



Special Olympics

Serving Athletes, Families and the Community

**The Universal Impact of Special Olympics:
Challenging the Barriers for People with Intellectual Disability**



“It’s just fun. You’re out talking with people, and you meet people that you’d never have met before in your life. The family atmosphere just grows.”

Family member

Since the beginning of Special Olympics, there have been countless stories about the difference the organization makes in the lives of athletes, their families, volunteers and the general public. These stories are powerful and inspiring, and they have been opening doors and touching hearts for more than four decades. Since 2001, however, Special Olympics has been examining the impact of its Programs and events in more measurable ways. By doing so with carefully planned and scientifically rigorous research and evaluation studies, conducted in collaboration with major universities and independent research groups, Special Olympics has not only confirmed the familiar anecdotes, but gone well beyond. The resulting facts and figures prove that the stories are not isolated incidents and that Special Olympics is not just “nice”; it is important.

Benefits of Special Olympics to Athletes

To document the universality of its impact, Special Olympics has conducted a series of systematic surveys and personal interviews of athletes, parents and coaches. These studies have included a representative sample of 2,376 athletes, 2,548 family members and caretakers, and 427 coaches and partners from North America, South America, Europe and Asia.

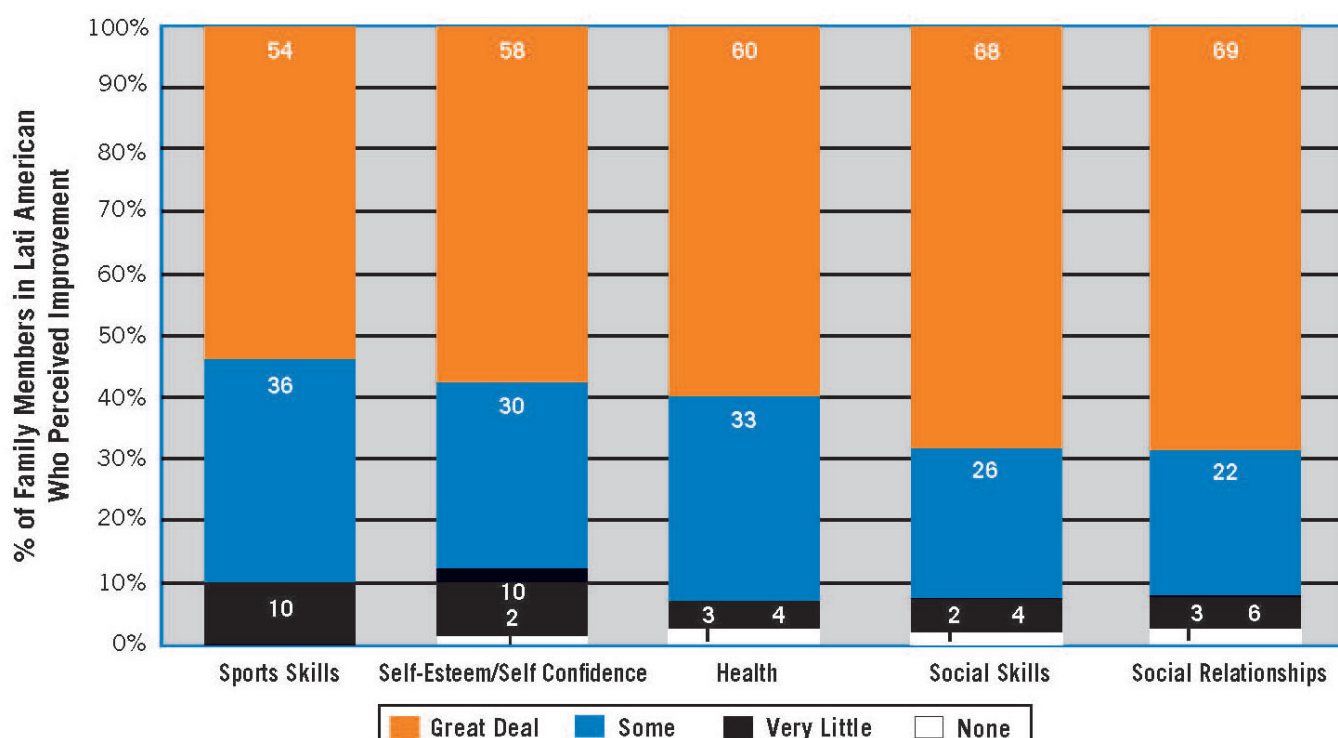
What is clear is that the impact of Special Olympics transcends variations in culture or context that exist worldwide. In numerous countries that have been assessed, there is a consistency in the Special Olympics experience and its benefit and value to the athletes. This is true for individuals with intellectual disabilities at all life stages, from small children to adults. It seems clear that the positive effects of participation in Special Olympics are universal, and in many ways, parallel the positive effects experienced by people without intellectual disabilities who are active in sports.

