

Special Olympics Families Research

[SUMMARY PAGE](#)

WHY FAMILIES?

Families are an important source of support for people with intellectual disabilities (ID), many of whom continue to live with their families into adulthood. For example, in the United States approximately 60% of adults with ID live with their families.¹ In order for families to thrive, social support is essential for parents of people with ID to maintain good mental health and positive parenting relationships with their child. Special Olympics provides opportunities for families to strengthen relationships within their family and to forge supportive communities with other families of children and adults with ID.^{2,3}

“We felt helpless before, because we did not know what his future would be. Since participating in Special Olympics, he [has changed] significantly, and we see the hope. They [people with intellectual disabilities] can merge into society.”

—Parent, Special Olympics China⁴

BENEFITS OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS TO THE FAMILY

Families are crucial to the success of Special Olympics and evaluations have found that **families of athletes are actively involved** in the organization. For example, the majority of families in Peru (80%), Argentina (85%), Brazil (59%), and the United States (82%) reported attending competitions.^{5,6} In the United States, 75% of family members were involved beyond watching competitions, with 42% serving as Special Olympics coaches.

1 Siperstein, G. (2012). [Special Olympics Household Study]. Unpublished raw data.

2 Wade, C., Llewellyn, G., & Matthews, J. (2015). Parent mental health as a mediator of contextual effects on parents with intellectual disabilities and their children. *Clinical Psychologist*, 19(1), 28-38.

3 Feldman, M., Varghese, J., Ramsay, J., & Rajska, D. (2002). Relationships between social support, stress and mother-child interactions in mothers with intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 15, 314–323.

4 Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Siperstein, G. N. (2008). *A comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in China. A special report.* University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

5 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: University of Massachusetts Boston & Special Olympics Inc.

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

While families are critical to the success of Special Olympics, Special Olympics also plays an important role in supporting families by creating family networks, raising expectations of their family member with ID, strengthening family relationships, and creating knowledge about ID and related issues.



CREATING FAMILY NETWORKS

Both Young Athletes and traditional Special Olympics sports have been shown to create networks of parents, fostering a support system where they can forge new relationships, learn about available support services, and connect with a community that understands their experience as a parent of a person with ID.

- A [U.S. study](#) found that 75% of parents reported that Special Olympics had a **positive impact on their social relationships outside the family**. Parents reported developing friendships with other parents of athletes who often share common experiences and whose children face similar challenges.⁶

A major benefit of Young Athletes is parents getting support through networking with other families. A parent of a participant in the US remarked, “It provided opportunities to communicate with other parents about needs of other kids with disabilities. Connecting and sharing information is really a huge benefit...it gives you an opportunity to talk to someone that can relate to what it is like to have a child with disabilities.”⁷



STRENGTHENING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to building external relationships, Special Olympics provides opportunities for family members to connect with one another and strengthens the bonds within families. A [U.S. study](#) found that⁶:

- Parents and siblings of athletes felt **Special Olympics provided opportunities for the family to come together, thereby strengthening family relationships**. They also reported that it provided opportunities to connect with other families and be meaningfully involved in the community.
- Over half of athletes’ siblings (57%) felt that participation in Special Olympics had **brought their family closer together**.
- Nearly one quarter (22%) of siblings reported that Special Olympics had **improved their own relationship with their brother or sister with ID**.
- 52% of athletes’ siblings said that attending Special Olympics events gave them the **opportunity to see and be proud of their brothers’ and/or sisters’ abilities and accomplishments**.

⁷ Favazza, P., & Siperstein, G. (2006). Evaluation of Young Athletes Program 2006. Washington, DC: Special Olympics and University of Massachusetts Boston.

Young Athletes also helps build family relationships. In Romania, teachers reported that Young Athletes improved communication between parents and participants and increased parents' trust in the abilities of their child.⁷



RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Special Olympics provides athletes with the opportunity to develop skills and demonstrate their abilities. This, in turn, can lead to raised expectations from parents:

- In the United States, parents reported that **Special Olympics allowed them to see their children's independence and competence.**⁶
- A [study in China](#) found that parents reported that participation in Special Olympics had brought them **more hope about their child's future.**⁴
- 70% of teachers in Romania and 21% of teachers in the United States stated that **Young Athletes benefited families by raising expectations of their child's capabilities.**⁷
- A 2014 Young Athletes evaluation found that **by demonstrating that children with ID can participate in and benefit from group activities, parents became more willing to bring their children into social settings.** A parent from Romania commented, *"I was surprised how much he/she changed in his/her first group experience. We clearly need to do more group activities, which prior to this, I was afraid of."*⁸



BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Special Olympics creates an opportunity for families to share knowledge amongst each other and in some cases learn about ID. Furthermore, some of Special Olympics' programs target improving knowledge around specific issues related to ID, such as health. This gain in knowledge can benefit not only the athlete, but the entire family.

- According to one [U.S. study](#), Special Olympics families reported that **connecting with other families opened a valuable source of information about school and community services and programs.**⁶
- An evaluation of Young Athletes found that **parents improved their understanding of people with ID** as a result of participating in Young Athletes. As a Young Athletes leader in Tanzania reported, *"The families feel relieved after learning that having a child with ID is not a personal issue/problem but it is common in the community."*⁸

⁸ Favazza, P., Siperstein, G., & Ghio, K. (2014). Young Athletes Globalization Project. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc

- Some Special Olympics programs, such as Family Health Forums, seek to educate families on issues relating to ID. A survey conducted after Family Health Forums found that **94% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the health of their family would improve as a result of participating.**

KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS FAMILIES RESEARCH



As of 2016, Special Olympics had more than **627,452 registered family members** serving in leadership roles in Programs around the world.⁹



75% of parents in the United States said that Special Olympics had a **positive impact** on their social relationships outside the family.⁶



Young Athletes can help new parents improve their understanding of people with intellectual disabilities by providing them with a **community of families** with experiences similar to theirs.⁸



70% of teachers in Romania and **21%** of teachers in the United States reported that Young Athletes benefited families by **raising expectations** of their child's capabilities.⁷



Parents learn about their child's athletic capabilities through Special Olympics. Parents of athletes in the United States reported being **impressed**, and often **surprised**, by their child's athletic ability.⁶



Over half (57%) of athletes' siblings in the United States felt that participation in Special Olympics had **brought their family closer together.**⁶



Families of Special Olympics athletes are often **actively involved** in Special Olympics. The majority of families in Peru (80%), Argentina (85%), Brazil (59%), and the United States (82%) reported attending competitions.^{5,6}

⁹ 2016 Reach Report (2016). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.