target sport coaches to help prepare them to integrate physical activity, nutrition, and hydration in sports settings.

Fitness For The Sport Coach Online Training

- **DESCRIPTION:** This online training module comprises of content on fitness components and principles, guidelines for physical activity and nutrition, benefits of fitness for performance, injury prevention, and reducing risk for chronic disease. Strategies for infusing fitness activities into sport practice are included, as are methods for fostering healthy eating, dynamic warm-ups and cool-downs, sport conditioning, and fitness assessment tailored to Special Olympics athletes. This module is interactive and includes links to additional Special Olympics resources that sport coaches can use when working with their teams.
- **GOAL:** To provide SO sport coaches with information that will help them introduce fitness into their ongoing sport program.
- **LINK** to [Fitness for the Sport Coach](#).

Sports Nutrition Online Training

- **DESCRIPTION:** This online training module helps sport coaches learn more about nutrition and how they can help their athletes make healthy choices to support their sports performance and overall health, based on national and international standards.
- **GOAL:** To provide SO sport coaches with information that will help them employ strategies to support proper sports nutrition within their team.
- **LINK** to [Sports Nutrition for Coaches](#) training.

Physical Activity for Sports Coaches

- **DESCRIPTION:** This online training module helps sport coaches explore different types of physical activity and discover how to create environments that foster physical literacy.
- **GOAL:** To provide SO sport coaches with foundational physical literacy skills, the ability to assess athlete physical literacy, and an understanding of how physical activity benefits health and sport performance.
- **LINK** to [Physical Activity for Coaches](#) training.

Supporting Resources For Sports Coaches

To follow the [Minimum "Fit" Practice Standards](#) and put their learnings into practice, sports coaches are encouraged to use the following (resources can also be found at [Fitness through Sport webpage](#)):

- **SPORTS PRACTICE TOOLS:** Resources to embed fitness and maximize physical activity during sports practices, including the [Fitness through Sport Playbook](#) and [Fitness Assessments](#).
- **SPORT-SPECIFIC DYNAMIC WARM-UP AND COOL-DOWN GUIDE AND VIDEOS:** Dynamic warm-up and cool-down resources specific to each sport. Dynamic warm-ups and cool-downs are an important part of every workout, training session, or competition. Athletes and coaches can use these tools to learn how to perform the different warm-up and cool-down exercises.
- **SPECIAL OLYMPICS COACHING GUIDES:** Guides for coaching and rules to over 30 Special Olympics sports. Each guide includes a section on fitness that provides sport-specific nutrition, hydration, conditioning, and injury prevention information.

ATHLETE LEADERS

Athletes play an important role in promoting fitness by serving as peer role models and social support for one another. Involvement of athlete leaders is integral to the success of fitness programming. Below are two important leadership opportunities for athletes to engage in fitness.

Fitness Captains

- **DESCRIPTION:** Fitness Captains are athlete leaders on a sports team trained to lead their teammates in activities related to fitness and a healthy lifestyle. Fitness Captains can influence the norms of their team, which in turn, can impact behavior. Fitness Captains encourage and empower fellow athletes to be healthy and fit on their teams. Using their leadership skills and fitness knowledge, Fitness Captains ensure fitness is a key part of their sports experience. Fitness Captains must complete the Leadership and Skills curriculum under Special Olympics Athlete Leadership, as well as the Fitness Captain Module. This module includes training on leadership in fitness, fitness components, the benefits of fitness, how to lead sport-specific warm-ups and cool-downs, and creating and sharing health tips.
- **GOALS:** Fitness Captains work closely with their coaches to help ensure health and fitness are key components of the sports experience and drive positive daily choices that support sports performance, injury prevention, and improvement in overall health and wellbeing.
- **LINK** to [Fitness Captain](#) resources.

Health Messengers

- **DESCRIPTION:** A Health Messenger is a Special Olympics athlete who has been trained to serve as a health and wellness leader, educator, advocate, and role model within their Special Olympics communities and the community at large. Health Messengers are trained in fitness, in addition to health content areas, and have skills-based training related to communications and advocacy. Additional continuing education, including content related to healthy nutrition habits, is being piloted with additional resources forthcoming.
- **GOALS:** Programs can integrate Health Messengers into fitness programming. Examples include involving Health Messengers in promoting fitness challenges, communicating health education on fitness to their peers, assisting in the training of fitness professionals on inclusive fitness, advocating for physical activity and nutrition access, and supporting fitness evaluation.
- **LINK** to [Health Messenger](#) resources.