Impact of Special Olympics on Athletes’ Sports Abilities and Self Image

Special Olympics improves athletes’ personal development. Parents and coaches in countries around the world report significant improvement in both athletes’ sport skills and their overall sense of self (self-esteem and self-confidence).

This finding is evident from both anecdotal and more formal data reported by coaches, family members and the athletes themselves. Many Chinese coaches (70%), for example, report “a great deal” of improvement in athletes’ in self esteem.¹ The findings are even more

Figure 1: Family Perceptions of Athlete Improvement (Latin America)²



dramatic when athletes themselves are asked about “feeling good about yourself ” after participating in Special Olympics. Among athletes in Latin America, for instance, more than 90% report “a lot” of improvement in this area.² These findings are similar to results found in all countries. For very young athletes in the Special Olympics Young Athletes program, the areas of improvement range from increased motor skills to increased social skills, communication skills and even improved cognitive skills.³

Worldwide, individuals with intellectual disabilities are serious in their endeavor to be physically active. Approximately half of all Special Olympics athletes in the United States (48%), China (53%) and Latin America (45%) engage in physical activity or exercise for more than three hours per week in addition to their involvement with Special Olympics.^{1, 2, 4} This is noteworthy, considering that less than 25% of the general population of the United States engages in three or more hours of physical activity per week.⁵ These findings suggest a connection between participation in Special Olympics and pursuit of additional physically beneficial activities.

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

- Almost all athletes experience improvement in sports skills (94% on average across China, Latin America, and the United States).
- Beyond improvements in sports skills, nearly all Special Olympics athletes (more than 90%) from all countries studied experience improved self-esteem and self confidence.
- There is a strong connection between Special Olympics participation and healthy physical activity. Based on their reported level of activity, Special Olympics athletes are more physically active than members of the general population in the United States!

**“Special Olympics has
infused my son with the
spirit of courage and
confidence.”**

*Parent of athlete from the
United States*

Impact of Special Olympics on Athletes' Social Skills and Social Relationships

The significant improvements that parents, coaches and athletes across the globe report in the area of self image can be attributed to the essential opportunities that Special Olympics provides for social interaction and the opportunity for achievement, both on and off the playing field. Universally, athletes across the globe view Special Olympics as a way to make new friends and spend time with friends.

The improvements athletes make in social skills and friendships are often dramatic. In the United States, for example, approximately 90% of family members report improvement in both social skills and friendships.⁴ Coaches are even more likely to note improvements, with approximately 95% reporting improvements in both areas.⁴

Studies in other countries also suggest improved social lives for Special Olympics athletes. Athletes in Europe participating in Unified Sports are provided the opportunity to play on teams and socially interact with their non-disabled peers (referred to as “partners”). The majority of athletes (60-100% depending on the country) participate in social activities outside of practice and competition. While many of the social activities beyond the playing field involve other athletes, many also involve partners (49% in Romania, for example).¹⁰ This is important considering that in several of the participating countries, students with intellectual disabilities are educated in separate schools.

It is clear that beyond the playing field, Special Olympics provides a platform where athletes with intellectual disabilities can experience social inclusion.

Another aspect of Special Olympics participation studied by the organization is its connection with employment. Employment can make a life-changing impact on someone with an intellectual disability, providing a way to make a living, boost independence, possibly provide health insurance and other benefits, and provide another social outlet. Research has found that 52% of Special Olympics U.S. athletes are employed. While employment statistics are difficult to find for the wider community of people with intellectual disabilities, they have been estimated to be as low as 10%.⁴

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

- Family members report that Special Olympics athletes show increased social skills and improved social relationships of all kinds.
 - Social skills improved by an average of 95% across the China, Latin America, and the United States.
 - Relationship skills improved by an average of 94% across the China, Latin America, and the United States.

