



Special Olympics
Junior Athletes



Introduction Guide



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 Introduction

- 4 Welcome Letter
- 5 Special Olympics Mission
- 6 Purpose of Junior Athletes
- 7 A Child's Journey Through Special Olympics
- 9 The Benefit of Age-Appropriate Sports for Children
- 10 Junior Athletes as a Multi-Sport Experience

11 Implementation

- 11 Lesson Plans
- 12 Skill Development
- 14 Skills Showcase
- 15 Implementation Models
- 16 Recruitment

18 Coaching

- 18 Coaching Requirements
- 20 Safeguarding
- 21 Registration, Roster Collecting, & Reporting
- 22 Coaching Best Practices
- 24 Coaching Children

26 Family Engagement

- 26 Role of Parents/Caregivers
- 27 Explaining Unified Partners to Parents
- 28 Family Health Forums
- 29 Supporting Lifelong Special Olympics Participation

32 Adaptations & Inclusion

- 32 Creating an Inclusive Junior Athletes Experience
- 35 If Offering Junior Athletes in a Non-Inclusive Setting
- 36 Adaptations in Junior Athletes
- 37 General Adaptations
- 39 Coach's Tip: Check in Often
- 40 Let's Play!

41 Appendix

- 42 Registration Form
- 46 Emergency Medical Care Refusal Form
- 48 Letter of Intent
- 49 Roster Template
- 50 Lesson Template
- 55 In-Person Coach Training Guide
- 56 FAQs
- 57 Brand Guidelines
- 59 Young Athletes One-Pager

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.

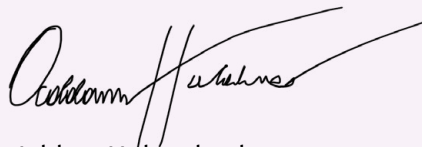
What we love most about this work is inspiring younger athletes to grow, dream, and become better versions of themselves. With the athletes we've coached, we've never had to beg for their attention, motivation, or effort. Their commitment and enthusiasm came naturally, and their passion reminds us of 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 **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.

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 sports offerings, while children who need more time to learn the rules, skills, and group play experiences associated with sports may transition to Junior Athletes activities beginning at age 6.

Terms Defined:

- **Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDDs)** are lifelong conditions that affect an individual's physical, intellectual, and/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.
- **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.
- **Recreational Sports** 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.

PURPOSE OF JUNIOR ATHLETES (CONTINUED)

Junior Athletes is a non-competitive, multi-sport program for children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities 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 known participation gap between Young Athletes (a sport and play program for children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities, ages 2-7), and traditional Special Olympics sports offered for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities 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:

