



Special Olympics
Junior Athletes



Introduction Guide



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WELCOME, COACH!

Welcome to the wonderful world of Special Olympics! Before you begin your learning journey, please read this message from two Junior Athletes coaches as they highlight how this program has enriched their lives and coaching styles!

A MESSAGE FROM COACH LUCY & COACH ADDAM

Special Olympics Junior Athletes has had a huge impact on our lives in ways we never imagined when we were first given the opportunity to get involved. This program has been a true blessing, not just because of what we've been able to give, but because of what we've gained from the incredible athletes we've worked with. Week after week, they would show up to practice radiating joy, regardless of their athletic abilities. That joy was contagious! It energized us, fueled our excitement, and encouraged these athletes to push beyond their limits, exceed their goals, and embrace every new challenge with determination.

What we love most about this work is inspiring younger athletes to grow, dream, and become better versions of themselves. With the athletes we've coached, we've never had to beg for their attention, motivation, or effort. Their commitment and enthusiasm came naturally, and their passion reminds us of why we do what we do every single day. They've taught us that when we provide the right environment, encouragement, and support, kids will rise to the occasion and often go far beyond what we expect!

This program has ignited a deep passion and love for Unified Sports and inclusive classes, which is something we might never have discovered without this incredible opportunity. It has opened our eyes to the transformative power of creating spaces where everyone, regardless of ability, can grow, connect, and thrive.

We are beyond grateful for what this program has given us, both personally and professionally. It's not just about sports; it's about building a community where athletes can develop their skills, experience the joy of being part of a supportive team, and gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. Watching them grow, challenge themselves, and celebrate their successes has been nothing short of inspiring. We hope to continue our involvement with Unified Sports for as long as we can. Our dream is to ensure that more athletes get the opportunity to be part of a team that not only encourages them but also pushes them to be the best version of themselves. This program isn't just about teaching athletes; it's about learning from them too, and we are so honored to be part of something so impactful.



Lucy Allee



Addam Holsenback

SPECIAL OLYMPICS MISSION

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills, and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes, and the community.

Special Olympics is a global movement that unleashes the human spirit every day around the world through the transformative power and joy of sport. Special Olympics athletes discover new strengths, abilities, skills and successes. They find joy, confidence, and fulfillment on the playing field and in life, and inspire people in their communities to open their hearts to a wider world of human talents and potential.

Through programming in sports, health, education, and community building, Special Olympics is changing the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by solving the global injustice, isolation, intolerance, and health risks they face.



PURPOSE OF JUNIOR ATHLETES

Special Olympics provides a lifelong opportunity for people with **intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)** to participate in **structured competitive** and **recreational sports**. Children as young as age 2 can participate in Special Olympics Young Athletes, which includes activities that develop the fundamental gross motor movements that build a foundation for future participation in sports, while children starting at age 6 can join in recreation and competitive sports opportunities through Special Olympics sport.

As children progress through Young Athletes, they can transition to programming that makes the most sense for their abilities and development. Some children who are ready to move to a competitive sport experience will transition to traditional or unified Special Olympics structured sports offerings, while children who need more time to learn the rules, skills, group play experiences, and begin an initial introduction to play-based competition associated with sports may transition to Junior Athletes beginning at age 6.

Terms Defined:

- **Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDDs)** are lifelong conditions that affect an individual's physical, intellectual, or emotional development. These disabilities are usually present at birth and can impact multiple body parts or systems. Intellectual disabilities specifically refer to limitations in intellectual functioning, which include the ability to learn, reason, and problem-solve, as well as adaptive behavior, which encompasses everyday social and life skills.
- **Structured Competitive Sports** are the organized sporting events where athletes with intellectual or developmental disabilities demonstrate their skills and abilities. These competitions, which range from local to global events, offer athletes opportunities for personal growth, physical fitness, and a shared experience with others. Special Olympics competitions are designed to be inclusive and fair, with athletes competing against individuals of similar skill levels.
- **Unified Sports Recreation** are inclusive sports programs that offer inclusive recreation activities for athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their partners, sometimes with an emphasis on fun and participation over competitive outcomes.
- **Play-based Competition** in Junior Athletes is a fun and supportive way for children to try their best, practice skills, and participate in activities with others. It is not about winning medals or competing in formal events, but about learning how to take turns, follow simple rules, and enjoy doing their best during lessons and skill showcases.

PURPOSE OF JUNIOR ATHLETES (CONTINUED)

Junior Athletes is a play-based, multi-sport program for children with and without IDD from ages 6 to 12. Junior Athletes focuses on the development of a child's physical literacy prior to competitive or recreational Special Olympics sport participation and also supports the development of key social and emotional skills, like teamwork, cooperation, and self-management.

This guide will address developmentally appropriate sports activities for children ages 6-12. It is packed with ready-to-use resources designed to help coaches effectively offer and implement Junior Athlete activities.

It is important to review all sections of the guide as it contains valuable information for teachers, coaches, and family members. Resources in the guide include the purpose of Junior Athletes in the lifespan of a **Special Olympics athlete** or **Unified partner**, implementation guidelines both at the Program and local level, lesson plans, and much more!

Terms Defined:

- A **Special Olympics Athlete** is an individual who is 6 years old or older who has an intellectual or developmental disability.
- A **Unified partner** is an individual without an intellectual or developmental disability who actively participates with Special Olympics athletes on a team, training and competing together.



A CHILD'S JOURNEY THROUGH SPECIAL OLYMPICS

Transition and Progression are Important

There is a recognized participation gap between Young Athletes (a sport and play program for children with and without IDD, ages 2-7), and traditional Special Olympics sports offered for individuals with IDD starting at age 6. By emphasizing age-appropriate sports skill development in a structured sport environment, Special Olympics can focus on retention of participants and development of athlete skills, while also creating a more robust opportunity for participation.

Below are some examples of scenarios in which Junior Athletes activities would be necessary to support existing Young Athletes participants moving to traditional or Special Olympics Unified activities:

- A child under age 7 has advanced beyond the skills in their Young Athletes activities and is motivated to learn and be challenged, but is not yet old enough to participate in Special Olympics.
- A child 6+ is not ready or not yet comfortable with participating in 8+ weeks of practice and competition in one sport.
- A community program or team is primarily made up of adults and it is not safe or developmentally appropriate for a 6-year-old child to join the team.
- An elementary or primary school wants to provide inclusive sports activities through Special Olympics, but does not have the structure to support team sports and competition.

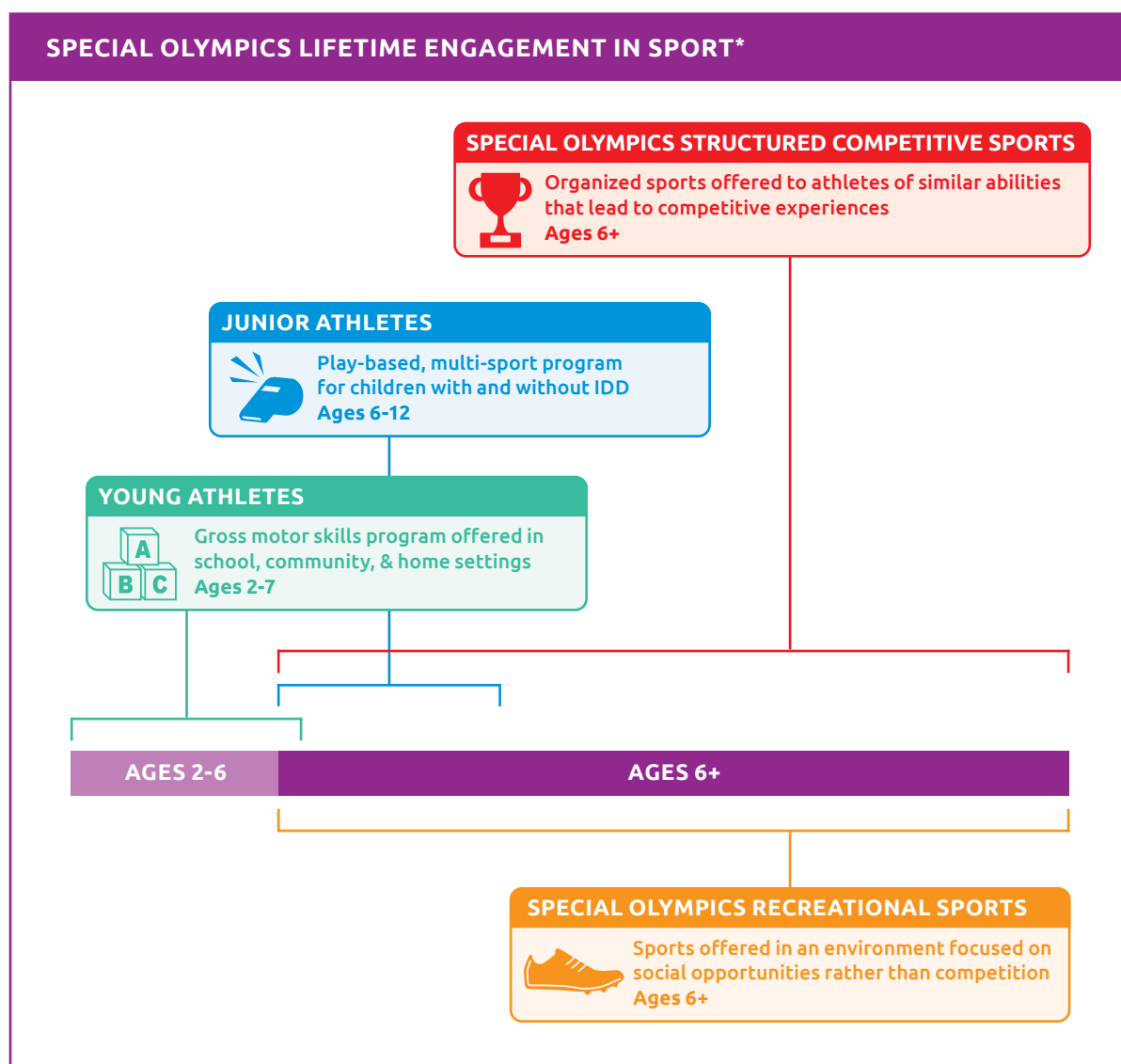
By focusing on athletes who are 6-12 years old, an overlap of opportunities is created to meet the unique and individualized needs of children, regardless of their age. It is important to remember that this opportunity may not be appropriate for all children. Participants should be identified not just by their age, but also by their readiness to participate in additional physical literacy and sports-specific skills.