Benefits of Special Olympics to Families

Families are critical to the success of Special Olympics and the organization provides invaluable benefits to family members who become involved. Worldwide, participation in Special Olympics significantly boosts family members' perceptions of and expectations for their children's future and improves family members' social networks both within the family and the wider community.

Family Involvement in Special Olympics

In every country surveyed, family members of Special Olympics athletes are actively involved in the organization beyond attending trainings and competitions. In the United States, for example, 42% of family members have coached; 39% have volunteered; and 24% have participated in fund raising, publicity, or recruitment. These statistics are similar for other countries as well, including Latin America and China.^{7, 8} (See table 1.) While family members outside the United States are very involved with their athletes' experience with Special Olympics, they are generally not coaches. It is likely that these differences are explained by the higher coach certification standards in place in some countries.

Table 1: Family Involvement in Special Olympics^{1,2,4}

Level of Involvement	% of family members (United States)	% of family members (China)	% of family members (Argentina)	% of family members (Peru)
Attended Competitions	82	43	85	80
Volunteered	39	34	47	38
Assisted in fundraising	24	24	35	49
Coached	42	15	12	15
Played as Unified Partner	17	19	26	40

“She met her best friend through Special Olympics. They like all the same things.

They get along beautifully. Karen never had friends like that her entire life.”

Parent of athlete from the United States

Impact of Special Olympics on Family Expectations and Relationships

Family members in the United States overwhelmingly comment that they are impressed, and often surprised, by their child's athletic ability, level of effort, competitive nature, and demonstrations of sportsmanship.⁶ Parents in China and Latin America echo similar sentiments. Family members in these countries also speak optimistically about their athlete's future regarding continued and improved independence, employment, and overall position in society at large.^{1, 2} Family members attribute positive changes in their athletes to involvement in Special Olympics.

The changing expectations parents have of their child leads to changing roles and participation for the athlete in the family and how family members relate to one another. Most parents in the United States (70%) report that Special Olympics has a positive effect on time spent as a family, either increasing the amount of time spent together or increasing the types of shared activities.⁶ This outlook is shared by siblings as well – 82% of whom feel that Special Olympics has a positive impact on their family.⁶

Finally, Special Olympics provides positive social networking opportunities outside of the family structure. Specifically, 75% of parents in the United States report that Special Olympics has an impact on their social relationships with others.⁶

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

- Two-thirds of parents in the United States (65%) report involvement with Special Olympics elevates their understanding of their children's abilities and raised expectations of what can be achieved.
- Most parents of young athletes in Romania (70%) report raised expectations of their children; and 90% say they learned new ways to work with their children.
- Most siblings of athletes in the United States (82%) feel that Special Olympics has a positive impact on their family.
- Most parents of athletes in the United States (75%) say Special Olympics has a positive influence on their social relationships outside of their family.

Benefits of Special Olympics to Volunteers and the Public

Impact on Volunteers

Research confirms the anecdotal evidence that volunteers with Special Olympics also reap a wide variety of benefits including personal satisfaction, increased tolerance, and re-examination of personal values. For example, health care professionals who volunteer as part of the Healthy Athletes program, which offers health screenings to Special Olympics athletes worldwide free of charge, report improvements in their understanding of how to best serve their patients with intellectual disabilities. In fact, a large majority of these professionals (90%) indicate a desire to increase their educational pursuits after volunteering in order to learn more about health issues and management of patients with intellectual disabilities.⁷ Moreover, after volunteering, 73% of health care professionals indicate they plan to actively seek out more patients with intellectual disabilities.

Impact on General Public

Special Olympics has enormous potential to shape public attitudes and the way people with intellectual disabilities are treated on a day-to-day basis. While it is harder to measure impact on the public at large, research has shown that the positive effects of Special Olympics extend to people who have no relationship with the organization other than knowing about it, hearing others talk about it, and seeing its events on television, or reading about them in the news.

The most powerful impact Special Olympics has on the wider community is changing public attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities. Many people around the world have inaccurate perceptions about the capabilities, potential, and other characteristics of people with intellectual disability. (For more information on this topic, see the Special Olympics paper, “Multinational Study of Attitudes Toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities,” available at www.specialolympics.org.) As a result of exposure to Special Olympics programs, however, perceptions change. For example, support for the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms increases from 2% to 55% as people become more involved with Special Olympics.⁸

“China will be different as a result of hosting such Olympic Games. Chinese people will be more caring about other people.”