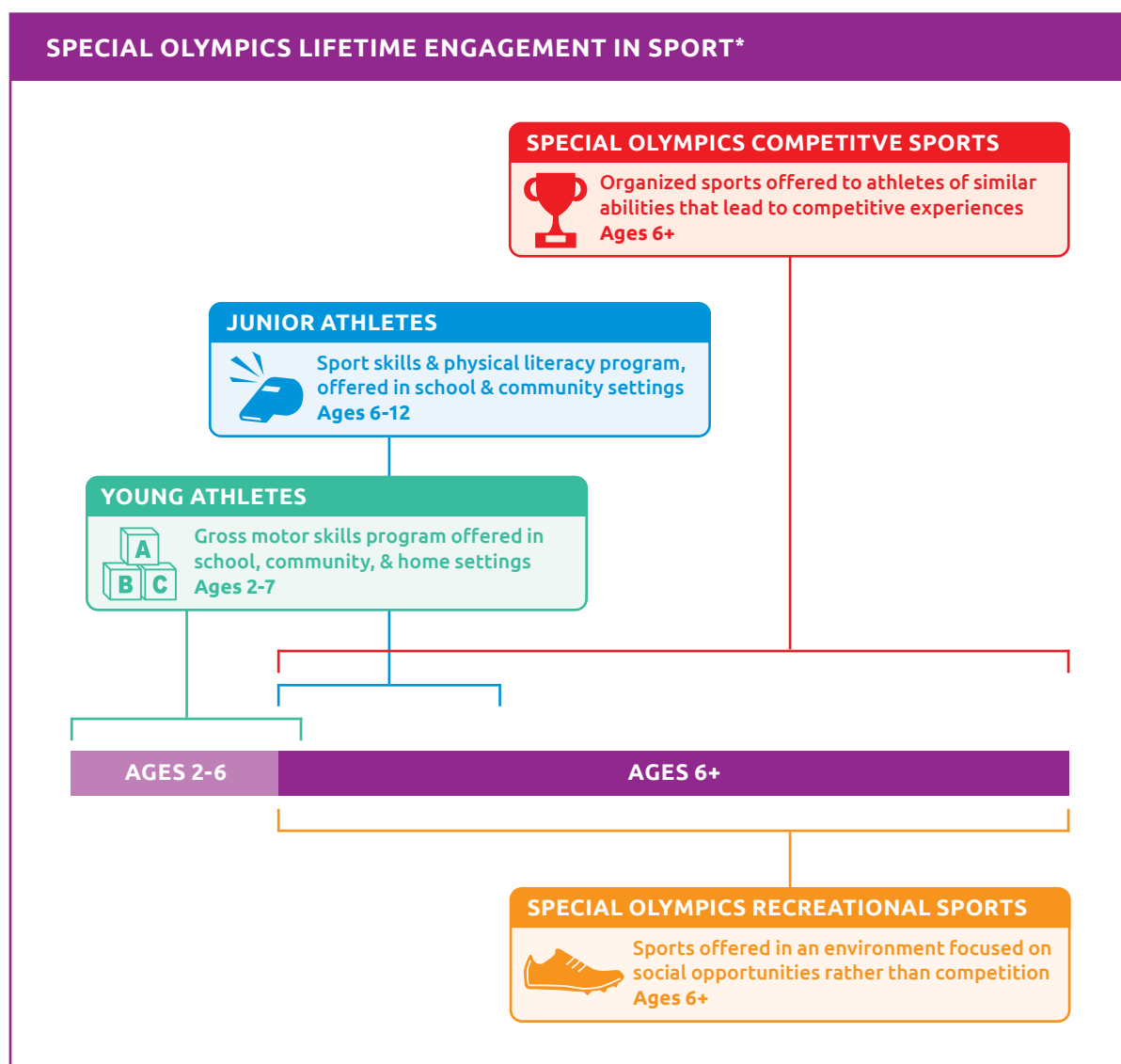
- A child under age 7 has advanced beyond the skills in their Young Athletes activities, but is not yet old enough to participate in Special Olympics.
- A child 6+ is not ready or not yet comfortable with participating in 8+ weeks of practice and competition in one sport.
- A community program or team 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 more advanced physical literacy and sports-specific skills.

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. While this change is an exciting step forward, our global movement is still determining what it means for Programs, and it may not apply to your Program at this time. Please continue to follow your current guidelines as we work toward broader implementation and provide further updates.

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.

Terms Defined:

- **Physical Competence** involves performing a wide range of movements proficiently, enabling participation in diverse activities.
- **Internal Confidence** stems from self-efficacy and enjoyment in physical activity, which maintains motivation.

Health and Development

A broad collection of research highlighting the impact of sports participation on children without disabilities, collated by the Aspen Institute's Project Play,¹ showcases how participation in sports and physical activity can have a lasting impact on many critical domains:

- Improves overall physical health
- Helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints
- Controls weight and reduces fat, including a reduction in obesity
- Prevents or delays high blood pressure
- Develops and improves cognitive skills
- Improves academic achievement, including grades and test scores
- Supports children with aspects of social emotional development, like self-esteem, goal-setting, and leadership skills
- Promotes teamwork and improved self-confidence
- Teaches discipline, dedication, and how to get along with others