In order to participate formally within Special Olympics in our traditional offerings for ages 6+, a participant must be registered with an accredited Special Olympics Program. Junior Athletes registration to be further defined later in this document.

A CHILD'S JOURNEY THROUGH SPECIAL OLYMPICS (CONTINUED)

There are many pathways for a child to participate in Special Olympics.

Children can participate in Special Olympics sports with or without first joining Young Athletes. Those who start in Young Athletes may progress to Junior Athletes before moving into recreational or competitive Special Olympics programs—or they can transition directly from Young Athletes into traditional Special Olympics offerings. Additionally, children can participate in Junior Athletes while simultaneously engaging in other Special Olympics sports. As competition guidelines evolve, we recommend checking with your local Special Olympics Program for specific age requirements. Ultimately, the flexibility of all Special Olympics early childhood offerings ensures that every child has an opportunity to find their pathway to success and joy in sports.



*Special Olympics has updated the General Rules to allow children ages 6 and older to participate in competition. As this update is introduced across the movement, Programs may be at varying stages of implementation. Programs should continue to follow current guidelines while further direction and support are provided.

THE BENEFIT OF AGE-APPROPRIATE SPORTS FOR CHILDREN

Physical Literacy

Physical literacy involves developing the skills, confidence, and knowledge to engage in physical activities throughout life. For Junior Athletes coaches, this means teaching not just physical skills but also fostering the motivation to stay active.

Too often, physical literacy is viewed as something that is objectively achievable and measured at a fixed point, with a rigid and narrow path needed to successfully do so. However, physical literacy is not something that can be achieved once and for all.

Success in physical literacy depends on opportunities to practice, as well as the instruction and encouragement a child receives. Ultimately, a child receiving high-quality physical literacy instruction should develop physical competence and internal confidence, which are central to physical literacy.

Physical literacy is made up of four key domains:

- **Physical Competence:** the ability to perform a wide range of movements and skills
- **Confidence:** feeling comfortable and self-assured in physical activity
- **Motivation:** the desire and enjoyment to participate in movement and play
- **Knowledge and Understanding:** knowing why physical activity is important and how to participate safely

Health and Development (Children with IDD)¹

Research shows that children with IDD benefit from sports and physical activity in many important ways:

- Improves overall health and fitness
- Builds strength, balance, and coordination
- Helps reduce the risk of obesity and other health problems
- Supports thinking skills like focus, memory, and following directions
- Improves social skills, such as communication and working with others
- Builds confidence and independence
- Helps manage emotions and reduce stress
- Encourages friendships and a sense of belonging
- Creates structure and supports positive behavior

¹ Physical literacy concepts adapted from Whitehead (2010), WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour (2020), CDC Physical Activity Guidelines, and Special Olympics Young Athletes research.

JUNIOR ATHLETES AS A MULTI-SPORT EXPERIENCE

Benefits of youth participation in multiple sports:²

- Enhances diverse sport skills and develops motor skills
- Promotes social development and identifies enjoyable physical activities for all children
- Increases physical activity

What Counts as Multi-Sport Programming?

In Special Olympics Junior Athletes, the number of sports and sessions offered should be a collaborative decision made by the coach, local Special Olympics Program staff, and other key individuals involved in the program.

When planning, it is important to balance variety with feasibility. Offering two or more sports qualifies as a multi-sport program, which can provide valuable exposure to different skills. However, adding too many sports can create challenges for both the participants and program logistics, potentially limiting the time needed for children to develop a strong understanding of each sport's fundamental skills.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a well-rounded and meaningful experience for Junior Athletes—one that includes a variety of movement skills, introduces multiple sports, and supports physical, social, and emotional development—helping them build confidence, stay engaged, and grow their understanding of different sports.

Multi-Sport Implementation Examples:

- Offering a session focusing on a different sport each meeting (example: 8-week session focuses on 8 sports, 1 each week)
- Focusing on a select number of sports during a session (example: 8-week session focuses on two sports, 4 weeks of each)
- Working with the same participants over the course of months or a year and providing instruction on a select number of sports for multiple weeks each session (example: a Program offers four two-month sessions in one year, each focusing on a different sport; there is a one-month break between each session and similar children participate in the sessions over the year)

²Adapted from AllSportz multi-sport programming resources, Aspen Institute Project Play sport sampling research, WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour (2020), and Special Olympics physical literacy and youth sport development principles.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Each lesson in this unit connects to the SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards. These standards describe what athletes should know and be able to do to lead physically literate, active lives. Because every lesson is designed to promote inclusion, teamwork, and leadership, not every standard is directly taught or formally assessed in every session. However, many standards are reinforced implicitly through active participation, social interaction, and reflection. While SHAPE America standards were developed in the United States, they are grounded in research and informed by international practices in physical education. These standards provide a widely recognized framework for developing physical literacy and guiding high-quality, developmentally appropriate programming. Their focus on lifelong participation, skill development, and whole-child outcomes aligns with global principles for physical education, including those outlined by UNESCO.³

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	HOW IT APPEARS IN LESSONS
Explicitly Taught & Assessed Standards	These are intentionally planned learning objectives. Athletes receive direct instruction and feedback, and their performance can be observed or measured.	Examples: Demonstrating control while dribbling, applying movement strategies, performing skill cues.
Implicitly Supported Standards	These standards are naturally reinforced through participation, teamwork, and classroom or team culture. They are not directly taught or graded but are embedded in the learning experience.	Examples: Demonstrating respect, encouraging peers, recognizing the value of physical activity, showing perseverance.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Physical education supports the whole child, physically, socially, and emotionally. Each lesson is designed to help athletes:

- Build foundational movement skills (Standards 1–2)
- Apply strategies and tactics in play (Standard 3)
- Develop respect, cooperation, and inclusion (Standard 4)
- Recognize the joy and value of physical activity (Standard 5)

By engaging in these experiences, athletes strengthen not only their motor skills but also their social and emotional competencies, including self-management, empathy, and collaboration.

WHY STANDARDS MATTER IN COMMUNITY COACHING

Using Physical Education standards helps coaches know what to teach and how to support each child's development. For coaches outside of school settings, these standards offer clear guidance to make sure activities are safe, age-appropriate, and meaningful for all athletes.

³ Adapted from SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards (2014), UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport (2015), WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour (2020), and Special Olympics Young Athletes research.

LESSON PLANS

Junior Athletes is a transition between Young Athletes gross-motor skills development and an introduction to Special Olympics sports. Lesson plans have been created to provide consistent and developmentally appropriate sport skill progression for children ages 6-12 with and without IDD. These lessons take into consideration:

Coaches' level of experience:

- New
- Experienced

Location of Junior Athletes programming:

- School
- Community

Level and diversity of each child's ability:

- Children with a diagnosis of IDD or multiple support needs
- Children without a diagnosis of IDD

Special Olympics sports offerings:

- Many sports offered in Junior Athletes may also be offered in school and community Special Olympics programming. As athletes transition from Junior Athletes, Special Olympics sports coaches will continue to support their development through progression of skills and increased participation in structured sport environments.

There are 6 lessons per unit. The lessons are progressive and instruct the child one skill at a time. The lessons detail sport rules and strategy, and the final lesson allows participants to practice the sport in a skills showcase.

Lessons are 45-60 minutes each and can easily be split up to meet the needs of your participants. Each lesson includes a warm-up and cool-down, as well as individual and group skill activities. Warm-up and cool-down times are great ways to incorporate fitness into your lessons. *High 5 for Fitness* features age-appropriate exercises for strength, flexibility, and endurance and can be an additional resource to support your warm-ups and cool-downs and make movement and health a priority!

The appendix of this guide includes a Junior Athletes lesson plan template that coaches can use when offering a sport or skill set not currently featured in our existing resources.

LEVELING UP

In Junior Athletes, "Leveling Up" means moving from learning in a playful manner to practicing a skill in the way it's used in the real sport. As children build confidence and control, they progress from basic movements to playing and applying those skills in team-style activities. It's how athletes grow, step by step, toward playing the sport with others.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The Junior Athletes lesson plans focus on a select group of Special Olympics sports designed to build a wide range of movement skills. These sports are intentionally chosen to align with key categories, such as Invasion Games, Net or Wall Games, Target Games, Striking or Fielding Games, and Endurance Games. Skill development is structured around fundamental movement areas including walking and running, balance and jumping, trapping and catching, throwing, striking, and kicking.

