



Intellectual Disabilities

Special Olympics serves athletes with intellectual disabilities.

WHAT ARE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES?

According to the definition by the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), an individual is considered to have an intellectual disability (mental retardation*) based on the following three criteria:

1. Intellectual functioning level (IQ) is below 70-75;
2. Significant limitations exist in two or more adaptive skill areas; and
3. The condition manifests itself before the age of 18.

Adaptive skill areas are those daily living skills needed to live, work and play in the community. The definition includes 10 adaptive skills: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, leisure, health and safety, self-direction, functional academics, community use and work.

Adaptive skills are assessed in the person's typical environment across all aspects of an individual's life. A person with limits in intellectual functioning who does not have limits in adaptive skill areas may not be diagnosed as having an intellectual disability.

A person is eligible to participate in Special Olympics if they have been identified by an agency of professional as having intellectual disabilities as determined by their localities. The minimum age requirement for participation in Special Olympics competition is eight years of age. Special Olympics also offers the Young Athletes program, an innovative sports play program for children with intellectual disabilities between the ages of 2-7, which engages young athletes through developmentally appropriate play activities designed to foster physical, cognitive, and social development while also introducing them to the world of sports prior to Special Olympics eligibility.

HOW PREVALENT ARE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES?

The following statistics and information on intellectual disabilities have been adapted from information from the Population Reference Bureau, The Arc (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens), the World Health Organization and various associations for people with disabilities.

According to the World Health Organization, up to three percent - or almost 200 million people - of the world's population has intellectual disabilities. This is the largest developmental disability population in the world.

Intellectual disabilities know no boundaries. They cut across racial, ethnic, educational, social and economic backgrounds, and can occur in any family.



DISABILITY LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

Words matter. Words can open doors to cultivate the understanding and respect that enable people with disabilities to lead fuller, more independent lives. Words can also create barriers or stereotypes that are not only demeaning to people with disabilities, but also rob them of their individuality. The following language guidelines have been developed by experts for use by anyone writing or speaking about people with intellectual disabilities to ensure that all people are portrayed with individuality and dignity.

Special Olympics focuses on people and their gifts and accomplishments, and to dispel negative attitudes and stereotypes. As language has evolved, Special Olympics has updated its official terminology to use standard terminology that is more acceptable to our athletes. We use “people-first language” - example: refer to people with intellectual disabilities, rather than “intellectually disabled people”. See more tips below.

Appropriate Terminology

- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as “Special Olympics athletes” rather than “Special Olympians” or “Special Olympic athletes.”
- A person has intellectual disabilities, rather than is “suffering from” is “afflicted with” or is “a victim of” intellectual disabilities.
- Distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes.
- A person “uses” a wheelchair, rather than is “confined” or “restricted to” a wheelchair.
- “Down syndrome” has replaced “Down’s Syndrome” and “mongoloid.”
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word athletes appear in quotation marks.
- In formal documents, refer to persons with a disability in the same style as persons without a disability: full name on first reference and last name on subsequent references. Do not refer to an individual with intellectual disabilities as “Bill” rather than the journalistically correct “Bill Smith” or “Smith.”
- In informal stories, also refer to persons with intellectual disabilities in the same style as persons without intellectual disabilities: if a story refers to an athlete by his/her first name, then the Unified teammate etc must also be referred to by his/her first name.

Terminology to Avoid

- Do not use the label “kids” when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the movement.
- Do not use the word “the” in front of Special Olympics unless describing a specific Special Olympics event or official.
- Do not use the adjective “unfortunate” when talking about persons with intellectual disabilities. Disabling conditions do not have to be life-defining in a negative way.
- Do not sensationalize the accomplishments of persons with disabilities. While these accomplishments should be recognized and applauded, people in the disability rights movement have tried to make the public aware of the negative impact of referring to the achievements of people with physical or intellectual disabilities with excessive hyperbole.
- Use the word “special” with extreme care when talking about persons with intellectual disabilities. The term, if used excessively in references to Special Olympics athletes and activities, can become a cliché.