

## Unified Sports Research: Reports and Publications

Since Unified Sports was launched by Special Olympics as an inclusive program bringing together athletes with intellectual disabilities and partners without intellectual disabilities for the purpose of competitive sport, a great deal of research and evaluation has examined the outcomes and impacts of the program. This research has included a number of clinical trials that used a randomized assignment to treatment design. In this design, Unified Sports participants are compared to individuals not participating in the program. (A number of these studies are listed directly below.) Other research on Unified Sports has included descriptive studies of participants' experiences and evaluations of various implementations of the program.

### Clinical trials

Baran, F., Aktop, A., Özer, D., Nalbant, S., Ağlamiş, E., Barak, S., & Hutzler, Y. (2013). The effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports Soccer training program on anthropometry, physical fitness and skilled performance in Special Olympics soccer athletes and non-disabled partners. *Research in developmental disabilities, 34*(1), 695-709.

The study investigated the effects of a Special Olympics (SO) Unified Sport (UNS) soccer program on anthropometry, physical fitness and soccer skills of male youth athletes with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) who participated in a training group (TRG) and in a comparison group (CG) without specific training. Youth with ID (WID) were randomly selected out of all the students between the ages 12 and 15, with a diagnosis of educable mental retardation and no secondary disabilities, who were attending a special education school. Participants without ID (WoID) were randomly selected from a regular secondary school out of the same age groups of male students. All participants were given permission by their parents or guardians to participate in the study. Participants in the TRG included 23 youth WID and 23 youth WoID. Mean ages were = 14.1 (SD = 1.1) and 13.2 (SD = 0.79) respectively. Fifteen WID, and 15 WoID comprised the CG. Mean ages were 14.51 (SD = 0.81) and 13.78 (SD = 0.49) respectively. Prior to and following the program measurements were conducted, and data were collected on students' anthropometric and fitness components of the Brockport physical fitness test as well as a soccer skill performance based on the SO soccer skill test. Participants in the TRG trained 8 weeks, 1.5 h per session, three times per week, in an after-school soccer program. CG did not participate in any sports program outside of the school physical education class. Dependent *t* tests and effect size calculations revealed that SO athletes and non-disabled partners scored significantly higher with regard to physical fitness and football skills in most variables compared with their CG. This Unified Program was successful in increasing fitness and soccer skill performance of youth WID as well as of those WoID.

Ninot, G., Bilard J. & Delignières, D. (2005). Effects of integrated or segregated sport participation on the physical self for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 49, 682-689.

Abstract: *Background* The purpose was to examine the effects of the type of athletic programme (integrated vs. segregated) on the athletic domain of perceived competence and on general self-worth. *Methods* Participants were 32 adolescent females with intellectual disabilities (ID), divided equally into four groups: (1) segregated swimming; (2) integrated swimming; (3) adapted physical activity; and (4) sedentary. The experimental treatment was 32 months long; for sport groups, this involved 2 h of training each week and 12 competitive meets. The Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children 11 times was administered to determine changes in perceived physical competence and general self-worth. *Results* Results indicated (1) no change in perceived general self-worth for the four groups; (2) significantly lower perceived athletic competence only for the integrated swimming group, despite the increase in athletic performance.

Ninot, G., & Maïano, C. (2007). Long-term effects of athletics meet on the perceived competence of individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 28(2), 176-186.

The purpose was to examine the effects of the type of athletic program (integrated versus segregated) and of the type of sport (basketball versus swimming) on two domains of perceived competence (athletic competence and social acceptance), and general self-worth. Participants were 48 adolescent females with intellectual disabilities (ID) divided equally into six groups: (a) segregated basketball, (b) integrated basketball, (c) segregated swimming, (d) integrated swimming, (e) physical education (PE), and (f) sedentary. The experimental treatment was 21 months long; for sport groups, this involved 2 h of training each week and 12 competitive meets. We administered Harter's (Harter, S. (1985). *Manual for the self-perception profile for children*. Denver: University of Denver) *Self-Perception Profile for Children* seven times to determine changes in perceived competence, and general self-worth. Results indicated: (a) no changes in perceived social acceptance; (b) significantly lower perceived athletic competence for the integrated groups; (c) significantly lower general self-worth for the basketball groups compared to the PE group. The integrated environment helps adolescents with ID to adopt a more realistic evaluation of their physical competence.