Coaches familiar with Young Athletes will recognize that the foundational gross motor skills introduced there are further developed in Junior Athletes, with a greater emphasis on sport-specific application. By offering one sport from each category, coaches can implement a well-rounded, multi-sport experience that supports physical literacy, encourages variety, and keeps athletes engaged. Please note that the sports made available within this guide are simply to give you, the coach, easy-to-use lesson plans that can be implemented in your Junior Athletes program with minimal planning. In future sections of this guide, you will find information on how to create your own lessons with the sport(s) of your choice!

Utilizing Young Athletes Skills to Support Junior Athletes

The chart below highlights the core Young Athletes skill and activity most relevant to each Junior Athletes sport. While Young Athletes skills are beneficial across all sports, this chart identifies the specific skills that align best with each Junior Athletes offering. If you have athletes who need additional practice, revisit the corresponding Young Athletes activity. [Click here](#) or scan the QR code to access the Young Athletes Activity Guide.



JA Sport Examples	Aligning YA Skill	Aligning YA Activity
Invasion Games: Football, Basketball, Floorball	Walking & Running	Obstacle Course
Net or Wall Games: Pickleball*, Badminton	Striking	Ball Tap
Target Games: Bowling	Trapping & Catching	Rolling & Trapping
Striking & Fielding Games: Cricket	Striking; Throwing	Handball; One-handed Overthrow
Endurance Games: Athletics	Walking & Running	Run & Carry

*Pickleball is growing in the United States and might not be offered around the globe. It is a great sport to play with this age range of children but can be replaced with your own local popular sport!

SKILL DEVELOPMENT (CONTINUED)

Individual and Team Sports

The Junior Athletes sports are broken down by team and individual sports. By distinguishing between team sports and individual sports, children can acquire skills that align with their social and emotional readiness.

Coaches are encouraged to offer opportunities for both team and individual sports, allowing each child to explore and engage in different experiences rather than assuming they fit into only one category.

This structure also gives parents and caregivers valuable insight into which path might be the best fit as their child continues their Special Olympics journey.

Sport Selection Process

As a trained Junior Athletes coach who may have expertise or interest in additional sports beyond the lessons provided, you have the flexibility to add additional sports offerings into your Junior Athletes programming. A template is available in the appendix section of this guide for you to complete a lesson plan for the sport of your choice.*

- Connect with your local Special Olympics Program to choose sports that are offered locally.
- Use your own sport experience and start with what you know best, but do not be afraid to try new sports! You are learning too!
- Consider popular sports in your community that give participants the opportunity to practice their skills before playing with their peers in another setting.
- Ask children and families what sports they are interested in learning.

Special Olympics Sports



Special Olympics provides a diverse selection of sports that are officially recognized, widely played, and locally celebrated. These opportunities include both individual and team sports, offered at varying levels of competition—ranging from recreational play to high-level tournaments—across communities worldwide. [Click here](#) or scan the code to learn more.

In addition to competitive sports, Special Olympics also offers individual skills competitions, which focus on developing fundamental sport skills in a fun and supportive environment. These events are designed for a range of ability levels, making them especially welcoming for beginners. While they are not a core part of Junior Athletes, experienced coaches sometimes adapt these skill-based activities as drills within Junior Athletes sessions to help build readiness for future competition.

*It is not advisable that Junior Athletes coaches offer water sports or other sports that involve complex equipment or facilities. Those interested in teaching skills like swimming should seek out the local Special Olympics Program to coordinate these opportunities with well-trained partners.

SKILLS SHOWCASE

Coaches and Special Olympics Program staff are encouraged to host a Skills Showcase. This is not a competition—it is a celebration of growth, learning, and participation! The Skills Showcase can be hosted as a standalone event to gain participants for an upcoming session, in conjunction with a larger Special Olympics event like State or National Games, or as a final event hosted at the end of a Junior Athletes session, either in a school or community setting.

The purpose of the Skills Showcase is to:

- Give Junior Athletes the chance to learn the skills or showcase what they have learned
- Provide families with a positive, joyful way to observe progress
- Build confidence and pride in all children

The event can include:

- Stations where participants rotate through the sports skills they've practiced
- Peer-to-peer demonstrations between Unified partners and athletes
- Certificates of participation or small tokens to recognize effort
- Focused conversations with caregivers on the next steps in their child's Special Olympics Journey

A Skills Showcase can be offered after each unit or simply once or twice a year. The model is flexible to what works in your community!

End the day with team photos, a group cheer, or a celebration circle to emphasize community and achievement. Use the printable certificates provided at the end of each lesson or create your own! Encouraging caregivers and friends to come and cheer athletes on can make this a really special and meaningful end to a sports unit.

IMPLEMENTATION MODELS

Junior Athletes in a Community Setting

- **Types of Locations:** Junior Athletes programs can be implemented in various community settings, including local sports clubs, within an existing Special Olympics sport club, community centers, and recreational facilities. These locations provide the necessary space and resources to conduct inclusive sports activities for children with and without IDD.
- **Times of Implementation:** The programs are typically scheduled during weeknights or weekends to accommodate the availability of participants and their families.

Junior Athletes in a School Setting

- **Types of Locations:** Junior Athletes programs can be implemented in various school settings, including kindergarten, elementary schools, primary schools, and special education schools. These locations provide a structured environment where children can engage in inclusive sports activities during the school day.
- **Times of Implementation:** The programs are typically scheduled during physical education classes, recess, or after-school programs to fit within the school schedule. Sessions can be integrated into the school's existing curriculum or offered as extracurricular activities.

Those implementing Junior Athletes through **Unified Champion Schools (UCS)** can use this program in **Unified Physical Education** and as their sport pillar within the UCS model.

Terms Defined:

- **The Unified Champion Schools (UCS) Program** is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities affecting systems-wide change in K–12 schools (primary and secondary education) and across college campuses. With sports as the foundation, the three-component model offers a unique combination of effective activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sports, classroom, and school climates of acceptance. These are school climates where students with IDD feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all activities, opportunities, and functions.
- **Unified Physical Education** is a concept for bringing students with and without IDD together, as equals, in a physical education setting where all students earn physical education credit, thus putting all students on equal footing.

JUNIOR ATHLETES RECRUITMENT

Marketing is helpful to Junior Athletes coaches or Special Olympics Program Staff because it directly supports the success and sustainability of the program. Here's why:

1. Increases Program Awareness

Marketing helps implementers spread the word about Junior Athletes to schools, families, and community partners who may not know it exists. This leads to:

- More participants
- Greater inclusion of children with and without IDD
- A stronger presence in the community

2. Builds Community and Partnerships

When coaches use marketing tools like flyers, social posts, or word-of-mouth, they can connect with:

- Schools interested in hosting sessions
- Local businesses that may offer space or sponsorship
- Volunteers or older students who want to help

3. Boosts Participation and Engagement

Clear, consistent marketing draws in families who are curious or looking for inclusive activities. It also:

- Encourages return participation
- Helps fill rosters for future seasons
- Keeps parents informed and involved

4. Strengthens Program Credibility

Professional-looking marketing materials show that the program is well-organized and supported by Special Olympics. This builds trust and makes it easier to:

- Gain school or facility approval
- Apply for grants or funding
- Earn respect and support from the community

5. Helps Coaches Focus on Coaching

Marketing doesn't need to be overwhelming. A simple flyer or social media post can go a long way, making it easier for coaches to recruit participants and focus their energy on what matters most: coaching kids and creating an inclusive, fun experience. If additional support is needed, coaches are encouraged to recruit a volunteer, staff member, or partner to assist with marketing efforts.

JUNIOR ATHLETES RECRUITMENT (CONTINUED)

HOW TO REACH JUNIOR ATHLETES

Identify Your Target Audience:

- Parents and caregivers of children ages 6–12
- School administrators and PE teachers
- Community recreation directors
- Pediatric therapists and support staff
- Potential sponsors and volunteers

Highlight Key Messages:

- Junior Athletes is a fun, inclusive sports program for children ages 6–12.
- The program builds sports skills, confidence, and friendships.
- It prepares children for lifelong participation in Special Olympics and community sports.
- Children with and without IDD learn and play together.

Identify Channels for Recruitment:

- School newsletters and staff meetings
- Community center and library bulletin boards
- Pediatric and therapy clinic flyers
- Local newspapers and community Facebook groups
- Email marketing and website posts
- Flyers handed out at local youth events and sports activities

Create Materials Per Junior Athletes Branding Guidelines:

- Program flyer (customizable with local contact info)
- Social media graphics and sample posts
- Introductory slide deck for school or community presentations
- Press release template
- Family info packet with FAQs

Suggested Marketing Timeline:

- 6–8 weeks out: Reach out to schools, therapists, and clubs
- 4–6 weeks out: Begin digital and print promotions
- 2–3 weeks out: Push registration reminders
- Program launch: Post welcome and kickoff messages
- Post-program: Share highlights and next steps for families

Record and Share Your Success:

- Number of enrolled participants
- Number of new schools or community sites engaged
- Social media engagement (likes, shares, comments)
- Number of families continuing to other SO programs
- Feedback from coaches, families, and site partners

JUNIOR ATHLETES COACHING REQUIREMENTS

Special Olympics Junior Athletes deserve great coaching. While it can be helpful to have previous coaching experience before getting involved in Junior Athletes, it is not required. Coaches do not need to be sport experts or have participated in sports themselves to be effective in this role.