FITNESS PROFESSIONALS

Special Olympics athletes, coaches, caregivers, and Program staff have identified fitness professionals as key leaders in promoting Fitness through Sport. They can play a critical role in training Fitness Captains and Health Messengers, delivering fitness programming, and speaking at family or athlete workshops. These trainings can support their success in contributing to a culture of fitness.

Inclusive Fitness Online Training

- **DESCRIPTION:** This training module comprises of content on ID, as well as information about the unmet health needs, health disparities, and access barriers experienced by individuals with ID. Principles and strategies for effectively communicating, instructing, and motivating individuals with ID are included, as are methods for inclusion, activity modification, program design, and fitness assessment. The module includes links to Special Olympics resources that fitness professionals can use when working with individuals with ID. Fitness professionals may be able to earn continuing education credits for completing this course depending on their certification requirements, including through the [American Council on Exercise](#), which offers 0.1 credits for the course.
- **GOAL:** To provide fitness professionals with information and guidance that will help them to successfully include individuals with ID in fitness opportunities outside of Special Olympics, such as in gyms or community recreation centers.
- **LINK** to [Inclusive Fitness](#) training.

Fitness Coach

- **DESCRIPTION:** A Fitness Coach is a volunteer who partners with Head Coaches across one or more teams within a Special Olympics Program to integrate fitness activities and education into all phases of the sport experience. Fitness Coaches provide a range of support during training sessions, between sessions, at competitions, and throughout the off-season. By partnering with Head Coaches, Fitness Coaches help bring Fitness through Sport to life by making fitness practical and achievable through customized planning, targeted training, and individualized support. By promoting physical activity, nutrition, and hydration during practices and competitions, they help ensure athlete fitness is supported consistently and that the [Minimum Fit Practice Standards](#) are met. Fitness Coaches complement Head Coaches, and do not replace sport-specific coaching. Anyone who wants to work with Special Olympics athletes, has interest in health and fitness, and a willingness to learn can become a Fitness Coach!
- **GOAL:** A Fitness Coach strengthens the quantity, quality, and consistency of fitness support for athletes while easing the workload of the Head Coach. With a dedicated focus on fitness, Fitness Coaches strengthen athlete development and support both sport performance and lifelong health.
- **LINK** to [Fitness Coach](#) resources.

EDUCATORS

Educators are a key audience to train to support fitness programming before, during, and after school. The below resources will help educators with their success in implementing school-based fitness.

Unified Fitness For Educators Online Training

- **DESCRIPTION:** The online training module describes Unified Fitness, implementation of Unified Fitness in schools, and how Unified Fitness benefits students and the community. The course outlines how Unified Fitness fits within the Unified Champion School strategy, real-life examples of implementation of Unified Fitness across grade levels, and how Unified Fitness aligns with academic, physical, and social-emotional learning goals. While this focuses on strategies for implementation in Unified Champion Schools in the U.S., many resources may also be helpful for educators globally.
- **GOAL:** To provide educators with information and guidance to help them successfully implement inclusive, school-based fitness programming for students with and without ID.
- **LINK** to [Unified Fitness for Educators](#) training.

Supporting Resources For Educators

- **FITNESS GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS:** Supports school-based implementation of fitness programming. For schools not yet participating in Unified Schools or Unified Champion Schools, the guide may serve as a pathway to participation. For schools already participating, the guide may provide new, innovative, and exciting ways to reenergize continued participation. This guide includes an introduction to all fitness resources relevant to youth and schools, along with resources and tips to enhance implementation.
- **UNIFIED SPORTS GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND YOUTH:** Supports implementation of fitness as a Unified Sports offering in the Unified Schools or Unified Champion Schools model. Inclusive fitness aligns with the Unified Sports recreation model to count towards Unified Schools status.
- **UNIFIED CLASSROOM:** Key resource hub for educators to promote inclusion in classroom settings, including inclusive fitness. Resources include videos, lesson plans, and activities broken down by grade level.



