

Special Olympics is a Viable Well-Being Choice for Healthcare Providers' Patients with Intellectual Disability

Jon Buzby

Director, Unified Champion Schools, Special Olympics Delaware

The mission of Special Olympics Delaware is to provide sports training and athletic competition in 19 sports for more than 4,200 children and adults with intellectual disabilities. The program is provided at no cost to the athletes.

Yet, the positive impact on the athletes' lives is far greater than just the thrill of victory. The number of physical, emotional and social benefits the athletes gain during their participation in the program expands far beyond any number of medals won.

It all starts with a focus on being a healthy person off the field in order to maximize potential on it.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that people with intellectual disabilities (ID) – difficulty with thinking, learning, remembering, and reasoning – experience poorer access to quality health care and have poorer health outcomes than people without ID.¹ For instance, people with ID are more likely to have difficulty receiving quality healthcare services, often receiving fewer preventive checkups such as cancer screenings.^{2,3}

The passive healthcare that people with ID frequently receive is often a result of there being a minimum amount of formal training in medical schools for how to care for patients with ID, along with communication gaps that can occur between patient and provider.

Special Olympics, in collaboration with the CDC, has created a worldwide all-inclusive health movement through its Healthy Communities and Healthy Athletes programs.^{4,5} The Healthy Athletes program provides athletes with needed screenings – vision, hearing, dental and podiatry (figures 1-3) in Delaware – and also gives medical professionals hands-on experience screening people of all ages with ID (see figure 4). Imagine the difference for a runner if now they can compete pain-free or a softball player who, for the first time, can see the ball as soon as it leaves the pitcher's hands. Soccer teammates can hear each other better while communicating on the field, and that painful tooth is no longer a distraction to the athlete on the bocce court.

Figure 1. Dental Screening



Figure 2. Vision Screening



Figure 3. Podiatric Screening



Figure 4. General Medical Screening



The result of the findings from these screenings further encouraged the organization to create additional programs focused on fitness, nutrition and other components that contribute to one's healthy lifestyle.

This is just the first step in creating a holistic, healthy Special Olympics athlete, so that each can then reap the same benefits as those who participate in sports who do not have disabilities.

- **Physical benefits:** Weekly sports-specific practices combined with additional fitness opportunities and offseason training enable athletes to improve their cardiovascular endurance.
- **Emotional benefits:** Research has shown that when people are successful, they feel emotionally better about themselves. Success on the fields and in the gyms gives the athletes confidence, which then contributes to their performance in school or work.
- **Social benefits:** For many of our athletes, the highlight of their week is gathering for practice. It's there that they socialize with their friends, without any inhibition.

Despite all the pluses to belonging to the organization, there are thousands of people with intellectual disabilities who are still “on the sideline;” not engaged, and not reaping the healthy lifestyle benefits the organization provides.

“Inclusion in sports with its tenants of team and physical fitness readily makes its way into the healthcare arena. An empowered Special Olympics athlete who enters my office is a healthier patient. I continue to encourage all of my patients to increase physical activity. Special Olympics just makes that a safe, fun, effective and easy option for me to recommend in my busy office for athletes, Unified partners and volunteers.”- Jennifer LeComte, DO, FACP, FAAP; Director, Rowan Integrated Special Needs (RISN) Center; Division Chief of General Internal Medicine, RowanSOM/Department of Medicine

For some it's by choice. But for the majority, it is because they and their caregivers are not aware of the program, or at least do not realize that the person in their care is eligible, because the stereotype still exists that Special Olympics is for children with Down Syndrome who run on a track.

Special Olympics offers sports programs for people of every athletic ability, and therefore is a very viable choice for any person whose physician or healthcare worker recommends that they “get more exercise” or become “more active” for their physical, social and emotional well-being.

References

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