By completing the required training, coaches will develop the knowledge and skills needed to provide a positive, fun, and developmentally appropriate sports experience. The role of a Junior Athletes coach is to support athletes in learning age-appropriate sport skills, building healthy habits, and developing a love of being active.

Ultimately, the individual leading Junior Athletes is there to foster inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity experiences that help every child grow and succeed.

Junior Athlete coaches, at a minimum, must complete the Special Olympics Level 1 Sport Assistant Course and the Special Olympics Junior Athletes Coaching Course, available through the [Special Olympics Learning Portal](#).

Additional policies and minimum requirements for coach certification may be required by each local Special Olympics Program, and these must be met before Junior Athletes coaching may begin.

And finally, it is highly recommended that coaches obtain certification in the specific sports offered within their Junior Athletes program. This certification should ideally come from a local or national Special Olympics Program, a recognized sport federation, or a third-level educational institution. This approach aligns with broader coaching standards and helps ensure quality, consistency, and safe sport practices. Coaches are encouraged to connect with their local Special Olympics Program for more information and available opportunities.



Learning
Portal



JUNIOR ATHLETES COACHING REQUIREMENTS (CONTINUED)

Who is the Junior Athletes Coach?

The individual leading Junior Athletes programming.

- **Current Special Olympics sport or Young Athletes coaches** or other individuals who have been properly trained in accordance with their local Special Olympics Program rules may serve as lead coaches in Junior Athletes.
- **Physical education or special education teachers** are likely to be the main coaches for activities in schools, since they already play vital roles within the school day and understand sports or working with people with IDD.
- **University students**, like those who are pursuing a degree in coaching, early education or similar fields, may serve as lead coaches or volunteers and may even take a lead in helping to create lesson plans.
- **Special Olympics athlete leaders** may serve as Junior Athletes coaches or volunteers. Involving athlete leaders not only creates a meaningful leadership opportunity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it provides children with IDD in the classroom the chance to see people that reflect them and the possibilities that lie ahead.
- **Parents and community leaders** can often serve as coaches or volunteers in Junior Athletes when offered in a community-based setting.
- **Older children (15+)** may serve as volunteers during sessions, working under the supervision and guidance of the Junior Athletes certified coach.

SAFEGUARDING

Safeguarding in sports involves ensuring the safety and well-being of children participating in sports activities. Coaches have a duty of care towards the children they coach, and clubs and organizations are responsible for implementing the correct policies and reporting procedures to minimize the risk of child abuse.

The UN's strategy for minimizing the risk of child abuse includes several General Safeguarding Standards:⁴

1. **Policy:** The organization develops a policy that describes its commitment to preventing and responding appropriately to harm to children.
2. **People:** The organization places clear responsibilities and expectations on its staff and associates and supports them to understand and act in line with these.
3. **Procedures:** The organization creates a child-safe environment through implementing child safeguarding procedures that are applied across the organization.
4. **Accountability:** The organization monitors and reviews its safeguarding measures.

For US based Programs, Special Olympics has Protective Behaviors training aimed at preventing abuse against Special Olympics athletes and ensuring their protection. This training is mandatory for all Class A Volunteers, including coaches and Unified partners. The training helps volunteers learn to identify inappropriate behavior, recognize the signs of abuse, and determine what to do if abuse or inappropriate behavior is suspected. This training can be found on the Special Olympics Learning Portal. For more specific information on safeguarding in your location, connect with your Special Olympics Program contact to learn more.

⁴ Adapted from the International Safeguards for Children in Sport, the United Nations Strategy on Ending Violence Against Children, and Special Olympics Protective Behaviors and Athlete Protection policies.

REGISTRATION, ROSTER COLLECTION & REPORTING

Junior Athletes participants are registered in one of two ways:

1. **A Junior Athletes Registration Form** that is completed by a parent or guardian before the first session. This registration form gathers key information that allows the coach to prepare for the upcoming session. Typically, the coach or administrative volunteer will support the Special Olympics Program staff in the collection of the individual forms.

Example of a setting where forms would be collected: A local sport club offering Junior Athletes on a weeknight.
2. **A Junior Athletes “Letter of Intent” or “Agreement”** with facility or organization hosting the programming. In the case that individual registration forms will not be collected, and Special Olympics is not assuming liability, an agreement can be drafted and signed between the Special Olympics Program and the organization offering Junior Athletes programming. This agreement will define that the liability falls on the organization offering the programming and can also include a statement regarding the level of participation data that will be shared between Special Olympics and the organization. At minimum, the number of participants, their disability status, and age range should be collected and shared back as a roster with the Special Olympics Program.

Both of these documents can be found within the appendix.

Roster Collection

The roster template, also found within the appendix, should be completed by the Junior Athletes coach or administrative volunteer and shared with your Special Olympics Program contact. Please fill out as much information as allowed by your local agreement. This helps Special Olympics track participation and engagement. You are the first line of gathering this important information, which leads to stronger communication and ties to Junior Athletes families!

COACHING BEST PRACTICES

- The coaching ratio for Junior Athletes is suggested to be a minimum of 1 coach for every 4 participants.
- Having one head coach and multiple assistant coaches or volunteers to support participants is an excellent option to create an effective learning environment.
- Athletes aged 6-12 have vastly different levels of skill. Breaking the athletes into smaller groups based on ability will assist with coaching according to skill level.
- Coaching should include supporting athletes through social and emotional development.

Coaching Course Spotlight: The Junior Athletes Coaching Course

The required Junior Athletes course gives coaches the tools and strategies they need to lead fun, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate sessions. It offers practical guidance on teaching fundamental sport skills while promoting physical literacy and social and emotional development.

Through age-appropriate activities and coaching tips, the course supports coaches in gaining the knowledge and strategies to help build Junior Athletes' confidence, coordination, teamwork, and resilience. Whether you're just starting out or looking to strengthen your approach, this training sets a strong foundation for creating positive, athlete-centered experiences.



COACHING BEST PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

To create an environment that supports social and emotional development:⁵

- Build positive adult-youth relationships.
- Create a safe space that supports social and emotional skill development.
- Embody effective leadership strategies that emphasize effort, autonomy, and learning.
- Prioritize and provide opportunities for direct skill building and practice.
- Model good character and decision-making.
- Engage with families, schools, and other community organizations.



⁵ Adapted from the Center for Social and Emotional Learning Through Sport, Aspen Institute Project Play's Coaching Social and Emotional Skills in Youth Sports (2019), and research on Positive Youth Development through sport.

COACHING CHILDREN

Coaching children is different than coaching adults. Coaching a child is just as much about adapting, responding, and nurturing the individual needs of each child as it is about supporting their sports skill development. Below are tips and techniques for coaching children, including children with IDD. Additional coaching materials can be found through [iCoachKids](#) and [Aspen's Project Play](#).

Consider the following points, from the iCoachKids Pledge, to create positive sports experiences for children through quality coaching practices:⁶

1. Be Child-Centered

Always have the best interest of children at heart, and listen to them. It is about what children want and what they need, not about the adults!

2. Be Holistic

Develop children as people first and foremost, not only as athletes. Aim to develop their psychosocial skills and capabilities, not just their physical ones.

3. Be Inclusive

Cater to all levels of abilities and motivations. Coaching is far from a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Coaches should get to know the children they are coaching, and should dare to coach them differently.

4. Make it Fun and Safe

Children want to have fun, and to learn, they need to feel safe. Build positive relationships, and enjoyable and caring climates that allow children to thrive, and that keep them coming back.

5. Prioritize the love for sport above learning sport

A very small percentage of children will become elite athletes, yet all of them have the potential to become healthy active adults. Creating that fantastic legacy is part of a coach's job. Remember, children are not mini-adults!

6. Focus on Foundational Skills

Do not be overly concerned with the specific skills of a sport. At a younger age, children need to gain essential motor skills and learn the basics of how to play games. Using generic tactical principles will yield the greatest chance for success.

Continued on the following page

iCoachKids



Project Play



⁶ Adapted from the iCoachKids Pledge: 10 Guiding Principles for Positive Sport Experiences for Children, Aspen Institute Project Play, and evidence-based child-centered coaching practices.

COACHING CHILDREN (CONTINUED)

7. Engage Parents Positively

Parents are not the enemy, but one of the biggest resources at a coach's disposal. They want the best for their children, and so do the coaches. Partnership is key. Talk to parents to understand what they can offer and how they can support their child's experience. Communication may look different depending on the setting. In community-based programs, coaches can connect directly with parents through conversations, messages, or regular updates. In school-based settings, communication may happen through teachers or school staff, and coaches should follow school policies and established communication channels.

8. Plan Progressive Programs

Coaches take their athletes on a learning journey, and need to have a good idea of the destination point, with short-, mid-, and long-term goals and plans that will help the children get there. Coaches should not take a peak-by-Saturday approach, nor should they improvise a session off the cuff. Failing to plan is planning to fail!

9. Use Different Methods to Enhance Learning

Learning is a complex process and it doesn't happen overnight. Different coaching and teaching strategies can serve different purposes at different stages of learning and development. They can complement each other, and can help to achieve the desired results.

10. Use Competition in a Developmental Way

There is nothing wrong with competition. When the format and atmosphere around competition are built around the developmental stage of the athletes, and are considerate of their needs, competition is an amazing motivator and a lot of fun. A win-at-all-cost mentality can really spoil the party though.



ROLE OF PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

The role of parents and caregivers in Junior Athletes sessions in a community based setting will vary based on the needs of participants. As the coach, it is your responsibility to assess each participant to determine the level of support they require.