Özer, D., Baran, F., Aktop, A., Nalbant, S., Ađlamış, E., & Hutzler, Y. (2012). Effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disability. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 33(1), 229-239.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of a Special Olympics (SO) Unified Sports (UNS) soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disabilities (ID). Participants were 76 male youth with ( $n = 38$ ) and without ( $n = 38$ ) ID. Participants with ID were randomly allocated into a SO athletes group ( $n = 23$ , mean age = 14.5; SD = 1.2 years) and a control group (CG) ( $n = 15$ , mean age = 14.5; SD = .8 years). Twenty-

three randomly selected youth without ID formed the partner group (mean age = 14.1; SD = .9 years) and 15 youth without ID (mean age = 13.8; SD = .5 years) formed the CG. Instruments included the Friendship Activity Scale (FAS) (Siperstein, 1980), the Adjective Checklist (Siperstein, 1980), and the Children Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). The soccer training program lasted eight weeks, 1.5 h per session, three times per week, in addition to school physical education (PE). The CG did not participate in any sports in addition to PE. The findings showed that the UNS program was effective in decreasing the problem behaviors of youth with ID and increasing their social competence and FAS scores. In addition, the program was found to be effective in improving the attitude of youth without disabilities toward participants with disabilities. In conclusion, the present findings demonstrate the utility of a UNS program for both youth with and without disabilities.

Riggin, K. and Ulrich, D. A. (1993). The Effects of Sport Participation on Individuals With Mental Retardation. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 10 (1), 42 – 51.

Abstract: This study compared individuals with mental retardation participating in either a traditional segregated Special Olympic program or the new Unified Special Olympic program, which is integrated. The dependent variables of the study included self-perceptions of physical ability, social skills, and general self-worth. Actual physical abilities were also compared between the two groups. A control group not participating in sport programs was utilized. Self-perceptions were assessed with a modified version of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1982). Cardiovascular fitness was estimated with the 1-mi run-walk (AAHPERD, 1984). Sport skills were assessed by use of a standard skills test routinely used for team placement by Special Olympics. Unified athletes demonstrated an increase in social self-perception, which remained unchanged in the traditional athletes. There were no significant increases found in self-perceptions of physical and general self-worth for either the traditional or Unified Special Olympic participants. Both the segregated and integrated basketball participants demonstrated significant increases in basketball skills but not in cardiovascular fitness.

Rosegard, E., Pegg, S., & Compton, D.M. (2001). Effect of Unified Sport on maladaptive behaviors among Special Olympics athletes. *World Leisure Journal*, 43, 39-48.

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of participating in a Unified Bowling program on maladaptive behaviors among Special Olympics athletes. Athletes aged 11 to 68 years with a mean age of 32 years (n=40), participated in a 12-week Unified Bowling program. A comparison group of individuals aged 16 to 68 years with a mean age of 34 years (n=40), was matched on demographic variables and was instructed not to participate in any socially inclusive recreation program during the 12-week study. The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) was administered to parents before, immediately following, and 18 months after the 12-week study. A measure of maladaptive behaviors was derived from responses to the CBCL. Separate 2 (Group) x 3 (Time) repeated measures MANOVA was computed on internal and external maladaptive behaviors. Results revealed a significant multivariate interaction effect of

Group x Time. Univariate contrasts to determine the significance of internal and external maladaptive behaviors over time were also computed. Results showed that the treatment group reported significantly lower internalizing and externalizing scores over time. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

### **Other research and evaluation**

Baran, F., Top, E., Aktop, A., & Nalbant, S. (2011). Evaluation of a unified football program by special olympics athletes, partners, parents, and coaches. *European Journal of Adapted Physical Activity*, 2(1).