¹ Project Play-Aspen Institute <https://projectplay.org/youth-sports/facts>

JUNIOR ATHLETES AS A MULTI-SPORT EXPERIENCE

Benefits of youth participation in multiple sports:²

- Avoids burnout and prevents repetitive strain or injury
- Enhances diverse sport skills and develops motor skills
- Promotes social development and identifies enjoyable physical activities for all children
- Increases physical activity

What Qualifies 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 engaging experience for Junior Athletes, helping them discover and nurture their understanding of multiple 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)

² <https://www.allsportz.com.au/news/quis-quia-quo-excepturi-atque-consequatur/>

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 challenges
- Children without a diagnosis of IDD

Special Olympics sports offerings:

- Most of the sports are offered at the Special Olympics community level, and a Junior Athlete can easily transfer to a local community team once they master their basic sport skills!

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!

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/Wall Games, Target Games, Striking/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 the Young Athletes program 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.

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/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!

** 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!

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. Team sports foster collaboration, while individual sports build self-reliance. 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 team 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, community centers, and recreational facilities. These locations provide the necessary space and resources to conduct inclusive sports activities for children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- **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 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 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 intellectual and developmental disabilities
- 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.

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.
- Participation is free or low-cost depending on location.

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/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

Who is the Junior Athletes Coach?

The individual leading Junior Athletes programming.

- **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 who have intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Parents and community leaders** typically 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.



JUNIOR ATHLETES COACHING REQUIREMENTS (CONTINUED)

A Junior Athletes coach does not have to be a sport expert or have even participated in sport previously to be effective in this role. The individual who leads Junior Athletes is there to foster healthy and developmentally-appropriate sport skills and physical activity.

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 [e-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.

For those coaches wishing to deepen their learning journey, the following supplemental courses on the Special Olympics e-learning portal are suggested:

- Welcome to Special Olympics
- Young Athletes Coaching Course
- Special Olympics Physical Literacy Course
- Elementary Education Course
- Nutrition for Sport Coaches

And finally, it is HIGHLY recommended that coaches gain certification from their local Special Olympics Program in the specific sports offered in their Junior Athletes program. Connect with your local Program for more information.

e-learning



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:³

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.

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 (within the United States), 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 e-learning portal. For more specific information on safeguarding in your location, connect with your Special Olympics Program contact to learn more.

³ United Nations, Elimination of Violence against Children https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/14-08451_Strategy_eBook.pdf

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 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 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 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 learning (SEL). SEL refers to the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship.

Coaching Course Spotlight: The Junior Athletes 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 emotional learning (SEL).