Technology Resources

Technology can be used to engage athletes in fitness programming and provide greater data, reporting, and analysis to understand how to best support the health and fitness needs of people with ID. Health interventions for people with ID, such as food tracking and weight loss, have used smart phone applications and technology successfully,^{18, 19} including a clinical trial. Mobile technology can serve to motivate athletes, foster social support, promote goal setting, and gain awareness of healthy behaviors.

SPECIAL OLYMPICS FITNESS APP

- **DESCRIPTION:** Special Olympics Fitness App is an application to promote fitness. Registered users can track all health activities, including steps and physical activity, fruit, vegetable, and water intake, Healthy Minds activities, and sleep. Through these tools, athletes and their supporters can monitor progress, gain awareness of their health behaviors, and participate in fun challenges. The app connects to a variety of wearable devices for automatic syncing. Additionally, users can create health goals and receive notification reminders to encourage them in pursuit of their goals. Users can also complete Strong Minds and Fit 5 activities directly in the app. Program staff can receive easy-to-access reports for their users to monitor and evaluate fitness progress.
- **GOALS:** To increase athletes' knowledge and adoption of healthy behaviors through technology-based fitness challenges, education, behavior tracking, incentives, and social connectedness.
- **LINK** to Special Olympics Fitness App: [Apple Store](#) and [Google Play Store](#)

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Advocacy Resources

To engage more athletes in fitness advocacy, Special Olympics has provided the following partnership guidance. Additionally, Special Olympics is working to engage athlete leaders in fitness-related advocacy at the community level. The strategy will provide athletes with opportunities to engage in advocacy efforts around increasing fitness opportunities and access, improving physical activity infrastructure, and improving nutrition offerings in school, residential, work, and day center settings.

PARTNERSHIP GUIDANCE

Partnering with community-based organizations is a great way to expand physical activity and health education opportunities for athletes and their supporters and encourage athletes to engage in fitness programming outside of sports practices and competitions. Partnerships also support a collective approach to advocate for increased access to local physical activity opportunities. Programs may establish agreements with organizations to share their space for fitness programming, or provide discounts on memberships (e.g., fitness centers) or facilities rentals. Within the Special Olympics movement, a partnership is defined as *a collaboration that involves Special Olympics with one or more collaborator(s) and has a memorandum of understanding (MOU)*. All types of collaborations and partnerships in the Single Health Evaluation (SHE) are referred to as *“collaboration(s)”*, and to the collaborating party as *“collaborator(s)”*. Programs can specify if the collaboration is a partnership that is coupled with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

ADVISORY GROUPS

Advisory Groups can be an effective way to foster collaboration across community level sectors for improving access to physical activity and fitness opportunities. This may involve participation of a Special Olympics Health Messenger in a community-level health or fitness task force or inviting fitness and health professionals and athlete leaders to join a Program-led Fitness Advisory Group to enhance the quality and reach of fitness programming offered within your Program.

ADVOCACY RESOURCES

These resources from Special Olympics partners provide information on how to create systems-level changes to improve fitness, health, and physical education through advocacy, as well as capacity building, to lead local level fitness opportunities.

- [Community Physical Activity Leader training](#): This free course can be taken by athletes, community members, and other volunteers to learn the skills needed to lead fitness programming and will support increasing local-level access to fitness opportunities.
- [Society for Health And Physical Educators \(SHAPE\) Physical Activity & Health Advocacy Resources](#)
- [International Society for Physical Activity and Health \(ISPAH\)'s 8 Investments that Work for Physical Activity](#)





WHY EVALUATE FITNESS PROGRAMMING?



TO IMPROVE

Evaluation allows you to better understand the impact of your fitness programming. Collecting this information provides the opportunity to modify activities that do not work, enhance activities that drive impact, and allocate resources more strategically.



TO ADVOCATE

Evaluation generates awareness of the needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This enhanced understanding brings accountability and can engage the public, institutions, and governments in implementing needed programs and policy changes.



TO DEMONSTRATE IMPACT

Evaluation helps funders and partners fully appreciate the extent and impact of their contributions, including who you are reaching and how you are impacting them.