The purpose of the study was to compare the perceptions of athletes, partners, parents, and coaches regarding their commitment to the concept of Unified Sports, and their overall satisfaction with the 8 weeks Unified Football Program at the beginning and the end of the program. Participants were 46 boys with and without Intellectual Disabilities (ID) (23 with ID, mean age=14.5±1.19 years, 23 without ID, mean age=14.1±0.89 years). The Unified Sport Questionnaire forms were administered to athletes, partners, coaches, and parents as a pretest in the second week of the training and a posttest just after the tournaments. There were significant decrease in after program responses of partners in enjoyment of training ( $p < .05$ , McNemar's test) and perception of the level of getting along with the other school friends ( $p < .05$ , McNemar's test). In athletes, there was a significant increase only in the recommendation of Unified Sports to a friend ( $p < .05$ , McNemar's test). Athletes' and partners' parents perceived improvements in abilities, behaviors and relations of their children. All of the coaches believed in the necessity of rule modification during the program. According to the results of this study, Unified Sports would enable to integrate children with intellectual disability into society and increase social awareness of their peers without disabilities.

Briere, Donald E. III and Siegle, Del (2008) "The Effects of the Unified Sports Basketball Program on Special Education Students' Self-Concepts: Four Students' Experiences," *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Unified Sports is Special Olympics' response to the inclusion movement. The program includes both students with disabilities and students without disabilities working together in athletic competitions. We describe 4 students who participated in the program: 3 females and 1 male. The students' disabilities varied and included mobile impairment, traumatic brain injury, and learning disabilities. We administered pre and post surveys and conducted one-on-one interviews with these participants upon their completion of their Unified Sports basketball season. Teams learned about and practiced the game of basketball twice a week (during their gym class) and ventured to competitions across Connecticut against other schools. The competitions occurred toward the end of the 6-month program. The Unified Sports basketball program had a positive effect on these students' attitudes. All of the participants verbally expressed highly positive feelings about the program and each of them recommended the program be continued in the future. Social self-concept showed the most significant positive change and physical self-concept showed the least.

Castagno, K.S. (2001). Special Olympics Unified Sports: Changes in male athletes during a basketball season. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 18, 193-206.

**Abstract:** The purpose was to describe the changes occurring in athletes with and without mental retardation (MR) during participation in a Special Olympics Unified Sports program. The method was evaluation research. Participants were 58 males (24 with MR, 34 without MR) in Grades 6-8. Before- and after-program data were collected on the Self-Esteem Inventory (Zigler, 1994), the Adjective Checklist (Siperstein, 1980), the Friendship Activity Scale (Siperstein, 1980), and the Basketball Sports Skills Assessment (Special Olympics, 1992). Athletes (Special Olympics Athletes and Partners) participated in an after-school basketball program for 8 weeks, 1.5 hr per session, three times per week. Dependent t tests revealed that each group scored significantly higher after participation in the program than before on all tests.

Counsell, S., & Agran, M. (2013). Understanding the Special Olympics Debate From Lifeworld and System Perspectives Moving Beyond the Liberal Egalitarian View Toward Empowered Recreational Living. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 23(4), 245-256.

Keith Storey outlined a comprehensive overview examining the pros and cons of Special Olympics and the unintended negative consequences for participants. In conclusion, he briefly summarized three options on how to respond to Special Olympics: (a) make no change, (b) reform the current structure but keep the basic conditions of Special Olympics, or (c) discontinue or replace Special Olympics with programs designed to promote more inclusive recreational leisure situations. The purpose of this article is to employ Habermas's theory of communicative action relative to the issues and concerns outlined by Storey into this framework to increase the understanding of the Special Olympics as a movement and a system. Newly gained insights from this investigation reveal a conceptual/philosophical disconnect between (a) the Special Olympics as a meritocratic deficit-based system according to the 1960s Liberal Egalitarian lifeworld view of people with disabilities and (b) the current lifeworld view of empowerment for persons with disabilities as promoted by researchers, scholars, and educators needed to achieve socially valuable lifestyles (social justice). The Special Olympics' antiquated deficit lifeworld view has largely resulted in outdated program practices that run counter to the current empowered lifeworld view of integrated recreational living.

Dowling, S., Menke, S., McConkey, R., & Hassan, D. (2012). Sport and disability. *Managing Sport: Social and Cultural Perspectives*, 108.