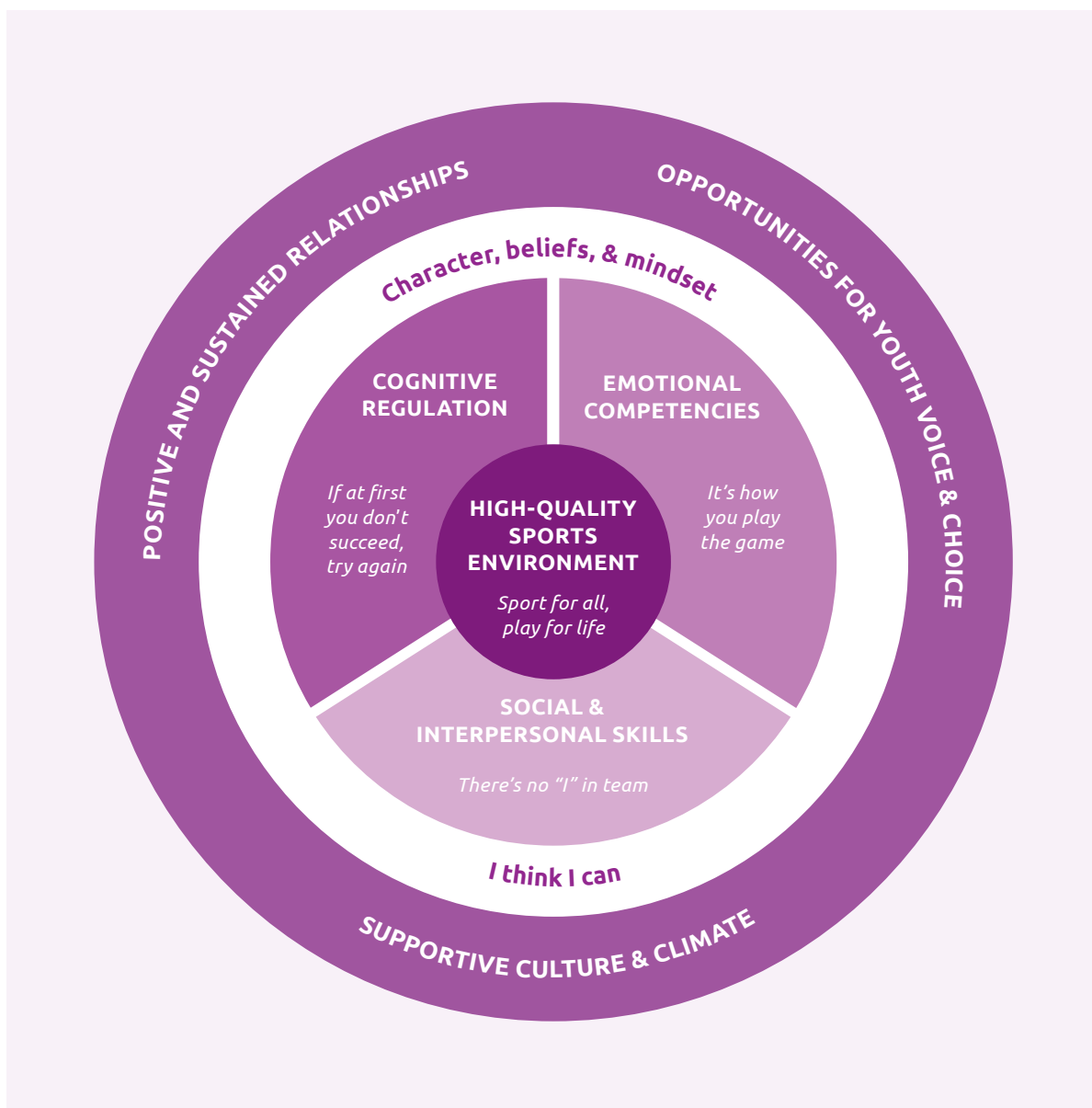
Through age-appropriate activities and coaching tips, the course helps build Junior Athletes' confidence, coordination, teamwork, and resilience. Whether you're just starting out or looking to strengthen your approach, this training sets a strong foundation for creating positive, athlete-centered experiences.



COACHING BEST PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

To create an environment that supports social & emotional learning:⁴

- 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.



⁴ Susan Crown Exchange. Coaching Social & Emotional Skills in Youth Sports, 14-17, accessed April 7, 2020, assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2019/03/Calls-for-Coaches-White-Paper-2.22.19.pdf.

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:⁵

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



⁵ The iCoachKids Pledge: 10 Guidance Points to Create Positive Sport Experiences for Kids, iCoachKids, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.icoachkids.eu/ick-pledge.html>.

COACHING CHILDREN (CONTINUED)

7. Engage Parents Positively

Parents are not the enemy, but the biggest resource at a coach's disposal. They want the best for their children, and so do the coaches. Partnership is the key word. Talk to parents to know what they can offer.

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/CAREGIVERS

The role of parents/caregivers in Junior Athletes sessions 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? Y/N
2. Does the participant require one-on-one assistance? Y/N
3. Do you have enough assistant coaches and volunteers to provide one-on-one support? Y/N

If you answer "No" to one or more of these questions, it is reasonable to ask a parent/caregiver to support their child during sessions. However, work with the parent/caregiver to promote the participant's independence over time. 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/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/caregivers can relax while their child participates.

