

Special Olympics Overall Impact & Sports Research

[SUMMARY PAGE](#)

WHY SPORTS?

Research commissioned by Special Olympics has shown that many people around the world underestimate the potential and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities (ID).¹ Sports has the potential to change external perceptions and attitudes towards the capabilities of people with ID², and also creates an opportunity to improve individual wellbeing.^{3,4} Special Olympics seeks to empower people with ID to achieve their personal best in all aspects of life, using sports to create opportunities for people with ID to demonstrate excellence, improve their physical fitness, and create relationships through sports.

Research demonstrates that physical activity improves motor skill development, muscular strength, immune system functioning, sleep patterns, and diet and nutrition.⁴ In addition, physical activity and sports can improve health outcomes by reducing the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer, conditions for which adults with disabilities are often at increased risk.^{5,6} Special Olympics is the ultimate prescription, as sport provides opportunities for athletes to get active and live healthier lifestyles.

The benefits of physical activity and Special Olympics sports participation extend beyond physical wellbeing. According to a study examining psychosocial outcomes, people with ID who are involved in Special Olympics demonstrate increased ability to adapt to stressors compared to involvement in sports outside of Special Olympics and no sports at all.⁷ In another study, Special Olympics athletes show increased levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and social inclusion compared to non-participants.⁸ The impact of sports and Special Olympics also goes beyond the athlete. Participation brings families together and provides a social network of other families involved in Special Olympics.⁹ Community engagement increases awareness of ID and subsequently, acceptance of people with ID. Thus, sports fosters increased inclusion and improved well-being.

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

2 Harada, C. M., Siperstein, G. N., Parker, R. C., & Lenox, D. (2011). Promoting social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities through sport: Special Olympics International, global sport initiatives and strategies. *Sport in Society*, 14(9), 1131-1148.

3 Dykens, E. M., Rosner, B. A., & Butterbaugh, G. (1998). Exercise and sports in children and adolescents with developmental disabilities. *Positive physical and psychosocial effects. Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*, 7(4), 757-71.

4 Dinomais, M., et al. (2010). Social Functioning and Self-Esteem in Young People with Disabilities Participating in Adapted Competitive Sport. *Neuropediatrics*, 41(2), 49-54.

5 Nike Inc. (2012). *Designed to Move: A Physical Activity Action Agenda*.

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Vital Signs Monthly Report: Adults with Disabilities, Physical Activity is for everybody*. Atlanta, GA; 2014

7 Crawford, C., Burns, J., & Fernie, B. A. (2015). Psychosocial impact of involvement in the Special Olympics. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 45, 93-102.

8 Weiss, J., Diamond, T., Demark, J., & Lovald, B. (2003). Involvement in Special Olympics and its relations to self-concept and actual competency in participants with developmental disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 24(4), 281-305.

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

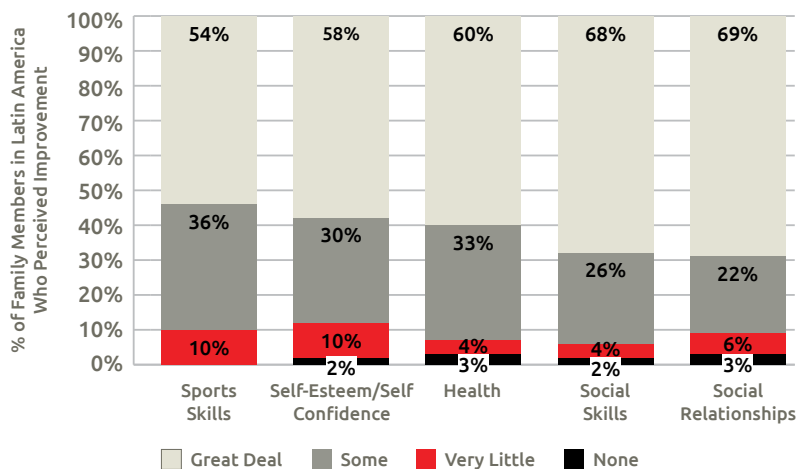
IMPACT OF INVOLVEMENT



In 2016, 5.6 million Special Olympics athletes and Unified Partners competed in 108, 821 competitions worldwide.¹⁰ Studies have shown that participating in Special Olympics sports has a positive impact on athletes in a variety of ways:

- According to a study evaluating the Unified Football Pilot Project in Europe/Eurasia:
 - **46%** of athletes and partners reported that their football skills improved a lot.
 - **53%** of Unified athletes reported feeling a lot better about themselves after participating.¹¹
- Research with nearly 2,500 family members in the United States, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, and China found that, as a result of participating in Special Olympics:
 - **90%** of family members in Latin America saw improvement in athlete self-esteem and self-confidence.
 - **80%** of family members in China saw improvement in athlete sports skills.
 - **90%** of family members in the US saw improvements in athlete social skills.
- The same studies found that **almost all athletes (94% on average) reported improvements in their sports skills** as a result of participating in Special Olympics.
- In the US, more than 90% of coaches reported **improvement in athletes' social skills and self-esteem.**¹³

FAMILY PERCEPTIONS OF ATHLETE IMPROVEMENT¹⁴



10 2016 Reach Report (2016). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

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

12 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.

