



American Academy
of Family Physicians



Special Olympics

Family Handbook for Health and Health Care



Special Olympics and
American Academy of Family Physicians



Photo credit: Ray McManus

Message from Special Olympics and the American Academy of Family Physicians

In a strategic step to improve health and health care for people with intellectual disabilities, Special Olympics and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) have created a unique partnership, combining their special expertise and access to people with intellectual disabilities. The AAFP answered Special Olympics' call to action to address key findings from Special Olympics' experiences and research that found people with intellectual disabilities badly in need of health care and healthful physical activity, and health professionals generally under-prepared to provide such care.

The partnership offers people with intellectual disabilities and their families an important new mechanism to identify health professionals willing to treat people with intellectual disabilities and provide a "medical home" for their health care needs. Family physicians are uniquely prepared to address the health care needs of individuals and families, especially those with special health care needs. The partnership essentially puts family physicians into Special Olympics and Special Olympics into the practices of family physicians. The reasons are compelling. Family physicians are committed to reliable, appropriate, continuing health care for people with intellectual disabilities and they recognize the importance of regular physical activity for all people, from childhood onward, including people with intellectual and other disabilities. Special Olympics is committed to providing quality sports experiences for people with intellectual disabilities and to working to eliminate health deficits that impede the quality of life for its athletes both on and off the field.

The full potential of people with intellectual disabilities cannot be realized if there are significant barriers to quality health care and, thus, to being healthy and physically fit. We welcome this opportunity to work together to help tear down these barriers to inclusion and provide access to quality health care for people with intellectual disabilities.

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About Special Olympics

Special Olympics currently serves more than 1.7 million athletes in more than 150 countries with a goal of 2 million athletes by the end of 2005.

Competition and training, not recreation, are the cornerstone of Special Olympics' unique sports model. Athletes of all ages and skill levels with intellectual disabilities are welcome to participate in Special Olympics. Competitions are arranged by groupings of athletes at the same level of abilities within each event. These groupings are called "divisions." There may be multiple divisions in the same event, with the first, second and third place finishers in each division receiving gold, silver and bronze medals, respectively.

Special Olympics also offers Unified Sports® competitions where athletes with intellectual disabilities compete on the same team with partners who do not have intellectual disabilities.

Additionally, for those athletes with intellectual disabilities whose cognitive or physical abilities do not allow them to participate in official Special Olympics sports, Special Olympics offers the Motor Activities Training Program. There is no cost to participate in Special Olympics.





Photo credit: Wataru Abe/Photo Kishimoto



Photo courtesy of Special Olympics

Who are Special Olympics athletes?

By definition and requirements, Special Olympics athletes are individuals with an intellectual disability that is manifest before age 18 which renders the individual challenged in at least two areas of daily functioning. The causes of the intellectual disability in athletes are quite varied. Athletes who participate fully in Special Olympics must be at least 8 years of age and there are no upper age limits. Athletes must be certified as medically qualified to join Special Olympics and, in the case of minors and non-emancipated adults, have consent of parents or guardians. In addition to intellectual disability, athletes also may have one or more additional disabilities (e.g., hearing or vision impairments, spina bifida).





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About AAFP

Founded in 1947, the AAFP represents more than 94,000 physicians and medical students nationwide. It is the only medical society devoted solely to primary care.

Nearly one in four of all office visits are made to general and family physicians. That is 215 million office visits each year – 59 million more than to any other medical specialty. Today, family physicians provide the majority of care for America’s underserved and rural populations.

In the increasingly fragmented world of health care where many medical specialties limit their practice to a particular organ, disease, age or sex, family physicians are dedicated to treating the whole person across the full spectrum of ages. Family medicine’s cornerstone is an ongoing, personal patient-physician relationship focused on integrated care. Providing patients with a personal “medical home,” family physicians deliver a range of acute, chronic and preventive medical care services and often coordinate care when their patients must see a variety of specialists.

The AAFP strongly supports and encourages healthy behaviors with programs such as Americans in Motion and Tar Wars – programs addressing physical activity, nutrition and emotional well being and tobacco prevention/cessation.

To learn more about the American Academy of Family Physicians and about the specialty of family medicine, visit www.aafp.org.

The Special Olympics Healthy Athletes® Provider Directory

Special Olympics research shows that only 1 in 50 of recently trained primary care physicians will have had any clinical training regarding intellectual disabilities during their medical school and residency programs. Such findings do not bode well for people with intellectual disabilities and their families seeking care in the future.

Because of the research and as part of the partnership, Special Olympics will implement an online database enabling patients to find health care professionals in their area willing to treat patients with intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics unveiled the physician component of the program at the AAFP's annual Scientific Assembly in 2005. This database will allow family physicians and other health professionals to identify themselves as willing to treat people with intellectual disabilities and provide them with medical care and the examination requirements for participation in Special Olympics.

The Provider Directory is expected to be the largest health care providers list for people with disabilities in North America. You can access the easy-to-use Healthy Athletes Provider Directory in early 2006 at www.specialolympics.org/providerdirectory.



Special Olympics Health Initiatives

It is impossible to separate sports from health. People need to be healthy to participate effectively in sport, and people who participate in sport effectively will be healthier. Special Olympics has long accepted these premises, but only in recent years have we discovered the extent of the health needs in our population. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities have a 40 percent greater risk of preventable secondary health conditions, such as obesity, poor fitness, nutritional deficits, untreated or poorly treated vision, dental, hearing and podiatric problems. Disparities are made worse by a lack of access and ability to pay for services, poor knowledge of practitioners, and poorly developed and supported behaviors to promote health.

Special Olympics Healthy Athletes[®] was developed in 1996 to begin to address these health disparities. Healthy Athletes is designed to help Special Olympics athletes improve their health, fitness and ability to train and compete through free health screenings and referral where necessary. Health care professionals and students are trained to provide the screenings in an effort to educate the professional community about the health needs and abilities of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. More than 200,000 athletes have been screened since the inception of the Healthy Athletes program in 1996. Healthy Athletes is offered at many Special Olympics events, and we encourage you to participate. To find out more, visit www.specialolympics.org.





Special Olympics Report Card

A recent study of the impact of Special Olympics on the population with intellectual disabilities indicates:

Participation in Special Olympics spurs activity and pursuit of physical fitness as a lifestyle choice.

Similar to other athletes, Special Olympics athletes are serious about their sports. They have a love of sport and training and appreciate development of personal sports skills; however, they state clearly and consistently that the greatest rewards they experience are from the enjoyment of sports, the social opportunities provided and the chance to make friends on and off the field.

It is typical for athletes, whether in Special Olympics or otherwise, to seek to reach both personal and team goals.

Athletes are encouraged and enabled to lead with their ideas and voices, through participating on Boards of Directors and committees, working in Special Olympics Programs or serving as coaches, officials or in other volunteer roles.

The consensus among athletes, coaches and family members is that there is significant improvement in athletes' sense of self, social skills and social interactions due to their participation in Special Olympics.

More than half of adult Special Olympics athletes in the United States are employed, half of those in competitive employment.



Special Olympics



**American Academy
of Family Physicians**

Contact Information

Ask your family doctor about how to start a regular program of healthy physical activity and learn more about your opportunity to be part of Special Olympics!

To find out more about Special Olympics programs – including information on specific opportunities in your area – visit our Web site at **www.specialolympics.org**.

To learn more about the American Academy of Family Physicians and about the specialty of family medicine, please visit **www.aafp.org**.



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