**BOOK CHAPTER:** The value of sport extends beyond its physical challenges, health benefits or competitive expression, it is known to hold an integral social value with the potential to bring together disparate groups, dispel stigmatizing myths and promote community cohesion. In 2007 the European Commission highlighted the importance of Sport as a vehicle for generating a shared sense of belonging and participation and as a valuable tool in the development of social inclusion, particularly amongst marginalized groups (European Commission on Sport 2007).

People with disabilities represent one such marginalized group. The Commission recommends that sports organizations should adapt their infrastructure to take account of the needs of people with disabilities. Primarily this is in terms of ensuring the accessibility of buildings, and providing training to volunteers and staff in sports clubs so that they are able to welcome people with disabilities. ([http://ec.europa.eu/sport/white-paper/index\\_en.htm?cs\\_mid=116](http://ec.europa.eu/sport/white-paper/index_en.htm?cs_mid=116)) This chapter will discuss a programme hosted by Special Olympics that aims to promote the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities through sport, namely the Unified Sports Programme. During 2009-10, an evaluation of this programme, as a model for social inclusion, was carried out by the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, in association with Special Olympics Europe-Eurasia. This chapter will draw on data (using quotations from participants) from this evaluation as it examines the organisation of the Unified Sports programme, both at a structural and practical level. The chapter will also discuss the critical role of programme leaders in delivering the Unified concept. First, following a brief summary of the evaluation methods, and by way of context, this discussion will highlight the common forms of marginalisation experienced by people with intellectual disabilities, and the known benefits to this group of participation in sport whilst it will also provide some background on the Special Olympics movement in a broader sense.

Grandisson, M., Tétreault, S., & Freeman, A. R. (2012). Enabling Integration in Sports for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 25(3), 217-230.

**Background** Promoting the health and social participation of adolescents with intellectual disability is important as they are particularly vulnerable to encountering difficulties in those areas. Integration of these individuals in integrated sports is one strategy to address this issue. **Methods** The main objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors associated with the integration of adolescents with intellectual disability in sports alongside their non-disabled peers. Individual interviews were completed with 40 adolescents with intellectual disability and their parents, while 39 rehabilitation staff participated via either a discussion group or self-administered questionnaires. The Disability Creation Process (DCP) theoretical model was used to frame the analysis and the presentation of the findings (*The Quebec Classification: Disability Creation Process*. International Network on the Disability Creation Process/CSICIDH, Québec, QC, 1998). **Results** Various personal and environmental factors that have an impact on integration in sports were identified by participants. For example, attitudes, practical support, individuals' experiences in sports and in integrated settings as well as behaviour control emerged as important elements to consider. **Conclusions** Integration in integrated sports can engender a lot of benefits for individuals with intellectual disability, their parents and non-disabled athletes. However, many barriers need to be removed before such benefits can be more widely realized.

Hassan, D., Dowling, S., McConkey, R., & Menke, S. (2012). The inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in team sports: lessons from the Youth Unified Sports programme of Special Olympics. *Sport in Society*, 15(9), 1275-1290.

This article examines the Special Olympics' Youth Unified Sports programme across five countries within its Europe/Eurasia region. It focuses upon the process by which impact is achieved, led for the most part by coaches involved in preparing participants for competition through training. This is realized through the creation of sports teams, which in the case of this research means association football and basketball teams, in which athletes (young people with intellectual disabilities, ID) are selected alongside partners (contemporaries without an ID) to form coherent units that then compete against other such teams locally, nationally and, occasionally, internationally. The results of this investigation reveal the positive impact, upon integration and inclusion, for athletes offered by the Unified Sports programme and point to the powerful outcomes for a host of stakeholders, ranging from Special Olympics at an organizational level, relatives of participants, partners and coaches as well as the athletes themselves.

Kai, H. (2010). Effect of College Students Acting as Special Olympic Unified Sports Partners on the Merge of Special Education and Higher Education. *Journal of Chengdu Sport University*, 2.

