

# Special Olympics Attitudes Research

## SUMMARY PAGE

### WHY ATTITUDES?

As evident throughout history, people in societies around the globe hold many misperceptions and negative attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Negative attitudes have been shown to be barriers to inclusion for people with ID in the community.<sup>1,2</sup> Several factors, including prior experience with people with ID and educational level, influence attitudes towards people with ID.<sup>3,4</sup> Research has shown that these attitudes can be changed through increased quality, positive interactions which challenge existing stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> This is at the crux of the Special Olympics Movement and is a strategic priority for the organization. Special Olympics utilizes sport to fight the stigma faced by people with ID, demonstrate their abilities, and change attitudes.

1 Abbott, S., & McConkey, R. (2006). The barriers to social inclusion as perceived by people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal Of Intellectual Disabilities*, 10(3), 275-287.

2 Gilmore, L., Campbell, J., & Cuskelly, M. (2003). Developmental Expectations, Personality Stereotypes, and Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education: community and teacher views of Down syndrome. *International Journal Of Disability, Development & Education*, 50(1), 65.

3 Tak-fai Lau, J., & Chau-kiu, C. (1999). Discriminatory attitudes to people with intellectual disability or mental health difficulty. *International Social Work*, 42(4), 431.

4 Yazbeck, M., McVilly, K., & Parmenter, T. R. (2004). Attitudes Toward People with Intellectual Disabilities. *Journal Of Disability Policy Studies*, 15(2), 97-111.

5 McManus, J. L., Feyes, K. J., & Saucier, D. A. (2011). Contact and knowledge as predictors of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28(5), 579-590.

**Myth 1:** The majority of people with ID are severely impaired.

**Fact 1:** 85% of people with ID are only mildly impaired. Despite this fact, there is a widespread belief that people with ID are not capable of doing things such as playing inclusive sports and attending inclusive schools.<sup>6</sup>

**Myth 2:** Most people feel that their city/area is a good place to live for people with ID.

**Fact 2:** Only 50% of people reported that their city/area is a good place for people with ID to live, while 36% reported their city/area is not a good place for people with ID to live.<sup>7</sup>

6 Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). *Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

7 Gallup (2014). *Gallup World Poll*.

**Myth 3:** The public's attitude toward people with ID cannot be changed by increased interactions between people with and without ID.

**Fact 3:** Attitudes can be changed through increased quality interactions that challenge prevailing stigmas. Research has shown that structured and positive interactions can lead to attitude change.<sup>5</sup>

## PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

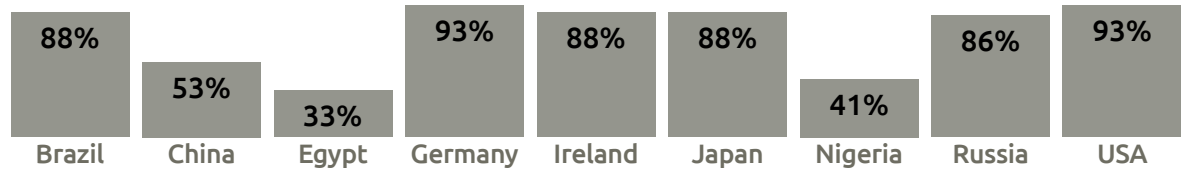
Due to the impact that public attitudes have on the lives of people with ID, documenting these attitudes has been one of the cornerstones of Special Olympics research. Since 2001, surveys of public attitudes have been conducted in 14 countries representing all Special Olympics regions. Special Olympics' [multinational attitudes study](#) surveyed people from 10 countries around the world to assess their attitudes about people with ID. It found that while attitudes vary between different countries and regions around the world, misperceptions and negative attitudes are found worldwide<sup>6</sup>:

- Although people with ID face many barriers to health care, **approximately 2/3 (68%) of those surveyed felt that people with ID receive the same or better health care than the general public.** (For more information see the [Special Olympics Health Research](#) section.)
- Over one third of the respondents felt that people with ID should be employed in “special workshops”, not mainstream workplaces. **Significant numbers of people in all countries surveyed felt that inclusion in the work place and school could have negative consequences** including more accidents, lower productivity, decreased ability to learn, and lack of discipline.
- When asked about obstacles to inclusion, respondents believed that **negative attitudes from other students, employees, and neighbors, as well as a lack of available supports were huge barriers to inclusion.**
- Attitudes varied from country to country about sports participation for people with ID. In Japan, India, and China, less than 20% of respondents believed that people with ID are very capable of participating in sports with other people with ID, as opposed to 75% in Germany.