13 Siperstein, G. N., Harada, C. M., Parker, R. C., Hardman, M. L., & McGuire, J. (2005). Comprehensive national study of Special Olympics programs in the United States. A special report. University of Massachusetts Boston. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

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

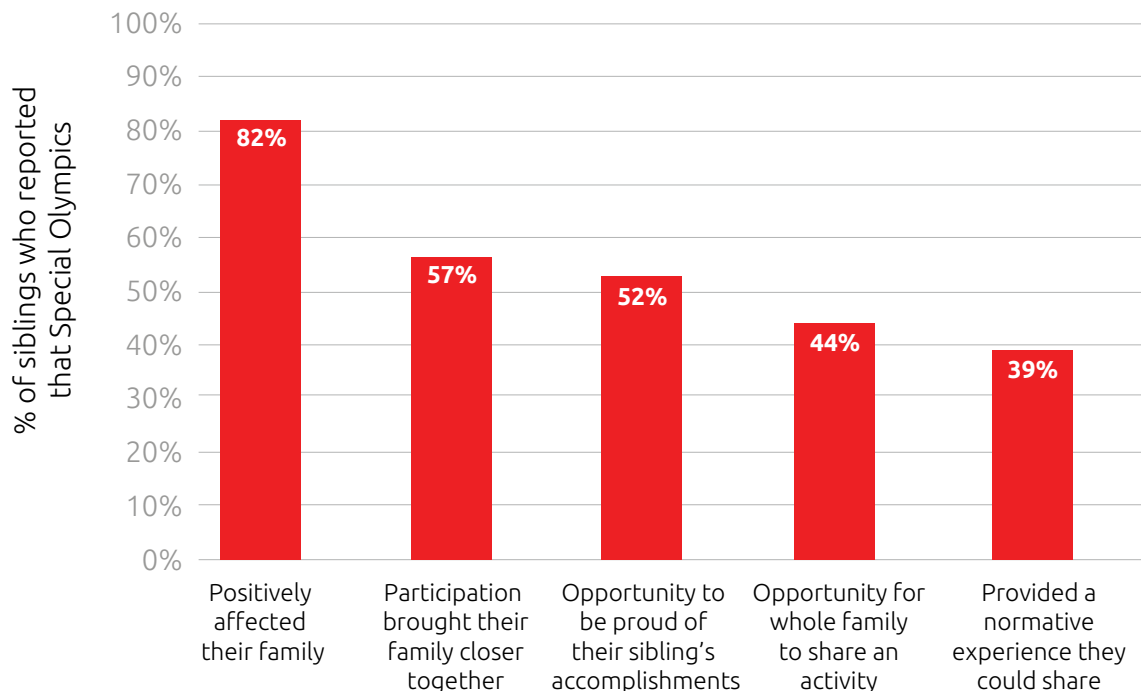


FAMILIES

Families also benefit from athletes participating in Special Olympics. A U.S. study conducted with 120 families in 4 different states found that⁹:

- Special Olympics provided opportunities for the family to come together, thereby strengthening family relationships.
 - **70%** of parents of athletes felt Special Olympics had some impact on time spent together as a family.
 - **75%** of parents reported that Special Olympics had an impact on their social relationships, and described how Special Olympics provided opportunities to connect with other families and be meaningfully involved in the community.
- Special Olympics also changes parental attitudes.
 - **65%** of parents felt that participating in Special Olympics increased their expectations of their child with ID.
 - Parents reported that Special Olympics allowed them to see their children's independence and competence.
 - In addition, parents were "impressed, and often surprised, by their child's athletic ability, by their level of effort, their competitive nature, and by their demonstrations of sportsmanship."

