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Special Olympics—Changing Lives Through Sport

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Special Olympics is a worldwide organization that provides opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to participate and succeed in sport. Special Olympics began

in 1968. Since its creation, this association continues to offer a variety of services to help these individuals lead healthy, active, and fulfilled lives. Other benefits of Special Olympics are the formation of friendships, the gathering of families as they join to offer their loved ones support, and the strength and skill sets that each athlete gains.

In addition to sports competitions, Special Olympics provides basic healthcare services. Their *Healthy Athletes* program offers health screenings such as *Fit Feet* (podiatry), *MedFest* (sports physical exam), *Opening Eyes* (vision), and *Special Smiles* (dentistry) (Special Olympics, 2010, What We Do – Healthcare Programs). Along with free health screenings, the organization provides health-related information.

Who Is Eligible to Participate as an Athlete in Special Olympics?

To be eligible as a Special Olympics' athlete, an individual must have "an intellectual disability; a cognitive delay, or a development disability, that is, functional

limitations in both general learning and adaptive skills" (Special Olympics, 2010, Get Involved – Athletes). A child can participate in Special Olympics starting at age eight. There is no age limit for participating as an athlete. For youth ages two through seven, the *Young Athletes* program allows them to participate in activities that prepare them for future participation in Special Olympics. *Unified Sports* brings together



those who have intellectual disabilities and those who do not into sports teams to play alongside one another. *Special Olympics Motor Activities Training Program* is for individuals with profound disabilities and focuses on training and participation, not

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competition (Special Olympics, 2010, Get Involved – Athletes & What We Do – Sports and Coaching Guides).

What Sports Are in Special Olympics?

There are over 30 Special Olympics sports, including: aquatics, badminton, basketball, bocce, bowling, cycling, equestrian, figure skating, football (soccer), golf, rhythmic/artistic gymnastics, sailing, skiing, softball, speed skating, tennis, and volleyball (Special Olympics, 2010, Get Involved – Athletes). Special Olympics acknowledges each athlete's performance and emphasizes a *Code of Conduct* which includes *Sportsmanship, Training and Competition, and Responsibility for My Actions* (Special Olympics, 2010, Get Involved – Athletes).

Ways to Contribute to Special Olympics

There are many ways to contribute to Special Olympics. Donate time and/or money. Volunteer as a coach, scorekeeper, coordinator, etc. Participate as an athlete in *Unified Sports*. Or, attend events as a fan. As well, Special Olympics has several programs to engage youth and give them opportunities to contribute. *SO Get Into It®* is a free learning curriculum for schools. This worldwide program has students participate in a group service-learning project as they



educate themselves about the special qualities and abilities of others. Another program, *Special Olympics Youth Summit*, has children ages 12 to 17 discuss ways to help Special Olympics as well as ways to change negative attitudes about those with intellectual disabilities. *Global Youth Summit* is another avenue to ignite young people across the world in discussion about breaking down stereotypes and fostering acceptance in their own communities (Special Olympics, 2010, Get Involved – Schools and Youth).

Resources:

To find the information above, and to learn more, go to: www.specialolympics.org

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