Assessment Questions to Consider:

1. Can the participant confidently participate independently? Yes or No
2. Does the participant require one-on-one assistance? Yes or No
3. Do you have enough assistant coaches and volunteers to provide one-on-one support? Yes or No

If these questions indicate that a child requires additional support, you should first determine if you can provide this support from within your coaching team. This should involve an open conversation with the child's parent or caregiver to determine any specific needs and what you can currently offer. If you together determine that you cannot offer that level of support, it may be an option to invite the parent or caregiver to provide that support. You can then work with them to promote the child's independent participation over time, and learn more about their support needs. Some children may need support for a few sessions before transitioning to independent participation, while others may require assistance throughout the program.

While some parents and caregivers will need to be actively involved, others may benefit from taking a break. If you have an adequate coach-to-volunteer ratio, consider providing a nearby space where parents and caregivers can relax while their child participates.

Note: It is not recommended that parents and caregivers drop off their child and leave the premises. They should remain nearby in case support is needed.

Parents and caregivers can be valuable assets during sessions, but their presence on the sidelines may sometimes become a distraction. If this occurs, positively encourage them to step away and enjoy a break, assuring them they'll be invited back at the end of the session to celebrate the day's successes.

Junior Athletes is an excellent opportunity to engage families. For some parents and caregivers, this may be their first time seeing their child participate in sports, which can be an emotional and exciting experience. Make an effort to connect with them each session by sharing highlights, successes, or key learnings. Consider incorporating activities where parents and caregivers can participate alongside their child, either within each session or as part of a final celebration. Most importantly, encourage play at home!

If Junior Athletes is hosted in a school setting, parents and caregivers may not be actively involved each week. In this case, use newsletters or emails to share updates on their child's progress and achievements. This communication helps reinforce learning at home and encourages continued participation in Special Olympics programs. If your school-based Junior Athletes program hosts a culminating event, such as a field day, invite parents and caregivers to cheer on their children!

EXPLAINING UNIFIED PARTNERS TO PARENTS

When introducing Unified partners to parents and caregivers, it's important to clearly explain their role and the value they bring to the program. Use simple language and emphasize inclusion and mutual growth.

Key messages to share:

- Unified partners are children without intellectual disabilities who participate with athletes.
- They are not assistants or volunteers—they're teammates and friends.
- The partnership model helps all children learn empathy, teamwork, and communication.
- Unified partners also develop leadership skills as they learn to work with diverse peers.

Let parents know that both athletes and Unified partners benefit from these relationships—and that the skills they build now can lead to lifelong friendships and inclusive mindsets. All participants including Unified partners develop sports skills though Junior Athletes making this program vital for everyone!



FAMILY HEALTH FORUMS

Family Health Forums (FHF) provide health education to parents, caregivers, and siblings of individuals with IDD. These forums connect families with health professionals, community leaders, and social service providers while creating spaces for peer support. FHF's can be offered as a single event or a series of sessions, often integrated with practices and competitions. These forums, available both in-person and virtual, provide families with education, resources, and a supportive community.

FHF Planning

FHF can be aligned with the Junior Athletes program to incorporate family health education. Hosting an FHF alongside Junior Athletes provides families with valuable health information while their child is engaged in the program. Connect with your Special Olympics Program for guidance on planning an FHF that complements your Junior Athletes program and connecting with relevant technical experts.

FHF Topics

Special Olympic Programs should select a maximum of 1-2 topics for a 1-hour Forum. It is encouraged to plan an FHF experience lasting at least 1 hour 30 minutes. This will ensure the delivery of quality health education to families while effectively addressing their needs. However, if an FHF is run during your Junior Athletes practice, the timing can be modified to align with your practice length.

Topic selections are based on the needs of local family members. Topics include but are not limited to:

- Introduction to intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Nutrition*
- Parent and Caregiver Stress Management*
- Fitness and Physical Activity*
- Obesity
- Positive Parenting*
- Human Rights and Inclusion
- Water and Sanitation or Hygiene
- Diabetes Prevention and Management*

Standardized curricula are available for select FHF topics, (noted with a * above) providing structured resources to support your event. Contact your Special Olympics Program if interested in using these resources to host an FHF alongside your Junior Athletes program.

SUPPORTING LIFELONG SPECIAL OLYMPICS PARTICIPATION

At the conclusion of each session, it is critical to share next steps in a child's journey through Special Olympics. This can be accomplished through collaboration with your Special Olympics Program staff to offer the fundamentals of the organization and all the opportunities that come with it.

- Do not expect that the parents and caregivers in your sessions know much about Special Olympics. Encourage them to follow the organization on social media and become acquainted with their local programming.
- Invite your Special Olympics Program Staff member to come speak with parents and caregivers and introduce them to Special Olympics and its programs.



SUPPORTING LIFELONG SPECIAL OLYMPICS PARTICIPATION (CONT.)

- Use the Skills Showcase Lesson to clearly explain to parents and caregivers that every child has a unique journey within Special Olympics. Participants may move to competitive sport, recreational sports, or [Motor Activities Training Program \(MATP\)](#).

Terms Defined:

- **The Motor Activity Training Program (MATP)** is the Special Olympics movement-based sport program for athletes with profound intellectual disabilities who have high support needs.

- Invite local Special Olympics athletes to speak with families! Special Olympics athletes are great examples to parents of young children with or without IDD, and can support as volunteers and assistant coaches too!
- Never assume that parents in the room know or understand sports. Take time to share with them details on the sport selected, why it is important for skill development, and the role it can play in a child's life.
- Review with parents what sport their child enjoyed the most and explain the differences between team and individual sports. It may come as a surprise to parents and caregivers that their child excels in a team vs. individual sport or even a sport they have never been interested in themselves.
- Support parents and caregivers in building community from the sidelines by creating a space where families can talk and share as they feel comfortable. Just as the Junior Athletes participants introduce themselves to their peers, parents and caregivers should introduce themselves to each other.
- Bring in other Special Olympics programming, such as Family Health Forums and Healthy Athletes Screenings, to provide additional services for children and families.

SUPPORTING LIFELONG SPECIAL OLYMPICS PARTICIPATION (CONT.)

It is important to celebrate children as they transition from Junior Athletes to their future in Special Olympics. The last lesson of each unit, the Skills Showcase, is a great way to help celebrate athletes and help families understand and prepare for the next state of their journey within Special Olympics. It bridges the gap between the Junior Athletes program (ages 6-12) and future opportunities in traditional, Unified, or MATP offerings for athletes age 8 and older.

If available, invite local Special Olympics athletes, coaches, and volunteers—including Health Messengers or Athlete Leaders—to share their experiences and inspire Junior Athletes as they prepare for their next steps. These guests can talk about how Special Olympics has helped them grow in sports, confidence, and friendship. Hearing real stories helps athletes and families see what's possible.

Transition not only supports the child and family—it also strengthens your Special Olympics Program. Junior Athletes should serve as a pipeline for ongoing growth by introducing the participants to the culture, values, and opportunities of Special Olympics. A well-planned transition helps build local teams, deepen community connections, and ensure that families stay engaged for years to come.



CREATING AN INCLUSIVE JUNIOR ATHLETES EXPERIENCE

This section highlights the main opportunities and practical tips for increasing inclusion in your Junior Athletes sessions. However, there is always more to learn! Please complete the Junior Athletes e-learning course to find more information on inclusion and inclusive coaching practices to increase your skills.

The Coach Needs to Set the Stage for Inclusion

As the coach, you set the tone from day one. You have the power to create a space where every athlete feels safe, respected, and valued.

You set the stage for inclusion by:

- Modeling respectful language and behavior
- Ensuring all children get equal attention and opportunities
- Addressing exclusion or teasing quickly and calmly
- Designing activities that every child can access with support

When children see you treat everyone fairly, they follow your lead. Inclusion starts with the environment you create—and your example matters most.



CREATING AN INCLUSIVE JUNIOR ATHLETES EXPERIENCE (CONT.)

When children are participating in Junior Athletes, they are playing TOGETHER. A child without an intellectual disability is never considered a “volunteer.” They are participants, just as a child with an intellectual or developmental disability. Although a child without an intellectual disability may be partnered with a child with an intellectual disability, it does not mean they will always lead the activity. It should be encouraged that all children, regardless of ability, take the lead in appropriate activities.

After identifying athletes participating in Junior Athletes, consult with their teachers, parent, or caregiver to understand the type of needs and experience with inclusion the children have in school and community settings. If you are unsure what to ask, consider questions such as:

- What helps your child feel comfortable and successful in group activities?
- How does your child typically interact with others during play?
- Are there any supports or strategies that work well for your child?

This information will aid in planning the session and determining the level of “getting to know you” activities needed.

During the first practice, allow children to spend time playing cooperative games and participating in activities that are not sport related to allow them to get to know one another before practicing the sport. Even better, start and end every session with name games and getting to know you activities that increase everyone’s level of confidence with their friends at Junior Athletes!

During the first practice, allow children to spend time playing games and participating in activities that allow them to get to know one another. Cooperative games can be a very effective way to do this. However, coaches should be aware that some children may require support with the social skills required for some cooperative games. Remember that you can be creative in planning these activities, especially when the goal is to create a positive environment. It does not have to be an activity based around the sport you are coaching. Stretch your coaching muscles!

If a parent or caregiver is supporting a child in a session, that individual IS NOT their partner. The child should still be paired with their peers in the activities.

Use the session as a learning opportunity should a participant struggle with listening, following rules, or displaying appropriate behavior. Never single out a child in front of their peers for poor behavior. Provide positive redirection when a child needs support.