Chinese youth

The positive effect of involvement in Special Olympics is also evident among youth. Chinese youth improved their attitudes toward students with intellectual disabilities merely as a result of their awareness of and exposure to information about the Special Olympics World Games in Shanghai. Those youth in Shanghai who were directly involved in the Games expressed the most positive attitudes; there were dramatic changes, not only in their perceptions of the capabilities of students with intellectual disabilities, but also their willingness to interact with a student with an intellectual disability, both in and out of school. See Figures 2 and 3.

Conclusion

Taken together, the results of studies conducted by Special Olympics in different countries and regions around the world validate what has been intuitively known for decades – Special Olympics has great value and utility for people with intellectual disabilities, their families and beyond. While there may be large cultural differences across the globe, the Special Olympics experience is universal for athletes around the world, and fills a critical need in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by providing opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and demonstrating competence to themselves, their families and the community.

Figure 1: Chinese Youth Perceptions Before and After 2007 World Games⁹

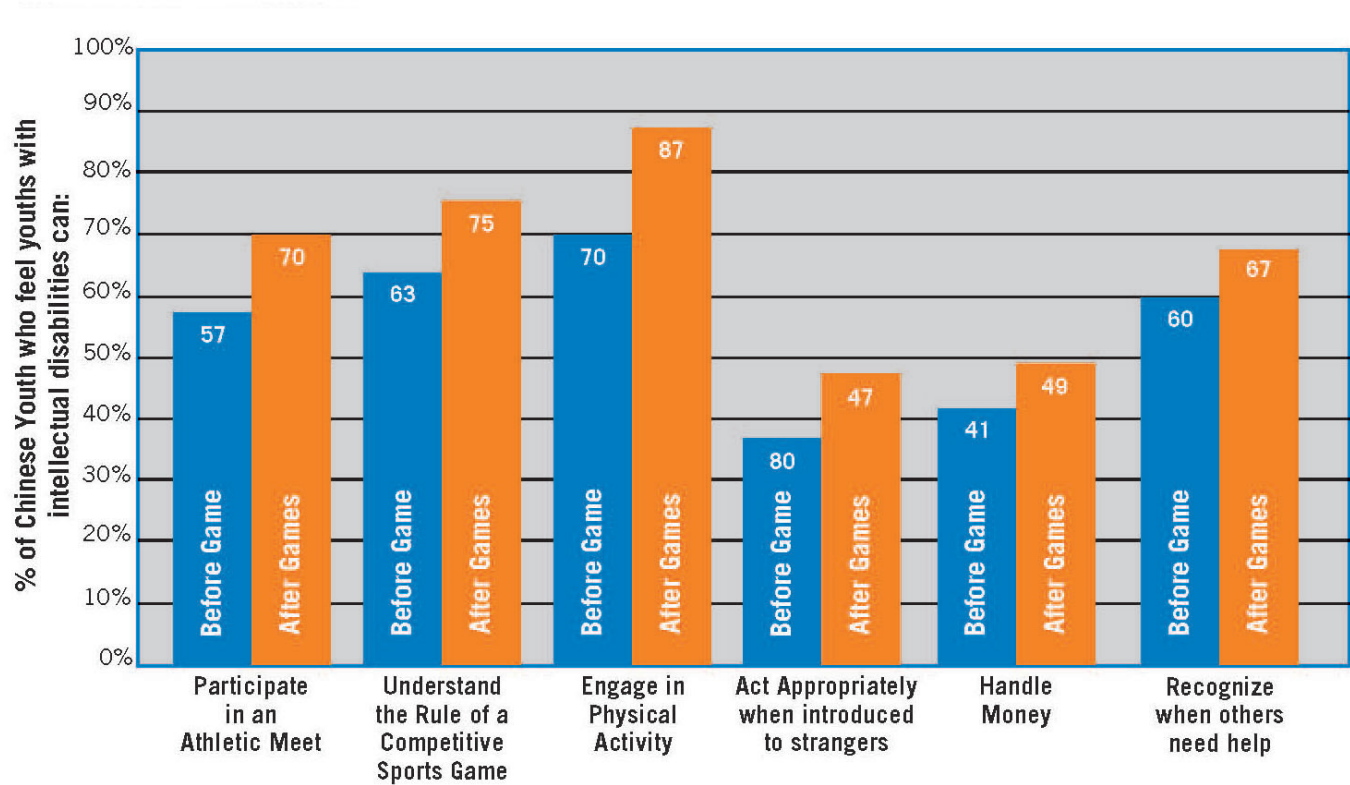
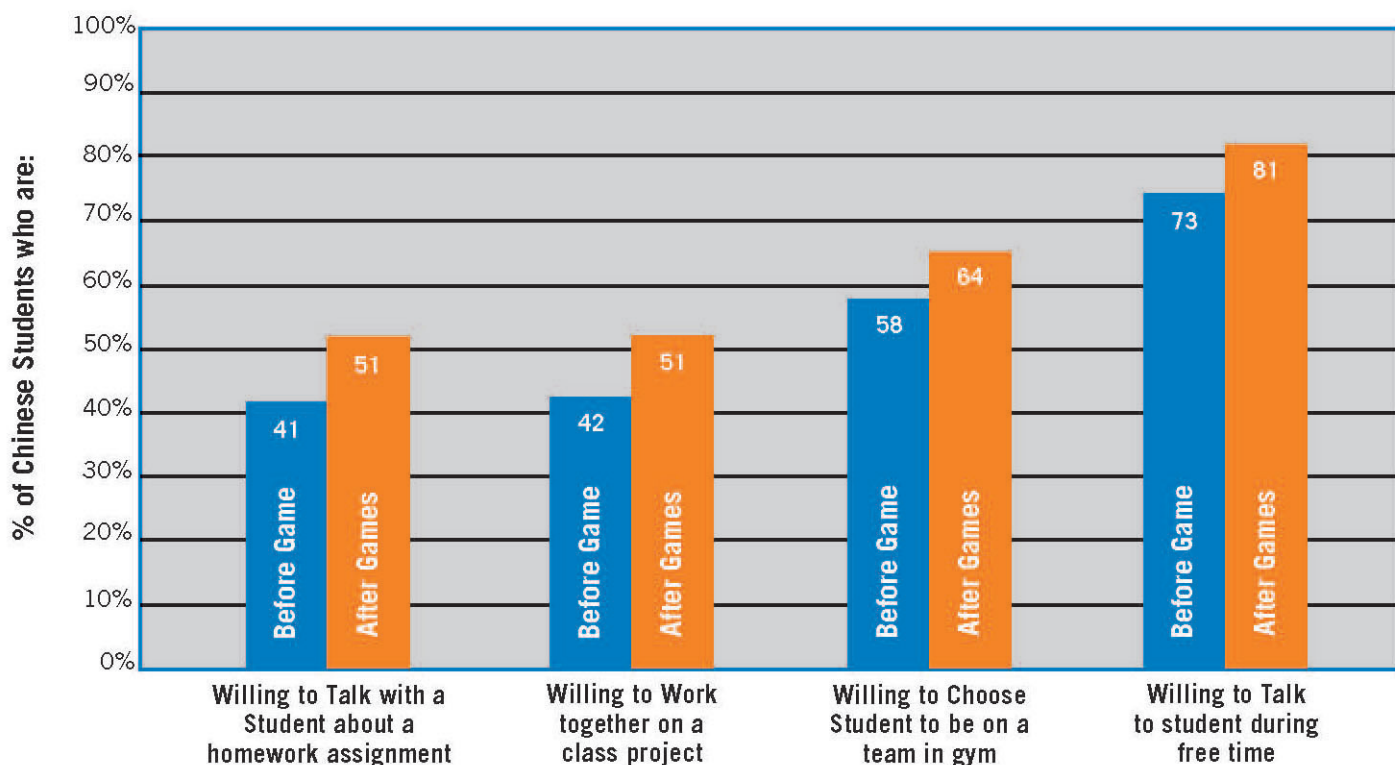


Figure 3: Chinese Youth Willingness to Interact with Students with Intellectual Disabilities Before and After 2007 World Games⁹



“Special Olympics has introduced me to three other families, and it’s like a group,” one mother explains. “On Saturdays when the athletes bowl, it is our time to sit and talk and cry on each others’ shoulders, or be proud and happy. It’s brought us together. I’ve made a lot of friends.”

Family member from United States

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