Special Olympic unified sports represent the thinking of the merge of special education and higher education and are of positive significance in such aspects as promoting the social activities of athletes taking part in unified sports and helping them form a sense of honor

Kersh, J., Siperstein, G. N., & Parker, R. C. (2008). Beyond the Playing Field: Impact of Special Olympics Unified Sports Final Report. (Not published.)

The focus of this report was to determine whether personal benefits resulting from participation in Unified Sports carry over into other areas of life, such as the classroom. A specific question was whether Unified Sports impacted social and academic competence in school settings. The report concluded that athletes and partners reported more positive self-concept and social acceptance, as well as more opportunities for friendship, at the end of their Unified Sports participation. However, no significant changes were apparent from teacher reports or observational data. The report also pointed out variability in Unified Sports implementation, in terms of team composition, coach training, and coach interpretations of the goals of the program. One finding pointed out that when teams are formed by intentionally selecting partners based on their positive attitudes toward athletes, both athletes and partners have more positive social interactions.

McConkey, R., Dowling, S., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2012). Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*.

**Background** Although the promotion of social inclusion through sports has received increased attention with other disadvantaged groups, this is not the case for children and adults with intellectual disability who experience marked social isolation. The study evaluated the outcomes

from one sports programme with particular reference to the processes that were perceived to enhance social inclusion. **Method** The Youth Unified Sports programme of Special Olympics combines players with intellectual disabilities (called athletes) and those without intellectual disabilities (called partners) of similar skill level in the same sports teams for training and competition. Alongside the development of sporting skills, the programme offers athletes a platform to socialise with peers and to take part in the life of their community. Unified football and basketball teams from five countries – Germany, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Ukraine – participated. Individual and group interviews were held with athletes, partners, coaches, parents and community leaders: totaling around 40 informants per country. **Results** Qualitative data analysis identified four thematic processes that were perceived by informants across all countries and the two sports to facilitate social inclusion of athletes. These were: (1) the personal development of athletes and partners; (2) the creation of inclusive and equal bonds; (3) the promotion of positive perceptions of athletes; and (4) building alliances within local communities. **Conclusions** Unified Sports does provide a vehicle for promoting the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities that is theoretically credible in terms of social capital scholarship and which contains lessons for advancing social inclusion in other contexts. Nonetheless, certain limitations are identified that require further consideration to enhance athletes' social inclusion in the wider community.

Norins Bardon, J., Harada, C., Parker, R., & Brecklinghaus, S. (2008). Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot-Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. (Not published.)

- This report resulted from the evaluation of the *Get Into It*/Unified Sports pilot program in the five countries mentioned in the title. The goal of the evaluation was to document impact on athletes and partners in terms of both sports skills/experience and social relationships/understanding of disabilities, as well as to document the implementation of the program. The report's conclusions included that: Unified Sports was typically a positive experience, players reported improvements in sport skills, players were motivated to participate by their enjoyment of the game and by social opportunities, players enjoyed the social aspects, and that partners reported improved understanding of peers with ID. Overall, the program demonstrated potential in promoting social inclusion through sport.

Pang, J. (2009). Intention and constraints of Hong Kong secondary school Physical Education teachers to promote Unified Sports®: physical education and sport science.

Unified Sports is an initiative of Special Olympics. It provides an opportunity for Special Olympic athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (called partners) to train and compete together on the same team. In Hong Kong, the development of Unified Sports is at an embryonic stage. Working on the front line, Physical Education (PE) teachers play an important



role in promoting students' participation in Unified Sports. This study was designed to explore teachers' intention and constraints in promoting participation in Unified Sports among their students. One hundred and eighty secondary school PE teachers took part in this study by responding to a questionnaire designed by the investigator. The questionnaire was based on literature review and guidelines provided by Ajzen (1985). It was found that the teachers' intention to encourage students' participation in Unified Sports was low and only 14.1% of the teachers had encouraged their students to take part in Unified Sports. Perceived constraints for teachers to encourage students' participation in Unified Sports and to organize Unified Sports in their own schools were also identified. The more important ones were heavy workload of teachers, inadequate information about Unified Sports, and tight curriculum. Since Unified Sport is still a novel concept to most teachers in Hong Kong, agencies providing Unified Sports can consider introducing it through the staff development programmes of the schools. Another strategy was working with other school subjects like Civic Education, Social Studies, Religious Studies or Liberal Studies

Roswal, G. M. (2007). Special Olympics Unified Sports: Providing a transition to mainstream sports. *The Sobama Journal*, 12, 13-15.

