



**GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARE PROVIDERS TO  
HELP KEEP OUR ATHLETES SAFE**  
(Information taken from Special Olympics, Inc. Guide for Parents and Care Givers)

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community. To fulfill this mission, Special Olympics strives to provide an environment where athletes are secure and protected.

Please note that this document includes sensitive, but very important information regarding each athlete's participation in Special Olympics' activities. Here at Special Olympics Pennsylvania, we believe that everyone, including staff, volunteers, parents, and coaches, has a role to play in ensuring the safety of Special Olympics athletes. We take that responsibility seriously and have implemented a number of steps to help make participating in Special Olympics not only rewarding, but also safe.

However, we cannot safeguard our athletes without your help. We need the involvement of others, including parents and caregivers if we are going to be successful. This document provides you with information on what we are already doing and also gives you some ideas of how you can support our efforts.

## **WHAT SPECIAL OLYMPICS IS DOING**

### **Volunteer Screening**

Special Olympics Pennsylvania requires all "Class A" volunteers be screened through a Background Check process. Those required to be screened include:

1. Volunteers who have regular, close physical contact with athletes.
2. Volunteers in a position of authority or supervision with athletes.
3. Volunteers who handle substantial amounts of cash or other assets of the Program.
4. Volunteers who have access to personal information of Special Olympics athletes, volunteers, and donors.

An individual is disqualified from serving as a volunteer if that individual appears on a sex offender registry or has been convicted of the crime of child abuse, sexual abuse of a minor/adult, death of a child, neglect of a child or any other individual for whom the potential volunteer had/has responsibility, kidnapping, murder, manslaughter, felony assault, arson and criminal sexual conduct.

## **Protective Behaviors Training**

Registered Volunteers in the United States who have close contact with Special Olympics athletes are also required to participate in Protective Behaviors Training. This training helps volunteers learn to identify inappropriate behavior, recognize the signs of abuse and determine what to do if abuse or inappropriate behavior is suspected so that all volunteers are active in achieving our ultimate goal of protecting Special Olympics athletes from harm or abuse.

## **Other policies and procedures**

While we believe screening and Protective Behaviors Training are important tools for Special Olympics Pennsylvania, we recognize its inherent limitations and are using a multi-faceted approach to address the issue including Protective Behaviors Training, notifying potential volunteers that they will be screened, providing this educational guide for parents and care providers and other policies and procedures that are directed at participant safety and internal and external reporting requirements, some of which are discussed below.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Know what to expect from Special Olympics**

Special Olympics programs offer a broad array of opportunities for athletes in sports, fitness, and leadership. Programs like Special Olympics Unified Sports® provide opportunities for athletes to socialize with peers and to form friendships, participate in their communities, and have choices outside Special Olympics. A parent or care provider may find it difficult to discern what is an official Special Olympics activity and what is not, especially since most Special Olympics events are held at venues which are open to the general public where similar events, not associated with Special Olympics Pennsylvania, are held. However, it is important that you have a general understanding of what constitutes an official Special Olympics activity, because Special Olympics' safeguards and quality controls are only in place at official Special Olympics activities. Special Olympics Pennsylvania does not have the ability to manage what happens at activities that are not identified as official Special Olympics activities.

***Just as with any other activity (whether a Special Olympics event or not), parents, care providers, and athletes must use their own discretion to determine whether or not to participate in non-Special Olympics activities even if the opportunities arise as a result of relationships formed at Special Olympics events.***

Official Special Olympics activities are described in the following paragraphs. Your Athlete's local Special Olympics Pennsylvania Program (Potter County, Area P, Washington County, etc.) can provide you with their current schedule of activities (training, competition, fundraising events, etc.). Their contact information is available on SOPA's website at [www.specialolympicspa.org/local-programs](http://www.specialolympicspa.org/local-programs).

- 1. Local Level Practices and Competitions** - These are organized by your local Program or coach. The Protective Behavior training stresses that, except in rare circumstances, interactions between volunteers and athletes should not be one-on-one. While certain circumstances may legitimately require one-on-one interaction, athletes, care providers, and parents should be aware that this should not be a regular occurrence during Special Olympics practices or competitions.

Generally, it would be the responsibility of the athlete, parent, or care provider to arrange transportation to and from local practices and competitions. If a coach or volunteer offers to provide such transportation, the athlete, parent, or care provider must determine whether this is appropriate. As indicated above, providing transportation for athletes to and from local practices and competitions would not be considered within the normal volunteer responsibilities of the coach or volunteer. Additionally, athletes are expected to show up at practice at the appointed practice time and leave immediately following the conclusion of the practice. Special Olympics volunteers will only be present during the appointed practice times.