TOOLS FOR FITNESS EVALUATION

SOI's Research and Evaluation team has developed a set of tools to facilitate the evaluation of fitness programs. These tools are created for individuals with ID and have been tested for their feasibility among athletes and coaches. You can evaluate your fitness programming in the following ways:

1. Lifestyle Survey

- a. Administer the lifestyle survey to participants before and after fitness programming. This will help you gauge changes in lifestyle behaviors and well-being over time.
- b. Outcome Measures:
 - Physical activity (e.g., frequency of moderate physical activity, hours of sedentary behavior, muscular strength activities per week)
 - Nutrition (e.g., fruit and vegetable consumption, hydration)
 - General health and fitness status
 - Gains in physical activity and nutrition knowledge
 - Gains in physical activity and nutrition confidence
 - Gains in social support for physical activity and nutrition
 - Program satisfaction

2. Fitness and Health Assessments

- Conduct fitness and health assessments before and after programming. This will enable you to measure improvements in health and fitness levels. Use the [Youth Fitness Assessment Toolkit](#) if your programming is targeted primarily for youth, or the [Adult Fitness Assessment Toolkit](#) if you are focusing primarily on adults.
- Outcome Measures:
 - Fitness Tests**
 - Endurance: 6-minute Walk
 - Muscular Strength: Push-up, Isometric Push-Up, Maximum Repetition Curl-Up, Timed Sit-to-Stand, Hand Grip Strength
 - Flexibility: Modified Apley's Shoulder, Sit and Reach, Trunk Lift
 - Balance: Single Leg Stance (eyes open and closed)
 - Speed: 10-Meter Agility Shuttle Run
 - Power: Standing Long Jump
 - Health Tests**
 - Blood pressure
 - Height and Weight
 - Waist to Hip circumference

3. Physical Activity Wearables

- Distribute physical activity wearables, such as Fitbits and Apple watches, to athletes to track activity and sleep behaviors before, during, and after fitness programming. This is the most accurate way to collect physical activity information from your athletes.
- Outcome Measures:
 - Physical activity (e.g., moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity, light physical activity, types of activities, total daily steps)
 - Sedentary time (e.g., time spent not moving during waking hours)
 - Sleep patterns (e.g., daily hours of sleep)

4. Attendance Tracking

- Keep a record of attendance at each session of your fitness program. Monitoring participation is essential to understanding engagement and adherence. Use attendance to compare changes in outcomes by those who participated in 90% of the program compared to those who participated in 10% or less of your programming.
- Outcome Measures:
 - Total number of participants in your fitness program
 - Number of weeks participants attend programming

More information can be found on the [Special Olympics Fitness Evaluation webpage](#).

SUPPORT FROM SOI RESEARCH AND EVALUATION (R&E)

Complete the [Fitness Evaluation Request Form](#) to connect with the SOI R&E team to streamline your evaluation process and provide:

Customized Support

- Indicate the level of support needed from SOI's Research and Evaluation team.

Tool Selection Guidance

- Help selecting the most suitable tools for evaluating your fitness programming.

Data and Reports

- Provide Program-specific data and reports that illustrate the impact of your fitness programming.

Evaluating the impact of fitness programming not only helps to enhance effectiveness but also provides insight on how to improve future programming.

Do I need to do all of these to evaluate my fitness program?

No, at minimum, ask athletes to complete the **Lifestyle survey** pre- and post-fitness programming and track **attendance**.





This guide is a tool to motivate, support, and standardize the implementation of fitness programming. A complete list of resources can be found on the [Special Olympics Fitness Resources](#) page. Please contact fitness@specialolympics.org for questions regarding fitness implementation or reach out to your Regional Health Manager for additional technical assistance and support.

Together, we will cultivate fitness to be a seamless part of the entire Special Olympics movement!