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

Parents/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 will 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/caregivers, this may be the first time they see 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/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/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/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 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.



FAMILY HEALTH FORUMS

Family Health Forums (FHF) provide health education to parents, caregivers, and siblings of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These forums connect families with health professionals, community leaders, and social service providers while creating spaces for peer support. FHF 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/Physical Activity*
- Obesity
- Positive Parenting*
- Human Rights/Inclusion
- Water and Sanitation/Hygiene
- Diabetes Prevention and/or 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/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/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/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 intellectual and developmental disabilities, 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/caregivers that their child excels in a team vs. individual sport or even a sport they have never been interested in themselves.
 - Support parents/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/caregivers should introduce themselves to each other.
 - Bring in other Special Olympics programming, such as Family 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 (Motor Activity Training Program) offerings for athletes age 8 and older.

If available, invite local Special Olympics athletes, coaches, and volunteers—including Global Messengers—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 young 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 a disability is never considered a “volunteer.” They are participants, just as a child with an intellectual or developmental disability. Although a child without a disability may be partnered with a child with a 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 or parent/caregivers to understand the type of needs and experience with inclusion the children have in school and community settings. This 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!

Example: Have children share with the team something fun they have done since the last practice, or what they are looking forward to doing in practice.

- Encourage all athletes to communicate* with their teammates using their first name.
- Take the time to recognize specific athletes for good performance, sportsmanship, and leadership, and encourage teammates to do the same.

If a parent/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.

If positive redirection is not working, privately approach the parent/caregiver for support. Just as you would NEVER single a child out in front their peers, never speak about a child’s behavior with a parent/caregiver in front of others. Pull them aside and ensure that the conversation is positive, affirming, and comes to a supportive conclusion for those involved.

* 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.)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a key part of Junior Athletes. Coaches help children develop skills like self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—often without even realizing it.

Ways coaches support SEL:

- 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 or disability-specific 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.

ADAPTATIONS IN JUNIOR ATHLETES

Adaptations to most sports activities can be made using the STEP principle. Widely used in adapted physical education settings, STEP is defined as the following:

- **SPACE:**
Changing the space where an activity takes place, depending on the activity
» *Example: Modifying the gym space by setting up boundaries or moving to a smaller room to accommodate Junior Athletes' needs*
- **TASK:**
Increasing participation through individualization of activities during a session
» *Example: Depending on the individual needs, allowing the Junior Athletes participant to walk or run while dribbling during basketball session*
- **EQUIPMENT:**
Changing the equipment used, so that success is increased
» *Example: Using a balloon instead of a shuttlecock during your badminton session to increase a player's hand-eye coordination*
- **PEOPLE:**
Properly pairing children in the skill being taught to allow for a better experience for everyone
» *Example: Thoughtfully placing children in smaller groups when learning a new skill that allows EVERYONE to work as leaders and followers*

GENERAL ADAPTATIONS

Skill Level

- Allow athletes to self-select their level of participation, with gentle guidance from the coach.
- Modify rules as needed (e.g., allow walking instead of running).

Equipment & Environment

- **Change the color or texture of equipment:**
Some athletes may engage more with bright colors or unique textures (e.g., soft velvet, Velcro), while others may prefer simpler, less stimulating equipment.
- **Use of Velcro:**
Velcro is helpful for athletes with limited fine motor skills. It can be used for catching, grasping, or target games to increase success and confidence.
- **Larger goals/targets:**
Larger targets are easier to see and reach, improving accessibility and increasing the chance of success.
- **Mark field positions:**
Clearly marked positions help athletes visualize where to stand or move during games.
- **Adjust goal/target placement:**
Lowering a basketball hoop or moving a goal closer can make activities more accessible.
- **Reduce boundary size/distance:**
Smaller playing areas can improve participation and success rates.
- **Simplify patterns:**
Keep instructions and movement patterns simple to support understanding.
- **Remove physical obstacles:**
Clear pathways help prevent slips, falls, or confusion, improving overall accessibility.
- **Provide quiet breaks:**
If group settings become overstimulating, allow space and time for athletes to regroup and return ready to participate.