Some children in Junior Athletes may be non-verbal or have difficulty with spoken communication. They might use sign language, communication devices, or picture boards to express themselves. At the start of your program, take time to educate all participants about different ways people communicate. This can include teaching how to sign a teammate’s name, explaining how assistive technology works, or showing how to use a communication board. Creating this understanding early on promotes inclusion and respect from the beginning.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE JUNIOR ATHLETES EXPERIENCE (CONT.)

If positive redirection—gently guiding the child toward appropriate behavior by offering clear, supportive instructions, modeling expectations, and suggesting alternative actions—is not working, privately approach the parent or caregiver for support. Positive redirection focuses on reinforcing what the child should do, rather than calling out what they are doing wrong.

Just as you would NEVER single a child out in front of their peers, never speak about a child's behavior with a parent or caregiver in front of others. If the situation requires immediate attention, first ensure that all participants—including athletes and coaches—are safe. If the behavior is causing a risk of harm, safety is the top priority.

If possible, it may be best to wait until after the session to speak with the parent or caregiver. However, if immediate follow-up is needed, coaches must first ensure that adequate supervision is in place before stepping away. Once supervision is confirmed, invite the parent or caregiver to speak privately about your concerns.

These conversations should remain respectful, positive, and affirming, with a focus on working together to support the child. Parents and caregivers are often aware of their child's needs and can offer helpful strategies and guidance. The goal is to reach a supportive and collaborative outcome for everyone involved.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE JUNIOR ATHLETES EXPERIENCE (CONT.)

Coaches help children develop skills like self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—often without even realizing it.

Ways coaches support social and emotional development:

- Celebrating small successes to build self-esteem
- Encouraging teamwork and peer praise
- Using calm, clear language to redirect behaviors
- Teaching conflict resolution during team play

By coaching beyond the physical, you help children grow into confident, caring teammates and community members.



IF OFFERING JUNIOR ATHLETES IN A NON-INCLUSIVE SETTING

While Junior Athletes is designed to be an inclusive program, it may occasionally be offered in a non-inclusive setting, such as a self-contained classroom, disability sports club, or traditional Special Olympics sports club. In these cases, coaches should continue to foster a sense of belonging, independence, and growth among all participants.

The goals of the program remain the same: to support physical development, encourage teamwork, and build confidence. Coaches can still create an environment that mirrors inclusive practices by:

- Encouraging peer-to-peer interaction
- Creating leadership opportunities among athletes
- Fostering a respectful and supportive team culture

If the opportunity arises to introduce peers without disabilities in the future, coaches should speak with their local Special Olympics Program about how to evolve their model toward inclusion.

A Note on Person-First Language:

Communicating respectfully with and about athletes is the first step in gaining their trust and creating a mutually respectful team. Using person-first language means putting the athlete first and leaving the disability behind. For example, an athlete should be referred to as a person with an intellectual disability rather than an intellectually disabled person.

THE STEP FRAMEWORK:

A foundational coaching tool for Special Olympics programs worldwide

Junior Athletes provides a space for children of all abilities to be successful. In some cases, due to a range of athlete abilities, activities may need to be adapted so that all athletes can participate.

STEP is a simple, powerful coaching tool—widely used in adapted physical education—that helps make any activity more accessible, more challenging, or more inclusive, without needing to create an entirely separate activity. By adjusting one or more of its four elements, a coach, teacher, or parent can meet every athlete where they are. You do not need to change every part of STEP for each activity—use your best judgment to make thoughtful adjustments that support success and inclusion for all athletes, while always presuming competence and recognizing that every child is capable of learning, growing, and participating in meaningful ways.

S	SPACE	Should I change the SPACE? Move targets closer or farther, open or shrink the playing area, add visual boundary markers, adjust the height of the activity.
T	TASK	Should I change the TASK? Simplify instructions, allow a different movement pattern, adjust the rules, use a visual schedule or picture card, break skills into smaller parts.
E	EQUIPMENT	Should I change the EQUIPMENT? Use a softer, larger, lighter, brighter, or noisier ball or tool; introduce a ramp, handle extension, communication board, or sensory support.
P	PEOPLE	Should I change the PEOPLE arrangement? Adjust team size, assign a supportive role, bring in a peer buddy, reposition yourself, add demonstration, physical guidance, or verbal encouragement.

HOW TO USE STEP

When observing an athlete, ask: Is modification needed? If yes, is it to provide support or to create a challenge? Start with the most important STEP element and add others as needed. Most athletes who need adaptations benefit from adjustments across multiple elements. Start with the minimum change, observe, and adjust from there.

STEP is also an analysis tool: work through each element to assess performance. You do not always need to modify—coaches should also recognize when an athlete can succeed without changes, and provide verbal encouragement and support first.

STEP is for every coach and athlete. Novice coaches may follow it step-by-step. Experienced coaches use it more fluidly and instinctively. Both should stay flexible, focus on athlete success, and build confidence in making adjustments.

INCLUSIVE ADAPTATIONS

Junior Athletes Inclusive Adaptations are organized by category. Athletes may have a primary need, such as requiring an assistive device to walk. However, categories are not mutually exclusive. Many children have multiple needs at the same time. Therefore, combining adaptations from more than one category may be necessary to ensure they can participate in all activities.

Specific adaptations by category can be found within the lesson plans.



SIX CATEGORIES

	Limited Mobility (LM): Athletes with limited or uncoordinated movement of their arms or legs; an athlete may use a wheelchair or stander for positioning and mobility.
	Assistive Device (AD): Athletes who are ambulatory with an assistive device (walker, crutches, cane, gait trainer) or wear a brace.
	Hard of Hearing (HOH): Athletes with difficulty hearing.
	Visual Impairment (VI): Athletes with difficulty seeing.
	Non-Verbal (NV): Athletes who have difficulty with oral communication; they may use sign language or a communication device.
	Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD): Some athletes may be overly sensitive to minor environmental stimuli (touch, sounds, etc.), while others may seek sensory stimulation, including movement.

Focus on what athletes CAN do and celebrate all participation!

COACH'S TIP: CHECK IN OFTEN

The best way to understand a child's enjoyment, fears, or challenges is to ask! Regularly check in with each athlete throughout practice and follow up with parents and caregivers when possible. Their insights are essential in supporting every child's success.

Use the chart below to respond calmly and consistently to common situations during Junior Athletes. Each response is designed to support inclusion, independence, and student confidence.

If the student...	What to do:	What to say:	Why it matters:
Won't join the activity	Offer 2 visual or physical choices	Would you like to start with this game or that one?	Reduces pressure while giving control within structure
Seems unsure what to do	Model physically and check for understanding	Let's do this step together first, then I'll watch you try.	Supports comprehension without singling them out
Is nonverbal or withdrawn	Use visuals or proximity, avoid pushing	I'm here when you're ready.	Builds trust and avoids sensory overload
Talks excessively or interrupts	Prompt peer interaction or rotate roles	Let's give our partner a turn to lead now.	Reinforces shared space and self-regulation
Becomes silly or hyper	Use a class-wide calm cue and physical reset	Let's do a quiet breath before the next move.	Helps reset energy using shared signals
Completes something unsuccessfully	Reinforce effort, not perfection	You really stuck with it and that's what matters.	Encourages persistence and self-efficacy
Melts down or becomes overwhelmed	Use calm body language, remove sensory triggers	Let's go to the calm space. I'll stay nearby.	Prevents escalation and keeps everyone safe
Says something unkind	Rephrase + model expected interaction	Let's try that again in a kind way.	Teaches social expectations while preserving dignity
Says they feel unwell	Alert your coach immediately, escort if needed	Let's tell the coach and take a break.	Ensures health and safety protocol is followed

LET'S PLAY!

Thank you for your dedication to the Junior Athletes program.

As a coach or a Program staff member, you are not only coaching sports—you are creating a space where children of all abilities feel valued, included, and capable. Your leadership builds confidence, sparks joy, and helps young athletes take their first steps toward a lifelong love of movement. The impact you make extends far beyond the playing field. Through your efforts, families are welcomed, friendships are formed, and every child is given the chance to shine. We are grateful for your passion, and we look forward to the incredible experiences you'll create with your athletes. **Thank you for being a champion of inclusion. Let's play!**





Appendix

- Registration and Release Forms
- Emergency Medical Care Refusal Form
- Letter of Intent
- Roster Template
- Lesson Template
- In-Person Coach Training Guide
- FAQs
- Brand Guidelines
- Young Athletes One-Pager
- References

JUNIOR ATHLETES REGISTRATION



Special Olympics
Junior Athletes

Special Olympics Program: _____

Are you new to Special Olympics or re-registering? ☐ New

☐ Re-Registering

JUNIOR ATHLETE INFORMATION

First Name:

Last Name:

Date of Birth:

☐ Female ☐ Male

Has an Intellectual or Developmental Disability:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Race/Ethnicity (Optional):

☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native

☐ Asian American

☐ Prefer not to answer

☐ Black or African American

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ More than one Race

☐ White or Caucasian

☐ Hispanic or Latinx

Language(s) Spoken in Junior Athlete's Home (Optional): Check all that apply

☐ English

☐ Spanish

☐ Other (please list):

Shirt Size:

☐ Youth Small

☐ Youth Medium

☐ Youth Large

☐ Requires Wheelchair Accessible Locations

☐ Language Needs:

☐ Medical Conditions:

☐ Special Diet:

☐ Other:

PARENT / GUARDIAN INFORMATION

Name:

Relationship:

Address:

City:

State/Province:

Postal Code:

Phone:

E-mail:

EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION

☐ Same as Guardian/Parent

Name:

Phone:

Relationship:

JUNIOR ATHLETES RELEASE FORM



I am the Parent or Guardian of the Junior Athletes participant named below and agree to the following:

1. **Able to Participate.** The Junior Athlete is physically able to take part in Special Olympics.
2. **Likeness Release.** I give permission to Special Olympics, Inc., Special Olympics games organizing committees, and Special Olympics accredited Programs (collectively "Special Olympics") to use the Junior Athlete's likeness, photo, video, name, voice, words, and biographical information to promote Special Olympics and raise funds for Special Olympics.
3. **Risk of Concussion and Other Injury.** I know there is a risk of injury. I understand the risk of continuing to participate with or after a concussion or other injury. The Junior Athlete may have to get medical care if there is a suspected concussion or other injury. The Junior Athlete also may have to wait 7 days or more and get permission from a doctor before playing sports again.
4. **Emergency Care.** If a parent or guardian is unavailable to consent or make medical decisions in an emergency, I authorize Special Olympics to seek medical care for the Junior Athlete, unless I mark one of these boxes:
 - ☐ I have a religious or other objection to receiving medical treatment. (Not common.)
 - ☐ I do not consent to blood transfusions. (Not common.)(If either box is marked, an EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE REFUSAL FORM must be completed.)
5. **Health Programs.** If the Junior Athlete takes part in a Special Olympics health program, I consent to health activities, exams, and treatment for the Junior Athlete. This should not replace regular health care. I can say no to treatment or anything else any time for the Junior Athlete.
6. **Personal Information.** I understand that Special Olympics will be collecting the Junior Athlete's personal information as part of participation, including name, image, address, telephone number, health information, and other personally identifying and health related information provided to Special Olympics ("personal information").
 - I agree and consent to Special Olympics:
 - using the personal information in order to: confirm eligibility and safe participation; run trainings and events; share competition results (including on the Web and in news media); provide health treatment if the Junior Athlete participates in a health program; analyze data for the purposes of improving programming and identifying and responding to the needs of Special Olympics participants; perform computer operations, quality assurance, testing, and other related activities; and provide event-related services.
 - using the personal information for communications and marketing purposes, including direct digital marketing through email, text message, and social media.
 - sharing personal information with (i) researchers, such as universities and public health agencies, that are studying intellectual disabilities and the impact of Special Olympics activities, (ii) medical professionals in an emergency, and (iii) government authorities for the purpose of assisting with any visas required for international travel to Special Olympics events and for any other purpose necessary to protect public safety, respond to government requests, and report information as required by law.
 - I have the right to ask to see the personal information or to be informed about the personal information that is processed. I have the right to ask to correct and delete the personal information, and to restrict the processing of personal information if it is inconsistent with this consent.
 - *Privacy Policy.* Personal information may be used and shared consistent with this form and as further explained in the Special Olympics privacy policy at www.SpecialOlympics.org/Privacy-Policy.aspx.

Junior Athlete Name:

PARENT/GUARDIAN SIGNATURE

I am a parent or guardian of the Junior Athlete. I have read and understand this form. By signing, I agree to this form on my own behalf and on behalf of the Junior Athlete.

Parent/Guardian Signature:

Date:

Printed Name:

Relationship:

JUNIOR ATHLETES LIKENESS RELEASE FOR SPONSORS (OPTIONAL)



Special Olympics
Junior Athletes

Special Olympics relies on sponsors and partners to help support our mission. We often use photos, videos and stories of our athletes to show the impact of support by companies that sponsor Special Olympics. If you wish to allow the Junior Athlete's likeness to be used in this way, please read and sign below.

I agree to the following:

- I give permission to Special Olympics, Inc., Special Olympics games organizing committees, and Special Olympics accredited Programs (collectively "Special Olympics") and their sponsors and partners to use the Junior Athlete's likeness, photo, video, name, voice, and words ("Likeness") to acknowledge the sponsors' and partners' support for Special Olympics.
- Special Olympics and its sponsors and partners will not use the Junior Athlete's Likeness to endorse commercial products or services.
- I understand neither the Junior Athlete nor I will not be compensated for the use of the Junior Athlete's Likeness.

Junior Athlete Name:	
PARENT/GUARDIAN SIGNATURE	
I am a parent or guardian of the Junior Athlete. I have read and understand this form. By signing, I agree to this form on my own behalf and on behalf of the Junior Athlete.	
Parent/Guardian Signature:	Date:
Printed Name:	Relationship:

EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE REFUSAL FORM

Instructions: Only complete this Emergency Medical Refusal Form (this "Form") if you do not consent to emergency medical care on religious or other grounds for the Junior Athlete and have marked a box under the Emergency Care provision on the Special Olympics Junior Athletes Registration Form ("JA Registration Form").

I am the Parent/Guardian of the Junior Athlete named below.

1. **No Consent to Emergency Medical Care.** I understand that the Junior Athlete Registration form requires their Parents/Guardians to consent to emergency medical care for a Junior Athlete if needed in an emergency. Based on my religious beliefs and/or other reasons **I DO NOT CONSENT** to emergency medical care for the Junior Athlete in an emergency.

YOU MUST MARK THE BOX AND WRITE YOUR INITIALS NEXT TO ONE STATEMENT TO CONFIRM YOUR INTENT TO NOT CONSENT TO EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE:

- ☐ I DO NOT CONSENT TO ANY KIND OF EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE FOR THE JUNIOR ATHLETE, EVEN IN A LIFE-THREATENING EMERGENCY. **INITIALS:** _____
- ☐ I DO NOT CONSENT TO BLOOD TRANSFUSIONS FOR THE JUNIOR ATHLETE, EVEN IN A LIFE-THREATENING EMERGENCY. I CONSENT TO ALL OTHER KINDS OF EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE. **INITIALS:** _____

2. **Assumption of Risk; Waiver and Release of Liability; Indemnification.** I understand the risks involved with the Junior Athlete participating in Junior Athletes activities ("JA Activities") and fully accept and assume all risks and all responsibility for losses, costs, and damages that may incur as a result of their participation. By marking one or more of the boxes and adding my initials in Section 1 above, to the fullest extent of the law, I release and agree not to sue SOI, any Special Olympics Program (a "Program" or "Programs"), Local Organizing Committee or other Special Olympics organization, or their directors, agents, volunteers, and employees, other participants, sponsoring agencies, sponsors, advertisers, and, if applicable, owners and lessors of premises (collectively, the "Releasees") for any claims that may arise out of taking or failing to take measures to provide the Junior Athlete with emergency medical care even if arising from the negligence of the Releasees. I am agreeing to this release on the Junior Athlete's behalf, and acknowledge I have given up substantial rights, because I have refused, knowingly and voluntarily, without inducement, to give the Releasees permission to take emergency measures, and I am expressly withholding consent to emergency medical care for the Junior Athlete on religious or other grounds. I further agree that if, despite this release, I or anyone on my behalf, makes a claim against any of the Releasees, I will indemnify and hold harmless each of the Releasees from any such liabilities, claims, or losses resulting from that claim. I agree that if any part of this Form is held to be invalid, the remaining parts shall continue in full force and effect.

3. **Printed Instructions.** I agree to ensure that the Junior Athlete carries printed instructions that describe our religious or other objections to emergency medical care as described in this Form and how I wish the person accompanying the Junior Athlete to respond if the Junior Athlete gets sick or hurt and cannot speak for themselves. These printed instructions will be carried at all times during participation in Junior Athletes
4. **Emergency Medical Care If Athlete Is Not Accompanied.** I understand that if the Junior Athlete is not carrying the printed instructions or if I, as the Parent/Guardian, am not present and actively taking personal responsibility during a medical emergency where the Junior Athlete is unable to speak for themselves, Special Olympics may seek emergency medical care for the Junior Athlete as recommended by medical professionals responding to the emergency. I waive any claims against the Releasees should they seek emergency care for the Junior Athlete.

Junior Athlete Name:	
PARENT/GUARDIAN SIGNATURE	
I am a parent or guardian of the Junior Athlete. I have read and understand this form. By signing, I agree to this form on my own behalf and on behalf of the Junior Athlete.	
Parent/Guardian Signature:	Date:
Printed Name:	Relationship:

LETTER OF INTENT FOR HOSTING SPECIAL OLYMPICS JUNIOR ATHLETES PROGRAMMING

This Letter of Intent (LOI) outlines the mutual understanding and agreement between the hosting organization or facility and Special Olympics [State or Country] regarding the implementation of the Junior Athletes program at the host site.

1. Parties

This agreement is made between:

Special Olympics _____ (hereinafter referred to as 'Special Olympics') and
[State or Country]

_____ (hereinafter referred to as 'the Host Organization').
[Hosting Organization or Facility Name]

2. Program Details

The Host Organization agrees to offer the Junior Athletes program on its premises during the following:

- Program Type: Junior Athletes (play-based sports for children ages 6–12)
- Program Schedule (Start date, End date, Time): _____
- Location (Facility Name or Address): _____
- Target Group: Children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities, ages 6–12

3. Liability

The Host Organization accepts full responsibility and liability for the safety and conduct of the program and its participants. Special Olympics shall not be held liable for any incidents, injuries, or claims arising from participation in the Junior Athletes program held at the Host Organization's facility.