Call To Action



Additional Behavior Change Techniques

Behavior Change Strategy	Definition	Example
Develop SMART goals	Encourage short and long-term goal setting for the behavior and outcomes. Goals should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely). Review goals regularly.	An example of a SMART behavioral goal is "By the end of the program, I will exercise for 30 minutes, 5 days each week." An example of a SMART outcomes goal is "By the end of the program, I will increase my 6-minute walk distance by 50 meters or more"
Explain risks and benefits	Explain consequences of doing or not doing the behavior.	During the physical activity portion of the program, teach athletes that doing balance exercises can help prevent falls and injuries in sports.
Review performance over time	Utilize data to provide feedback on an athlete's performance towards their goal.	In a Unified Fitness Club, have a chart that shows miles over time. Every 4 weeks, review this chart with athletes to let them know how they've done over the last month.
Build action plans	Support athletes to plan how to reach their goals.	Ask athletes to write down the steps they will take to achieve their goal.
Identify barriers	Discuss barriers to behavior change and develop a plan for overcoming these barriers.	Athletes discuss how expensive it is to eat healthy, then explain that canned or frozen vegetables and fruits are less expensive options.
Identify role models	Acknowledge that others see the individual as a role model.	Remind participants that they all have family or friends that look up to them and would be proud to see them do this behavior. This technique also includes suggesting athletes are trained as a Health Messenger or Fitness Captain.
Make a pledge	Make a group pledge or goal and have each member commit to doing their part.	The team pledges to workout at least two days per week outside of regularly scheduled practice.

Program Resources

Many SO Programs throughout the world have created high-quality resources to enhance fitness among their athletes. Programs can adapt and implement fitness resources shared by other Programs [here](#). To add your Programs' resources for sharing, please email fitness@specialolympics.org.

External Resources

There are several high quality, evidence-based resources that have been developed by other organizations to promote healthy eating and physical activity among PWID. Below are a few examples that may be helpful in developing fitness programming or resources for your Program.

Health Matters

- A research-based, field-tested curriculum that shows professionals how to conduct up to 59 one-hour sessions that help people with developmental disabilities make the best choices about health, exercise, and nutrition. This resource includes everything professionals need to run successful health education sessions.

Stoplight Healthy Living

- A health promotion program for adults with ID created by the University of Kansas Disability and Health Program. The program is designed to be delivered by service providers in six weekly group sessions. It provides health information about nutrition and physical activity to adults with ID through a plain language format in a fun group learning environment. Resources include a Facilitator Manual and Session Materials covering a variety of health topics.

SMASH IT!

- SMASH IT! was developed by staff at the UNESCO Chair in Inclusive Sport, Fitness, Recreation, and Physical Education. This program provides 8 weeks or 24 sessions of hour-long programming that is appropriate for people with and without disabilities.

Inclusive Healthy Eating Workshops

- Commissioned by SO Health and supported by the Golisano Foundation, this series includes four lessons that can be implemented as a series or as stand-alone modules. Each workshop introduces a simple nutrition message and includes a hands-on opportunity to learn how to prepare a simple recipe for a meal or snack.

Frequently Asked Questions

There are several high-quality, evidence-based resources that have been developed to promote healthy eating and physical activity among individuals with ID. Below are a few examples that may be helpful in developing fitness programming or resources for your Program.

Q. Should nutrition classes (without physical activity) be tracked as fitness activities?

A. Please track under "preventative health education" in the Healthy Communities Impact Grant (HCIG) and the Single Health Evaluation (SHE). It should not be included under fitness programming in the Census or HCIG, as it only addresses one component of fitness and not all three components.

Q. Should a hydration or nutrition-only challenge be tracked as fitness?

A. Programs are encouraged to embed health education messaging related to all three components of fitness. If a hydration-only, physical activity-only, or hydration-only fitness challenge is conducted without education in other domains, please track this under "preventative health education" opportunities.

Q. Should fitness programming happening in community centers not affiliated with Special Olympics be tracked?

A. Special Olympics fitness programming should be conducted through a Special Olympics Program or through a Program's partnerships (ex: a fitness facility). If programming is not affiliated with any training and implementation of fitness initiatives that your Program has created, it should not be tracked. If your Program has trained a community center to implement fitness programming, please report the number of participants in the fitness programming being implemented.

Q. Should MATP be tracked as fitness?

A. MATP is tracked separately in the census. Future directions to integrate fitness into MATP may include integration of fitness education led by trained facilitators, Fitness Captains, or fitness professionals.

Q. Should sports be tracked as fitness in the census?

A. Sport programming should be tracked in the census according to the census guidelines and should not be tracked as fitness. Fitness through Sport should be integrated using the guidelines and strategies described on pages 23-25. Minimum "Fit" Practice Standards should not be counted as fitness programming.

Fitness through Sport activities (ex: Performance Stations, sports coaches trained in fitness, Fitness Captains, etc.) can be reported through the [Fitness Captains Directory Submission](#) and the Healthy Communities Impact Grant reports.



Special Olympics
Health

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