GENERAL ADAPTATIONS (CONTINUED)

Time

- Vary the pace and duration of activities to meet athlete needs.
- Offer frequent water and rest breaks.
- Keep practice times consistent—same day, same time each week—for predictability.
- Slow down activities or extend learning time as needed to support comprehension and participation.

Communication

- Use simple, clear language.
- Break tasks into small, manageable steps.
- Provide short verbal cues and repeat them as needed.
- Demonstrate/model each activity visually.
- Use both verbal and non-verbal signals (gestures, visuals, or physical modeling).
- Use the buddy system or small groups to promote peer support.
- Increase space between athletes to reduce distractions and improve focus.
- Repeat skills often, using consistent language and movements.

Transitions

- Use songs, movement, or signals (like bells or chimes) to indicate a change in activity.
- Combine cues for effectiveness:
 - » Visual (e.g., lights flickering or picture cards)
 - » Auditory (e.g., music or bells)

Enhance directions with multi-sensory cues:

- Use gestures, pictures, or objects alongside speech to guide athletes effectively.

Repetition & Purpose

- Offer frequent, varied opportunities to repeat and practice skills.
- Vary the goal of each game depending on the child's developmental level.
- Some children may be working on simple motor skills, while others may be ready for more complex strategies.
- Vary the number of turns each athlete receives to match their attention span and skill level.

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 or 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 teaching 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!**





Special Olympics
Junior Athletes



Appendix

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

JUNIOR ATHLETES REGISTRATION FORM

Required for participating in Special Olympics Junior Athletes



State Special Olympics Program: _____

Is the Junior Athlete new to Special Olympics or returning ☐ New ☐ Returning

JUNIOR ATHLETE INFORMATION	
First Name:	Last Name:
Date of Birth:	Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Prefer not to answer
Has an Intellectual or Developmental Disability: Yes ☐ No ☐ Unknown ☐	
Race/Ethnicity (Optional): ☐ Prefer not to answer ☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native ☐ Black or African American ☐ White or Caucasian ☐ Asian American ☐ More than one ☐ Race ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander Hispanic or Latinx	
Language(s) Spoken in Junior Athlete's Home (Optional) ☐ English ☐ Spanish ☐ Other	
Shirt Size: ☐ Youth Small ☐ Youth Medium ☐ Youth Large	
Requires Wheelchair Accessible Locations	
Language Needs:	
Relevant Medications	
Medical Conditions:	
Relevant Medications	
Special Diet:	
PARENT / GUARDIAN INFORMATION	
Name:	
Relationship to Junior Athlete: Parent/guardian ☐ Caregiver ☐ Family member ☐	

Address:		City:
State/Province:		Postal Code:
Phone:		E-mail:
EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION		
☐ Same as Guardian/Parent		
Name:		
Phone:	Relationship to the Junior Athlete: Parent/guardian ☐ Caregiver ☐ Family member ☐	

I am the Parent or Guardian of the Junior Athlete 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 local organizing committees, accredited Special Olympics Programs (collectively "Special Olympics"), as well as official Special Olympics supporters and partners that have authorization from Special Olympics, to use the Junior Athlete's likeness, photo, video, name, voice, words, biographical information and similar or related material (their "likeness") to promote Special Olympics and raise funds for Special Olympics. I understand that the Junior Athlete's likeness may be used in all forms of media in local or global campaigns – including those by supporters and partners of Special Olympics – but understand that the likeness will not be used to endorse commercial products or services. I understand that the Junior Athlete will not be compensated for the use of their likeness.
- 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. Health Programs.** If the Junior Athlete joins a health program, I consent to their participation in activities, screenings, and treatment, understanding this does not replace regular care and may be declined at any time
- 5. 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.)