- 2. State or Sectional Games/National/Regional/World Games** - Larger events such as Sectionals, State Games and World Games often require athletes to travel long distances to the site of the event and/or to stay overnight during the event in housing arranged by Special Olympics. If an athlete is involved in an overnight competition, your local program (State Games) or state staff (National/World Games) will provide information on the travel arrangements, supervision, and anticipated activities (in addition to competition). Special Olympics Pennsylvania has adopted a Housing Policy applicable to any overnight accommodations arranged by SOPA. A copy of the policy can be found on SOPA's website under the "Policies and Guidelines" section. There may be situations, such as World/National Games and competitions sponsored by other state or national Special Olympics Programs, where SOPA does not arrange for the overnight accommodations. In such situations, SOPA will apply the requirements of our Policy to the fullest extent possible given the arrangements for overnight accommodations established by the sponsor for that event and will make reasonable attempts to notify all athletes/Unified Partners scheduled to participate in the overnight event if any requirement of this Policy cannot be implemented during such event. For all overnight Special Olympics events, regardless of sponsor, please make sure you understand and are comfortable with the arrangements by working with the appropriate Special Olympics contact to ensure you understand what type of housing will be provided, whether rooms will be shared, plans for supervision, etc. and that you work with that contact to address and resolve any questions or concerns. If family members or care providers intend to participate in the event in a non-official capacity and plan to take a side trip or do activities other than Special Olympics activities, it is extremely important that you work with Special Olympics in advance to understand the policies and procedures so everyone has an understanding of the expectations. For example, Special Olympics Pennsylvania requires a "Release" form be completed prior to removing an athlete from his/her delegation.

- 3. Unified Sports** - Special Olympics Unified Sports® is an initiative that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (called Partners) on sports teams for training and competition. Unified Sports activities should follow the same general guidelines outlined for local practices and competitions. One outcome of Unified Sports activities may be to foster friendships that extend beyond official Special Olympics activities. However, as noted above, Special Olympics does not manage the quality or safety of activities, events, or outings that are not specifically organized and carried out by Special Olympics, and thus parents, care providers, and similar individuals must use their own discretion in deciding whether a Special Olympics athlete should participate.
- 4. Healthy Athletes** ®- Healthy Athletes events are designed to help Special Olympics athletes improve their health and fitness, leading to enhanced sports experience and improved well-being. During a Healthy Athletes event, Special Olympics athletes receive a variety of health screenings and services in a series of clinics conducted in a welcoming, fun environment. The clinicians are either licensed in their field or supervised by licensed professionals in accordance with state laws. Screenings are most often held in conjunction with State Games. Healthy Athletes screenings are generally held in open spaces and do not require a one-on-one setting as the procedures are non-invasive and privacy is generally not required. All screenings are provided free of charge and are not conducted without athlete consent and assent.
- 5. Athlete Leadership Programs (ALPs)** - These programs allow athletes to explore opportunities for participation in various leadership and community roles. Through ALPs, athletes serve on Boards of Directors or local organizing committees and act as spokespersons, team captains, coaches and officials. Typical activities involved with ALPs will vary depending on the avenue the athlete is pursuing but could include things such as board meetings, speaking engagements, or ALPs workshops. If an athlete becomes a Special Olympics coach or official, the expectations are the same as those required for all Special Olympics coaches and officials, such as completion of necessary training and participation at practices, competitions, and official team activities.
- 6. Fundraising Events and Activities** - Fundraising is a critical function that enables Special Olympics to offer its programs and services. Athletes can become involved in fundraising initiatives in a number of different capacities, as participants, donors, event organizers, attendees, or volunteers. Given the diverse array of fundraising opportunities in Special Olympics, it is difficult to define "typical" fundraising involvement parents or care providers should anticipate. However, as a rule, the same policies and principles that apply to sports practice and competition should apply when it comes to fundraising: one-on-one interaction between volunteers and athletes is not required and should be avoided unless first considered carefully by athletes, parents, and care-givers (such as a coach offering to take an athlete to participate in a parade or golf fundraiser) to determine that you are completely comfortable with the situation. It is not a requirement of Special Olympics that athletes participate in fundraising, and athletes, parents, and care givers

must use their own discretion in determining if and how an athlete decides to become involved in these efforts or events.

7. **Young Athletes Program** - Young Athletes is an innovative sports play program for children ages 2 through 7. This innovative program is a series of developmentally appropriate activities designed specifically for young children and their family members. The Young Athletes program seeks to strengthen physical development and self-esteem for children by building skills for future sports participation and socialization prior to Special Olympics competition eligibility. Designed as a versatile program, Young Athletes can work in various learning situations. Families can play with their young athletes at home in a fun atmosphere, using simple-to-follow activities. The program is also appropriate for preschools, schools and playgroups to use with small groups of young children with and without intellectual disabilities. The same policies and principles that apply to traditional Special Olympics activities also apply to the Young Athletes activities. However, the Young Athletes program also encourages families and their young athletes to participate in this program together.
8. **Project UNIFY**® – Project UNIFY® is an education-based project that uses sports and education programs to activate young people to develop school communities where all youth are agents of change – fostering respect, dignity and advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities. Athletes, parents, and care givers must use their own discretion in determining if and how an athlete decides to become involved in these efforts or events.