4. Participant Data Sharing

As part of this agreement, the Host Organization agrees to provide a roster to Special Olympics at the conclusion of the program. At minimum, the following participant information will be collected and shared:

- Total number of participants
- Age range of participants
- Disability status (if known or self-reported)
- Permission to share photos for promotion purposes. No personally identifiable information (e.g., names, contact info) is required unless otherwise agreed upon.

5. Authorization and Signatures

By signing this Letter of Intent, both parties acknowledge their understanding of the expectations outlined above and agree to collaborate in the successful delivery of the Junior Athletes program.

Authorized Representative, Special Olympics

Date

Authorized Representative, Host Organization

Date

JUNIOR ATHLETES ROSTER

This roster should be completed by the Junior Athletes coach and shared with your Special Olympics Program contact. Please fill out as much information as allowed by your local agreement. This helps Special Olympics track participation and engagement. You are the first line of gathering this important information, which leads to stronger communication and ties to Junior Athletes families!

Participant Name	Date of Birth	Gender	Known intellectual or developmental disability	Emergency Contact	New or Returning	Notes

LESSON TEMPLATE: WARM-UP 1

WARM-UP 1: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Instructions

WARM-UP 2: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Instructions

LESSON TEMPLATE: SKILL

SKILL: _____

Equipment

Setup

Instructions

GAME: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Instructions

COOL-DOWN: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Directions

Reflection

.....

IN-PERSON COACH TRAINING GUIDE

This training guide is designed for staff or facilitators delivering an in-person session for new Junior Athletes coaches. It includes a sample agenda, key talking points, interactive activities, and materials needed to prepare coaches for successful program delivery.

Training Agenda (2.5–4 Hours):

- Welcome and Introductions
- Overview of Special Olympics and Junior Athletes
- Understanding the Junior Athletes Model
- Physical Literacy and Age-Appropriate Skills
- Coach Responsibilities and Best Practices
- Adapting Activities for All Abilities – STEP Method
- Break
- Review of Lesson Plans and Sample Activities
- Interactive Coaching Practice
- Data, Roster Sharing, and Program Reporting
- Q&A and Wrap-Up

Key Topics to Cover:

- Mission of Special Olympics and where Junior Athletes fits in
- Inclusive coaching strategies and the role of the coach
- Core components of a Junior Athletes session: warm-up, skill building, cool-down
- Age-appropriate instruction for children 6–12
- Safety, supervision, and behavior guidance
- Adapting using the STEP Method (Space, Task, Equipment, People)
- How to communicate with parents and caregivers
- Collecting attendance and sharing program data with your Special Olympics Program

Interactive Activities:

- Icebreaker: Participants introduce themselves and share why they want to coach
- Small group: Review and adapt a sample lesson plan
- Demonstration: Facilitate a mock Junior Athletes activity
- Discussion: Share ideas on how to include all children

Materials Needed:

- Printed Junior Athletes Coach Guide
- Lesson plan samples
- Equipment (cones, soft balls, foam paddles, etc.)
- Roster templates
- Sign-in sheet and feedback forms
- Laptop and projector (optional)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Who can participate in Junior Athletes?

A: Children ages 6–12 with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities can participate in Junior Athletes.

Q: Do coaches need to be certified?

A: Yes. Coaches must complete the Special Olympics Level 1 Sport Assistant Course and the Junior Athletes Coaching Course. Additional training may be required by your local Special Olympics Program.

Q: What sports are included in Junior Athletes?

A: Junior Athletes includes sport and movement activities featuring skills used in basketball, bocce, bowling, floorball, football, volleyball, softball, tennis, and volleyball. Coaches may use the included template to develop additional lessons that align with Junior Athletes principles and learning objectives.

Q: How long is each session?

A: Each session is approximately 45–60 minutes and includes a warm-up, skill-building activities, and a cool-down.

Q: Can a child without a disability join?

A: Yes! Junior Athletes is an inclusive program designed for children both with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Q: What if a child needs support during the session?

A: Coaches can work with parents and caregivers to determine appropriate support and promote the child's independence over time.

Q: Is there a cost to participate?

A: Junior Athletes is typically free. Check with your local Special Olympics Program.

Q: How do I start a Junior Athletes program in my school or community?

A: Contact your local Special Olympics Program for support, complete required training, recruit participants, and use the guide's lesson plans and resources to begin.

Q: Can Junior Athletes be used in a school setting?

A: Yes. Junior Athletes can be incorporated into PE classes, recess, or after-school programs. It can also be a Unified Sports offering in a Unified Champion School.

Q: What happens after a child completes Junior Athletes?

A: Children may transition into traditional or Unified Special Olympics sports or join the Motor Activity Training Program (MATP), depending on their skills and interests.

Our visual identity is built on our core building blocks. These central elements provide the framework for all visual communications.

Programmatic identifiers



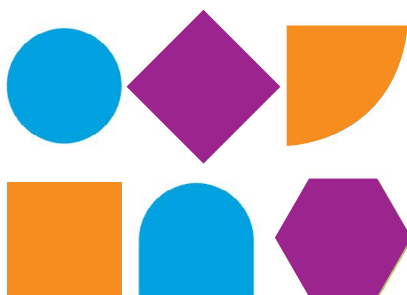
Typography

Abc

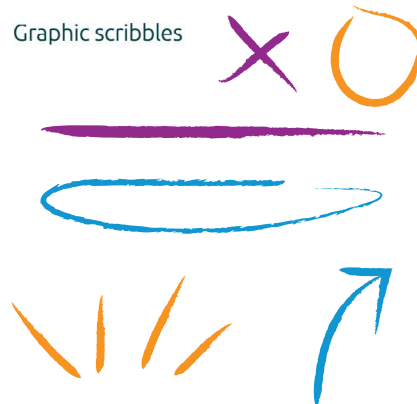
Photography



Shapes and Color



Graphic scribbles



Visual Identity

Color Palette

Our palette is made up of three colors, each assigned to an area.

Each color has a range of shades, which can be used alongside the main color.

Please use process color (CMYK) mix created for artwork. Colors should be visually matched to an up-to-date Pantone® Swatch.

The SO Universal Colors Black, Grey and Biscuit can be used alongside this color palette.

Note Special Olympics Red should only be used for the Special Olympics mark.

Orange

Pantone 137C
Process: 0C/50M/100Y/0K
RGB: 247R/148G/30B
Hex: #F7941E

Mid Orange

HEX: #EEAD65

Light Orange

HEX: #F2C18B

Extra Light Orange

HEX: #F7D6B2

Purple

Pantone 2587C
Process: 50C/100M/0Y/0K
RGB: 146R/39G/143B
Hex: #92278F

Mid Purple

HEX: #9E59A2

Light Purple

HEX: #B782B9

Extra Light Purple

HEX: #CFACD1

Blue

Pantone® Process Blue
Process: 100C/20M/0Y/0K
RGB: 0R/149G/218B
HEX: #0095DA

Mid Blue

HEX: #339FD7

Light Blue

HEX: #66B7E1

Extra Light Blue

HEX: #98CFEB

Universal

Special Olympics Red

Pantone® 186C
Process: 0C/100M/100Y/0K
RGB: 255R/0G/0B
HEX: #ED1C24

Special Olympics Black

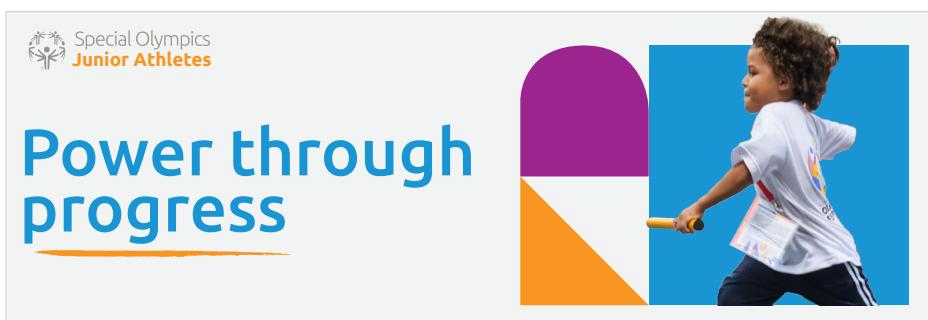
Pantone® 7547 C
Process: 100C/8M/0Y/85K
RGB: 0R/36G/39B
HEX: #002427

Special Olympics Grey

Pantone® 418
Process: 0c/0m/15y/75k
RGB: 99R/99G/89B
HEX: #636359

Biscuit

Pantone® Warm Grey 1
Process: 0c/0m/8y/8k
RGB: 236R/234G/219B
HEX: #ECEADB



YEAR-LONG LESSON PLANS

Special Olympics Young Athletes School lesson plans offer a year-long sport and play program for children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in early childhood and elementary school. They have a strong focus on classroom inclusion and how to foster confidence, language, and social skills. The lessons develop motor skills like balance, flexibility, strength, and coordination, while incorporating academic skills to help form stronger connections to classroom concepts.

What it looks like:

- Two separate curricula: early childhood education and primary school
- 30 weeks of lessons: 30 minutes, 3 times a week
- Common Core and SHAPE standards aligned
- Weekly read-aloud books and discussion that focus on friendship and social emotional development
- 8 total units, each with a focus on a different sports skill area
- Newsletters & printables in each unit
- Additional Special Olympics resources, videos, and skill cards included (Fit Five, High Five, GoNoodle)



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Special Olympics **Junior Athletes**



Special Olympics
Health

MADE
POSSIBLE BY **Golisano** FOUNDATION

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