6. **Personal Information.** I understand that Special Olympics will be collecting the Junior Athlete's personal information as part of their participation, including my name, image, address, telephone number, health information, and other personally identifying and health related information they provide to Special Olympics ("personal information").

I agree and consent to Special Olympics:

- using the Junior Athlete's information in order to: make sure they are eligible and can participate safely; analyze data for the purposes of improving programming and identifying and responding to the needs of Junior Athletes participants; perform computer operations, quality assurance, testing, and other related activities; and provide event-related services;
- using my contact information for communicating with me about Special Olympics;
- sharing the Junior Athlete's personal information confidentially with (i) researchers such as universities and public health agencies that are studying intellectual disabilities and the impact of Junior Athletes and other Special Olympics activities, (ii) medical professionals in an emergency, and (iii) for any other purpose necessary to protect public safety, respond to government requests, and report information as required by law; and
- 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 see the Junior Athlete's personal information or to be informed about the personal information that is processed about them. I have the right to ask to correct and delete their personal information, and to restrict the processing of their personal information if it is inconsistent with this form.

7. **Privacy Policy.** Personal information may be used and shared consistent with this form and as further explained in the Special Olympics Privacy and Data Security Policy privacy policy at www.SpecialOlympics.org/Privacy-Policy.

SYMPTOMS FOR SPINAL CORD COMPRESSION and ATLANTOAXIAL INSTABILITY (For Junior Athlete with Down syndrome only)

If the Junior Athlete has been diagnosed with or experienced any of the following symptoms that have increased in severity over the past three years – difficulty controlling bowels or bladder; numbness or tingling in legs, arms, hands, or feet; weakness in arms, legs, hands, or feet; burner/stinger/pinches nerve, pain in neck, back shoulders, arms, hands, buttocks, legs or feet; spasticity or paralysis – I will obtain a review and permission from a licensed medical practitioner for the Junior Athlete to participate in JA Activities.

WAIVER AND RELEASE OF LIABILITY / ASSUMPTION OF RISK / INDEMNIFICATION

In consideration of being allowed to participate in any way in Special Olympics activities, the undersigned acknowledges, appreciates, and agrees that:

- While particular rules and personal discipline may reduce this risk, the risk of illness (including communicable diseases), injury (including concussion), disability, and death does exist;
- If I observe any unusual or significant hazard during the Junior Athlete's presence or participation, I will remove them from participation and bring such to the attention of the nearest Special Olympics representative immediately; and
- I understand the risks involved with participation in Junior Athletes. I fully accept and assume all risks and all responsibility for losses, costs, and damages the Junior Athlete may incur as a result of their participation. To the fullest extent of the law, I release and agree not to sue any Special Olympics organization, its directors, agents, volunteers, and employees, other participants, sponsoring agencies, sponsors, advertisers, and, if applicable owners and lessors of premises on which Junior Athletes is occurring ("Releasees") related to any liabilities, claims, or losses on my account caused or alleged to be caused in whole or in part by the Releasees even if arising from the negligence of the Releasees. I have read this release of liability and assumption of risk provision, fully understand its terms, acknowledge that I have given up substantial rights by signing it, and sign it freely and voluntarily without any inducement. 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 as the result of such claim. I agree that if any part of this form is held to be invalid, the other parts shall continue in full force and effect.

EVALUATION AND RESEARCH

(Optional)

Special Olympics wants to help our Junior Athletes and their families stay healthy and happy. We may take part in research studies and would share information for the Junior Athlete's potential participation. All studies will be checked by the Special Olympics Chief Health Officer. Would you be interested in learning about research studies related to IDD Activities?

____Yes____ No

Signature Page Follows

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.	
Junior Athlete Name:	
Parent/Guardian Signature:	Date:
Printed Name:	

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/facility and Special Olympics [State/Region] 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/Region]

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

2. Program Details

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

- Program Type: Junior Athletes (non-competitive 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!