### **Identify the red flags**

As discussed throughout this guide, Special Olympics fosters friendships and creates opportunities for athletes to become involved in activities that may extend outside Special Olympics. It is important for athletes, parents, and care providers to be aware of two important facts:

1. ***Only activities organized, conducted and supervised by Special Olympics qualify as Special Olympics activities. In other words, activities that result from relationships formed through Special Olympics are not Special Olympics activities.*** It is important to evaluate outside opportunities that arise in connection with individuals a Special Olympics athlete meets through Special Olympics activities. When such an opportunity is not part of Special Olympics, Special Olympics is not able to provide resources or help ensure the safety of the event.
2. ***Be aware of a volunteer's interest in an athlete outside the normal scope of a Special Olympics activity.*** Although we cannot make a generalization that will address every possible scenario, there are certain behaviors that should raise a red flag. These include, but are not limited to:
  - Inappropriate gifts, trips, outings, or other gestures of affection from a volunteer;
  - Invitations for sleepovers at a volunteer's house;
  - Invitations to parties at a volunteer's house where parents or care providers are not included;

- Excessive displays of interest in a particular athlete or group of athletes (such as all male athletes or only athletes under the age of 13);
- Parents/guardians should also note that sexual predators:
  - Target vulnerable populations;
  - Come from all backgrounds;
  - Can be male or female;
  - Are generally very likeable and can have warm personalities;
  - May have limited relationships with other adults.

Each situation is different, so it is important for parents/guardians to evaluate the proposed activity on a case-by-case basis, which may include a call to your local Special Olympics office to confirm the validity of the activity and determine whether it is appropriate for the athlete.

Identifying a sexual predator is very difficult and therefore, parents/guardians should be extremely cautious of those activities, behaviors and characteristics outlined in this guide. Special Olympics has undertaken steps to check the backgrounds of certain volunteers and to educate registered volunteers, staff and parents/caregivers of “red flag” behaviors, but everyone should be on the lookout for inappropriate behavior.

If you believe a volunteer is engaging in activities under the guise of Special Olympics that do not fit within the expected scope of Special Olympics, contact the state Program office to discuss the situation.

### **Learn to recognize the signs of abuse**

In addition to statements by the athlete, there may be physical or behavioral indicators of abuse. Physical indicators include questionable injuries such as bruises or lacerations in the soft tissue areas of an athlete’s body. Bruises change color during the healing process, and bruises of different colors indicate different stages of healing, thereby indicating that the injuries happened on more than one occasion. Injuries to genital areas may indicate sexual abuse; for example, cigarette burns on the inside of the upper leg or on the buttocks. Tether marks or rope burns and abrasions caused by tying wrists, ankles or the neck are also indicators of probable abuse.

Some athletes are prone to injuries as a consequence of athletic competition, and the location of the injury may indicate whether the injury was due to abuse or competition. Injuries that happen due to athletic competition are most likely to be on the shins, knees, elbows, etc. They are less likely to be on the abdomen, across the back, on the backs of the legs, or on facial cheeks. If you notice that an athlete has been injured, ask how the injury happened. Could the incident described by the athlete have resulted in the injury you observed?

Since most bodily injuries heal, an athlete’s behavior may offer a valuable clue that an athlete is the victim of abuse. Individuals under stress often reflect that stress in their behavior. Maltreatment often causes stress related behavior such as depression, withdrawal, thoughts of or attempts at suicide and aggression. Uncharacteristic, extended changes in behavior can also be an indicator of abuse. However, the absence of behavioral indicators does not indicate a lack of

abuse. Individuals cope differently and some athletes will internalize abuse and display no outward signs.

### **Know who to go to if you have a concern**

If you believe that a Special Olympics athlete has been abused, you should contact SOPA's SVP of Programming, Clare Walsh Miller, at 610-630-9450 ext. 235 or 484-632-6123.

### **Understand Special Olympics policy on volunteers or staff dating athletes**

Special Olympics respects the right of athletes to have the full range of human relationships. The Special Olympics dating policy is designed to protect the wellbeing of, and respect for the dignity of, Special Olympics athletes. The policy applies on a global basis and shall not be interpreted as a limitation on the rights of athletes, but only as a restriction on Special Olympics staff and volunteers.

Special Olympics prohibits any Special Olympics staff member or volunteer (excluding spouses of Special Olympics athletes and Special Olympics athletes who are "day of event" volunteers) from dating or having a sexual relationship with any Special Olympics athlete. In the case of a Special Olympics athlete who is also a staff member or volunteer, the Chief Executive Officer of the organization where the athlete competes will evaluate the circumstances on a case-by-case basis and determine whether the staff/volunteer athlete is an authority figure to the competing athlete, and if it is determined that the staff/volunteer athlete is an authority figure, then the relationship is prohibited.

### **Discuss the contents of this guide with your athletes**

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to discuss the contents of this guide with their athletes to help their athletes distinguish appropriate contact from inappropriate contact and to feel comfortable discussing any concerns they may have.

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Thank you for your continued support. We look forward to working together to keep our athletes safe. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or suggestions regarding this document.