The impact of Special Olympics extends to siblings as well. The following graph displays data collected from siblings of Special Olympics Athletes⁹:

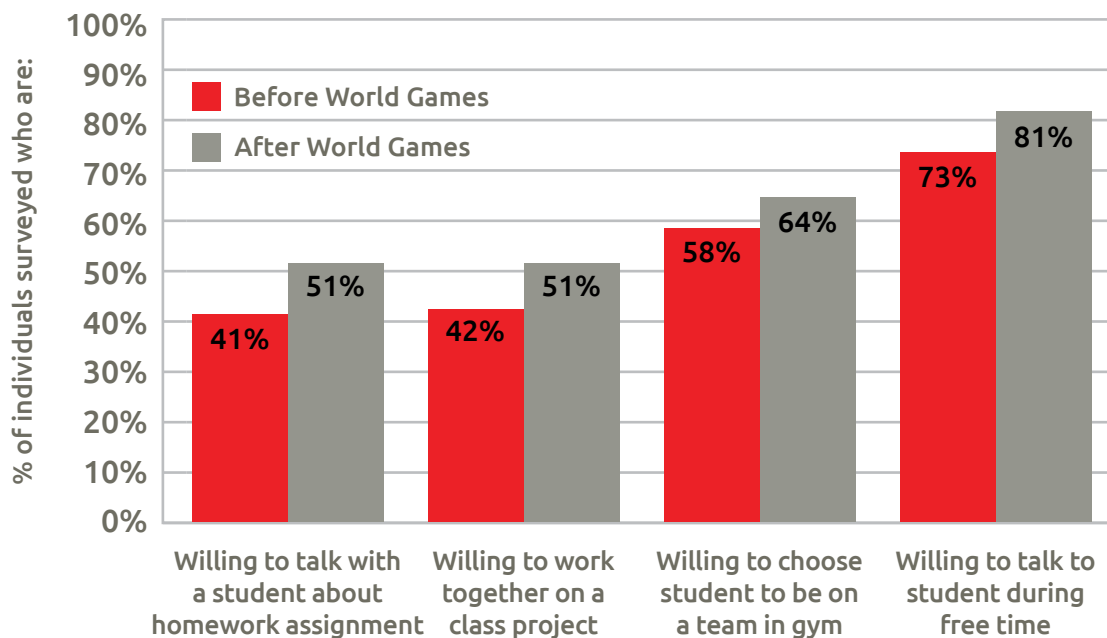


WORLD GAMES

Participating in World Games is a unique experience for athletes, coaches, families, and the community and has been shown to positively influence the public’s perception of people with ID’s abilities. A [study before and after the World Games in Shanghai](#) documented the attitudes of Chinese youth in Shanghai, Chongqing, and Beijing. It found that after World Games¹⁵:

- Improved perceptions about the ability of students with ID. For example, youth were more confident in the ability of students with ID to participate in physical activity and understand the rules of a sports game.
- Increased willingness to interact with a student with ID inside and outside of school. For instance, after World Games the percent of youth willing to work together on a class project with a student with ID rose by 9%.
- Enabled more positive attitudes of the capabilities of students with ID than youth who were not involved.

CHINESE YOUTH WILLINGNESS TO INTERACT WITH STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES BEFORE AND AFTER 2007 WORLD GAMES¹⁵



15 Norins, J., Parker, R. C., & Siperstein, G. N. (2007). Impact of the Special Olympics world games on the attitudes of youth in China. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

Research on World Games has also focused on the experience of coaches and athletes before, during, and after World Games. One study found that, while both athletes and coaches focus on sports at World Games, coaches tended to place more emphasis on building the athlete's self-confidence and having them achieve their personal best while athletes were more focused on winning medals and experiencing a major competition. This study shed light on the dual roles of the coach: preparing athletes in their sport and promoting the personal and social skills of athletes.¹⁶

KEY FINDINGS:

SPECIAL OLYMPICS OVERALL IMPACT AND SPORTS RESEARCH



70% of parents in the United States reported that Special Olympics has a positive effect on time spent as a family – either increasing time spent together or types of activities shared.⁹



82% of siblings in the United States felt that Special Olympics had positively impacted their family.⁹



Athletes improve sports skills through Special Olympics. In Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and China, **94% reported improvements** as a result of their participation.^{12,14}



World Games serves as a catalyst to change attitudes about people with ID. After World Games in Shanghai, youth in several Chinese cities were **more likely to interact** with a student with ID inside and outside of the classroom.¹⁵



108,000 Special Olympics competitions were held in 2015, averaging **297 competitions per day** around the world.¹⁰

¹⁶ Dowling, S., Hassan, D., & McConkey, R. (2012). The 2011 Summer World Games Experience for Special Olympics Athletes and Coaches: A longitudinal study in four countries. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.