[illegible]

LESSON TEMPLATE: WARM-UP 1

WARM-UP 1: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Directions

LESSON TEMPLATE: WARM-UP 2

WARM-UP 2: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Directions

LESSON TEMPLATE: SKILL

SKILL: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Directions

LESSON TEMPLATE: GAME

GAME: _____

Equipment

.....

Setup

.....

Directions

LESSON TEMPLATE: COOL-DOWN

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 (2.5–3 Hours):

- Welcome and Introductions (15 min)
- Overview of Special Olympics and Junior Athletes (20 min)
- Understanding the Junior Athletes Model (20 min)
- Physical Literacy and Age-Appropriate Skills (15 min)
- Coach Responsibilities and Best Practices (20 min)
- Adapting Activities for All Abilities – STEP Method (20 min)
- Break (10 min)
- Review of Lesson Plans and Sample Activities (30 min)
- Interactive Coaching Practice (30 min)
- Data, Roster Sharing, and Program Reporting (15 min)
- Q&A and Wrap-Up (15 min)

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/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/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: The core sports include volleyball, football, floorball, pickleball, bowling, basketball, and athletics. Coaches can add sports using provided templates.

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/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 or low-cost depending on the hosting organization or school. 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



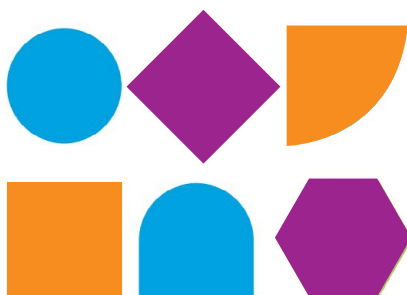
Typography

Abc

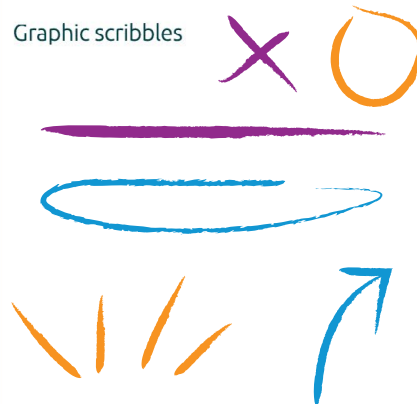
Photography



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

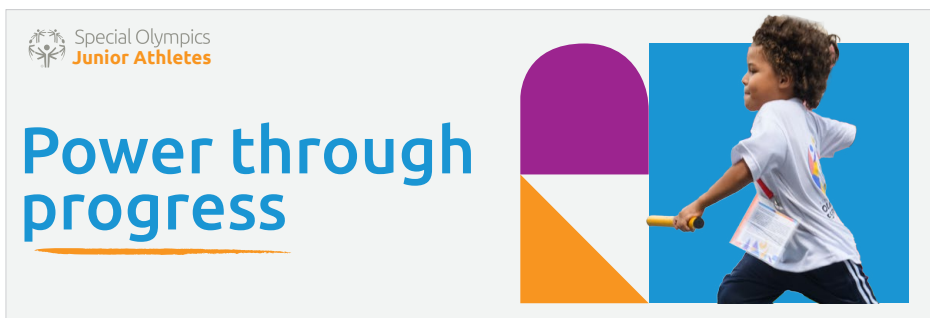
Pantone® 7547 C
Process: 100C/8M/0Y/85K
RGB: 0R/36G/39B
HEX: #002427

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: Pre K & K focus; 1st & 2nd grade focus
- 30 weeks of lessons: 30 minutes, 3 times a week
- Common Core/SHAPE standards aligned
- Weekly read-aloud books and discussion that focus on friendship and social emotional learning skills
- 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)





Special Olympics
Junior Athletes

Special Olympics Health activities are supported by many sources, including in the United States by Grant Number NU27DD000021 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with \$18.1 M (64%) financed with U.S. Federal funds and \$10.2 M (36%) supported by non-federal sources. These contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.