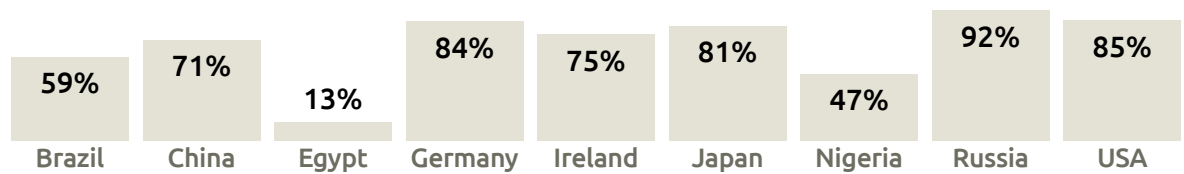
- **When asked about the ability of people with ID to participate on sports teams with others without ID, respondents were much more skeptical.** In nine out of ten countries surveyed, only 20% or less of the population believed that people with ID could play sports alongside their peers without disabilities. In four of the ten, that number fell to 10% or less.

**PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE ABILITIES OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (SELECTED CAPABILITIES)**

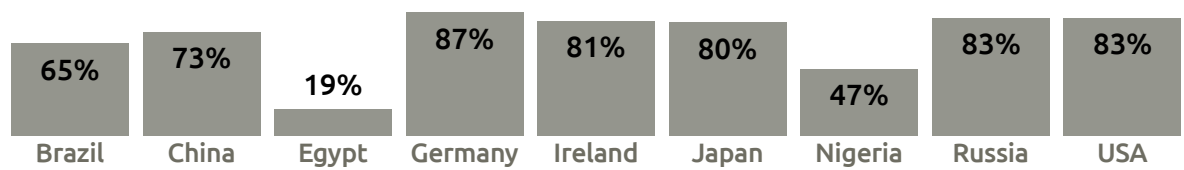
**Sustain Friendships**



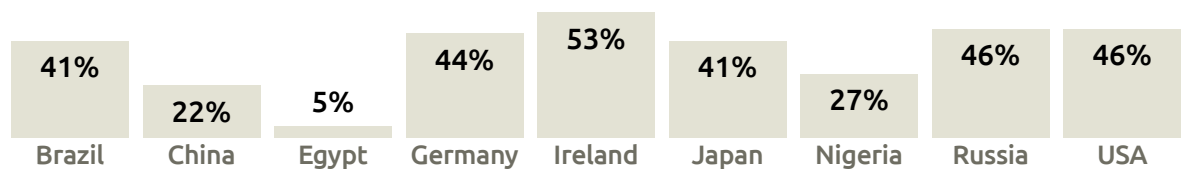
**Wash and Dress**



**Tell Time**



**Understand News Events**



**Handle Emergencies**



Youth attitudes also play an important role in fostering inclusion, particularly in school settings. A Special Olympics study focusing on Japanese youth found<sup>1</sup>:

- Only 40% of Japanese youth reported having personal contact with students with ID in school.
- **Only 17% of Japanese students indicated that they would spend time with students with ID outside of the classroom**, and over 75% of Japanese students expressed concern that including students with ID in their classroom would impede their own learning.
- Japanese youths did not hold completely negative perceptions about people with ID. For example, over 70% of Japanese youths believed that people with ID were capable of playing on a sports team. Furthermore, **nearly half of Japanese youth (46%) were open to having students with ID in their school, in contrast to Japanese adults who overwhelmingly believe that children with ID should learn in separate schools.**<sup>6,9</sup>

While a multitude of characteristics and experiences can influence attitudes, media is one factor that can play a powerful role in how the public regards people with ID. Negative portrayals can perpetuate misperceptions and hide the real issues that people with ID face. Alternatively, positive and realistic media portrayals can have a positive impact. One [study](#) found that **after a viewing of the film *The Ringer*, 74% of youth and 83% of adult respondents thought that the movie would have a positive impact on the public's attitudes toward people with ID.**<sup>10</sup>

Special Olympics research has demonstrated that much work remains in order to educate the public and dispel inaccuracies and stigma about people with ID.

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**“I don't have anyone with ID around me and there is no way I can know about it. Misunderstanding is to some extent inevitable.”**

—Student, Japan<sup>8</sup>

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8 Norins, J., Matsumoto, C., Siperstein, G. (2005). *National Survey of Japanese Youth's Attitudes Toward Peers with Intellectual Disabilities*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston and Special Olympics, Inc.