Abstract: Special Olympics offers sports competition and training to over 2 million athletes with intellectual disability in 150 countries. Through 28 team and individual sports, programs are provided that allow individuals of all level of intellectual disability to participate in sports. One program, Unified Sports, provides Special Olympics athletes the opportunity to compete with non-disabled peers in an inclusive sport or recreation environment. Unified Sports focuses on athletes with higher functional levels, especially those who can benefit from social interaction with peers. Special Olympics Unified Sports combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (partners) on sports teams for training and competition. Research and program evaluation has shown that Unified Sports can promote attitude change among unified partners and the general public, cultivate attitude change in young volunteers, and facilitate community involvement of Special Olympics athletes. Unified Sports increases sports opportunities, promotes sports skills development, and enhances self-esteem in Special Olympics athletes.

Siperstein, G. N., Hardman, M. L., Wappett, M.T., & Clary, L. (2001). National Evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Sports Program. (Not published.)

The purpose of this report was to access the perceptions of state directors, athletes, family members, partners, and coaches about their commitment to and satisfaction with Unified Sports, in terms of the effectiveness of the implementation of Unified Sports, the impact and value of the program, and the program's contribution to the mission of Special Olympics. The report concluded that: Unified Sports had a positive impact on all participants, athlete and partners enjoyed participating, athletes and partners believed their sports skills and self-confidence had

improved, and partners developed a better understanding of ID. The report also states that the growth of Unified Sports was impacted by the commitment of Special Olympics state program staff, and that there were no standardized procedures for implementing Unified Sports at the state level.

Townsend, M., & Hassall, J. (2007). Mainstream students' attitudes to possible inclusion in unified sports with students who have an intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 20(3), 265-273.

**Background** Schools in New Zealand do not normally include students with intellectual disability in their sports programmes. This study examined regular students' attitudes towards the possible inclusion of students with an intellectual disability in an integrated sports programme within their school. **Materials and Methods** A total of 170 school students at year 6 (10 years) and year 12 (16 years) at four Auckland schools completed an attitude scale assessing their acceptance of a possible unified sports programme at their school, a test of their knowledge about Special Olympics, and wrote open-ended comments about unified sports; a subsample at each age level was interviewed. **Results** Students had positive attitudes towards possible involvement alongside students with an intellectual disability in unified sports. These attitudes were moderated by age and gender, but not knowledge about Special Olympics. **Conclusions** The strengthening of inclusion and normalization through unified sports would likely have positive peer social acceptance by typical students in New Zealand.

Wilski, M., Nadolska, A., Dowling, S., Mcconkey, R., & Hassan, D. (2012). Personal development of participants in special Olympics unified sports teams. *HUMAN MOVEMENT* 2012, vol. 13 (3), 271–

Purpose. This study aims to identify the impact of the Special Olympics' Unified Sports program on the personal development of its participants. Methods. A qualitative method was used, which included gathering data by interviewing individual athletes and unified teams, by collecting individual personal histories and by use of connection charts from five European countries that participate in the Unified Sports program. A total of 221 data samples were recorded. Results. Athletes reported improvements in their abilities on the field as well as increased fitness and technical ability. They emphasized the importance of team-work and trust between athletes. Improvements in confidence, self-esteem and communication skills were also reported by athletes. Partners also reported a positive change in attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities. Friendships were a central and vital aspect of taking part in the teams. Friendships developed between athletes and partners. Athletes reported increased access to community "places" such as sports facilities and social venues. Conclusions. Unified Sports is an exciting initiative that holds much promise in transforming the life experiences of young athletes with intellectual disabilities. The impact of the Unified Sports program on the personal development of participants applies to all areas of human functioning - physical, mental and social. Our evaluation suggests that its concepts and modes of operations transcend national boundaries and cultures at least within a European context.