

Special Olympics Young Athletes Research

[SUMMARY PAGE](#)

WHY YOUNG ATHLETES?

Participation in Special Olympics has been shown to inspire joy, improve self-confidence, bolster family relationships and improve parents' expectations of their children with intellectual disabilities (ID).^{1,2,3,4} While this is crucial for people with ID of all ages, the Special Olympics traditional sports program is only available to athletes ages 8 and over. Furthermore, for families that have a child with ID, it can be challenging to develop and maintain a social network for support and guidance. This network is crucial, as parents who have more social support have better mental health and more positive parenting interactions (hugging, praising, etc.) with their child with ID.^{5,6} Young Athletes engages children with and without ID between the ages of 2 and 7 in a sport and play program with a focus on activities that are important to mental and physical growth. The program benefits the child and the family, challenges societal expectations of children with ID, forges relationships, fosters support networks, and builds crucial skills for young children.

“I have found a common ground – a place where my son and I can connect – through sports.”

— Parent of Young Athlete, United States⁷

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

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

5 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.

6 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.

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

IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Children with ID often experience challenges developing motor skills.^{7,8,9} Research conducted by Special Olympics and its partners has found that Young Athletes improves the motor skills of participants globally.

A review of [US Young Athletes programming](#)¹⁰ showed:

- After two months of participation in Young Athletes, children with ID experienced a **seven month gain in motor skills**. Participants in Young Athletes **improved motor skills at twice the rate** of children who do not participate.
- **The benefits from Young Athletes persisted even after the program ended**. At 5 and 10 month follow-ups, children who participated in Young Athletes **maintained a 4 month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.

A [study in Kenya, Tanzania, Venezuela, and Romania](#)¹¹ similar benefits of Young Athletes outside the United States:

- In Romania at the beginning of Young Athletes, only 2 (18%) of 16 children displayed motor skills scored within the average range for their age and gender. At the end of Young Athletes, that number had risen to 11 children (69%).

Research also reveals that skills learned in Young Athletes translate to other settings. An evaluation of Young Athletes in eleven countries found that:

- 50% of teachers in the United States, 60% in Romania, and 44% in Latin America (Venezuela, Panama, Chile, and Paraguay) observed skills learned in Young Athletes being used in other activities or settings (at school or home).

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN WITH ID PARTICIPATING IN YOUNG ATHLETES



Children who participated in the Young Athletes program experienced a **seven month gain** in motor skills, twice the rate of children who did not participate in the program.



At 5 and 10 month follow-ups, children who participated in Young Athletes maintained a **four month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.

8 Emck, C., Bosscher, R., Beek, P., & Doreleijers, T. (2009). *Gross motor performance and self-perceived motor competence in children with emotional, behavioural, and pervasive developmental disorders: a review*. *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*, 51(7), 501-517.

9 Provost, B., Lopez, B. R., & Heimerl, S. (2007). *A Comparison of Motor Delays in Young Children: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Delay, and Developmental Concerns*. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 37(2), 321-328.

10 Favazza, P. C., Siperstein, G. N., Zeisel, S., Odom, S. L., & Moskowitz, A. L. (2011). *Young Athletes intervention: Impact of motor development*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

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

In addition to motor skill development, participants benefit from learning in a social environment with their peers. Research on Young Athletes has found that:

- 89% of teachers in the United States reported that a benefit of Young Athletes was children having fun with peers.⁷
- 60% of teachers in Israel reported similar benefits.⁷
- Participants in Young Athletes improve their social skills. One teacher commented: *“Many parents and grandparents had never placed their child in a group setting or group activities...By the end of the second or third week, we all could see differences in the child’s ability to listen, participate, socialize with adults and other children, and, of course improve in their motor abilities.”*¹¹

Young Athletes creates an environment where children with ID can play with their peers without disabilities perhaps for the first time, while developing motor and social skills.

IMPACT ON THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

The impact of Young Athletes has a ripple effect that extends benefits beyond the participants in the program to the family and community. In this way, **Young Athletes serves as a catalyst for change in the community and a mechanism to enhance social inclusion for people with ID.**



Young Athletes benefits families in a number of ways, including helping parents understand what ID is, creating opportunities for family engagement, improving parental attitudes, and fostering support networks.

- A study on Young Athletes in Kenya, Tanzania, Venezuela, and Romania¹¹ showed that:
- Knowledge sharing led to an increased understanding of people with ID. 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.”*
- 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.”* Young Athletes also provided opportunities for enhanced sibling engagement. Parents in Kenya and Tanzania reporting that *“Parents and siblings alike now have more respect for the child and more expression of love and affection.”*

A survey of more than 1,400 family members throughout the world demonstrated the impact of Young Athletes on parental attitudes:

- 91% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that participation in Young Athletes made them more hopeful about their child’s future.
- 89% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they had higher expectations of their child as a result of Young Athletes.

A major benefit of Young Athletes is parents getting support through networking with other families.^{7,11}

- A parent of a participant in the United States 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



Furthermore, Young Athletes has been shown to have a positive impact on the broader community. Schools that provided Young Athlete activities and community members who engaged in Young Athletes had the opportunity to learn about and interact with people with disabilities.

One volunteer remarked, *“At first, I did not know how to work [with] really young children with disabilities. So that was a new experience for me and one in which I learned a great deal.”*¹¹ Young Athletes provides the community with an opportunity to learn about ID and to embrace members of the community with ID and their families.

“Because of J. – a whole circle of families with children with disabilities has opened up for us. It is exciting and overwhelming to be a part of a new world – in the best way (sense). It changed my life.”

—Parent of Young Athlete, United States



IMPACT OF YOUNG ATHLETES AT THE INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEVEL



Community: Enhanced interaction with and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities by community members, particularly university partners.

Family: Increased understanding of intellectual disability and willingness of parents to bring their child with an intellectual disability into social settings, as well as the development of support networks among parents.

Individual: Improvements in participants' motor, social, cognitive, and adaptive skills.

KEY FINDINGS:

SPECIAL OLYMPICS YOUNG ATHLETES RESEARCH



In 2016, **163,224** children participated in Young Athletes in 179 Programs.¹²



Participants experienced a **7 month gain** in motor skills after participation in an 8-week Young Athletes program.¹⁰



Young Athletes raises parents' expectations of their child with ID. In the United States **21%** of teachers reported that Young Athletes Athletes benefitted families by raising parental expectations of their child's capabilities.⁷



The benefits from Young Athletes continue even after the program ends. At 5 and 10 month follow-ups, children who participated in Young Athletes maintained a **4 month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.¹⁰



Young Athletes forms a **community of support** for parents and caregivers of children with ID by creating a more **positive** view of their child, building a social support network, and inspiring them to imagine a better, more **hopeful** future for their child.^{7,11}

¹² 2016 Reach Report (2016). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.