9 Special Olympics (2005). *Changing Attitudes Changing the World – A Study of Youth Attitudes about Intellectual Disabilities*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

10 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M. (2006). *Survey of adult and youth reactions to public showing of *The Ringer**. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc

# CHANGING ATTITUDES THROUGH SPECIAL OLYMPICS

In addition to understanding the state of attitudes toward people with ID, Special Olympics has conducted research to determine the impact of its programs on attitudes.

**Evaluations have found that Special Olympics programs are changing the attitudes of parents, athletes, health care professionals, students, and the general public.**

- **Special Olympics sports changes parents' expectations.** A [U.S. study](#) found that many parents credit Special Olympics with helping them better understand their child's capabilities. Sixty-five percent (65%) of parents felt that participation in Special Olympics had raised their expectations of their sons and daughters.<sup>11</sup>
- **Special Olympics sports not only impacts others' perceptions about ID, it also influences the attitudes people with ID hold about themselves.** An [evaluation of Special Olympics in Brazil, Argentina, and Peru](#) found that nearly all athletes who participated in Special Olympics reported improvements in "feeling good about yourself."<sup>12</sup>
- **Unified Sports influences the attitudes of partners without disabilities toward athletes with intellectual disabilities.** One [evaluation in Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia](#) found that the majority of Unified football partners felt that their understanding of people with ID had improved a lot (50%) or a little (29%).<sup>13</sup>
- **World Games can challenge negative public attitudes toward people with ID.** One [study assessing attitude change in youth before and after the World Games in China](#) found that after World Games, Chinese youth had improved perceptions about the abilities of students with ID and were significantly more willing to interact with a student with ID inside and outside of school.<sup>14</sup>
- **Healthy Athletes transforms health care professionals' attitudes about the abilities of people with ID.** After volunteering with Healthy Athletes, health care professionals reported improved perceptions of people with ID's ability to 'describe their health to doctor' and 'act appropriately toward strangers'.<sup>15</sup>

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11 Kersh, J., & Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *The positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

12 Harada C, Parker R, Siperstein G. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in Latin America: findings from Argentina, Brazil, and Peru*. Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Boston.

13 Norins, J., Harada, C., & Parker, R. (2006). *An Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot-Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia*. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston and Special Olympics, Inc.

14 Norins, J., Parker, R. C., & Siperstein, G. N. (2006). *Impact of the Special Olympics world games on the attitudes of youth in China*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

15 Bainbridge, D. (2008). *The antecedents and impacts of participation in Special Olympics Healthy Athletes on the perceptions and professional practice of health care professionals: A preliminary investigation*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

- **The Unified Strategy shifts perceptions of students with ID.** Seventy-one percent (71%) of U.S. school administrators observed that the Special Olympics Unified Strategy impacts the behaviors and attitudes of students without disabilities toward their peers with ID.<sup>16</sup>
- **Young Athletes raises parents' expectations of their child with ID.** In the United States, 21% of teachers reported that Young Athletes benefited families by raising parental expectations of their child's capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

Through each of its programs, Special Olympics positively shapes perceptions of people with ID, paving the way for social inclusion

16 Center for Social Development and Education (2012). *Project UNIFY 2011-2012 Final Evaluation Report*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.

17 Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). *Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston

## KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATTITUDES RESEARCH



Only **50%** of people reported that their city/area is a good place for people with ID to live, while **36%** reported their city/area is not a good place for people with ID to live.<sup>7</sup>



Over **one third** of the general population believes that people with ID should be employed in "special workshops," not mainstream workplaces.<sup>6</sup>



Despite 85% of people with ID being only mildly impaired, there is a **widespread belief** that people with ID are not capable of doing things such as playing inclusive sports and attending inclusive schools.<sup>6</sup>



Special Olympics sports changes parents' expectations. **65%** of parents felt that participation in Special Olympics had raised their expectations of their sons and daughters.<sup>11</sup>



Attitudes about sports participation for people with ID vary. In Japan and China, only **17%** of people believe that people with ID are very capable of participating in sports with other people with ID, as opposed to **75%** in Germany.<sup>6</sup>



Unified Sports **influences the attitudes** of partners without disabilities toward athletes with intellectual disabilities. One evaluation found that the majority of Unified football partners felt that their understanding of people with ID had improved a lot (50%) or a little (29%).<sup>13</sup>