Benefits the Special Olympics has on its Participants with Intellectual Disabilities

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**Abstract**

Our research will take an in depth look at the positive effects that the Special Olympics has on its participants who have intellectual disabilities; more specifically those participants with Down Syndrome. We will begin by discussing what exactly the Special Olympics are and why this international competition was created for individuals with intellectual disabilities in the first place. We will proceed by acknowledging the extent at which this organization has reached in the many years since its creation. Lastly, we will examine the benefits that have been found to be exhibited by its intellectually disabled participants. In our presentation we hope to express how beneficial the Special Olympics are and some interesting facts about the events.

**Understanding of Exceptionality**

**Overview of research.** For our research question, we were curious as to what ways the Special Olympics positively impact the lives of their intellectually disabled participants, specifically those with down syndrome. “An intellectual disability is a complex and multifaceted concept” (Gargiulo, Richard). Intellectual disability’s affect both intellectual functioning and interfere with everyday activities. Some examples are Fragile X, Fetal Alcohol Disorder, or most commonly Down Syndrome. Down syndrome is a congenital disorder arising from a chromosome defect, causing intellectual impairment and physical abnormalities including short stature and a broad facial profile. It arises from a defect involving chromosome 21, usually an extra copy (trisomy-21). “About 5% of people with intellectual disability have Down Syndrome” (Gargiulo, Richard). Down Syndrome is most common when a woman of older age has a child. But how does Down Syndrome affect people physically?

Our hypothesis or assumption for the research was that intellectually disabled participants, and more specifically those with down syndrome, who chose to participate in the Special Olympics would be positively impacted in numerous aspects of their life. Various aspects in which their lives might would be positively impacted by the Special Olympics that I had anticipated prior to conducting my research include gaining social skills through collaboration with both peers and coaches as well as an increased level of self-worth and confidence.

**Introduction of an Appropriate Based Practice**

**What are the Special Olympics?** The Special Olympics are an international competition for intellectually disabled athletes modeled after the Olympics. They were created by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968 when she saw how unfairly the individuals with intellectual disabilities were being treated around her. The origin of the Special Olympics was Camp Shriver, which was the summer camp that Eunice created for children with disabilities that were not allowed to participate in public summer camps (Special Olympics, Camp Shiver). The children rode horses, kicked soccer balls, and swam. Through this, “counselors began to see, as Eunice already had, that these children were not "difficult," "unteachable," or "belligerent" and all those other stereotypes that had been ascribed to them. They merely wanted to have fun… just like every other kid” (Special Olympics, Camp Shiver). One of the most important aspects of Camp Shiver, was that it stressed how important it was for children with special needs and typical children to interact. This was beneficial for children on both ends, because it gave the kids appreciation and compassion for one another. Eunice saw so much potential in the children with disabilities, that she began her campaign to start something special just for them. She worked closely on President Kennedy’s panel for people with ID and her determination and drive for equality grew into the Special Olympics movement (Special Olympics, Camp Shriver).

**Mission.** “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” (Special Olympics, Our Mission). This organization has been about bringing joy to these competitors and their families, through physical activity and strength. Competitions range from local tournaments to World Games, over half of the athletes have participated only at local or regional levels. While many also go on to compete at the state level, and very few go on to compete globally (Siperstein, Gary). Much like the Olympic Games, Special Olympics includes many of the same events, such as alpine skiing, floor hockey, short track speed skating, basketball, figure skating, gymnastics, tennis, volleyball, cross country skiing, powerlifting, roller skating, and more. Approximately 4.9 million athletes with intellectual disabilities and 1 million coaches and volunteers are involved in the 223 national U.S. Special Olympic programs that are found in 172 countries (Special Olympics, Our Mission). “The organization offers its athletes year-round training and competition in 30 Olympic-type summer and winter sports. Special Olympics North America has 544,581 athletes participating in all 30 sports offered by Special Olympics” (Disabled World). This incredible event has brought people with disabilities from all over the world to compete and win titles in athletic events.

**Research Based Support**

**Study1.** (Kersh, 2018. The Positive Contributions of Special Olympics to the Family). Our first study is about the positive contributions of Special Olympics to the family. Based on our findings, the study we examined is about the positive impacts the Special Olympics has on the family as a whole. In the study the authors conducted over the phone interviews with the families of current Special Olympic participants. The questions the researchers asked to the families were: “1) How Do Families Perceive Their Children with Intellectual Disabilities, and How Does Participation in Special Olympics Impact Their Perceptions? 2) How Do Families Believe that Participation in Special Olympics Benefits Their Children with Intellectual Disabilities? 3) How Are Family Members Involved in Special Olympics and How Does Involvement Benefit Families” (The Positive Contributions of Special Olympics to the Family)? When collecting results for question one, the researchers found that parents would describe their child as outgoing, capable, kind, and hardworking, as well as other character traits such as their sense of humor, compassion, and their achievements (The Positive Contributions of Special Olympics to the Family). The parents boasted about their child, as most parents do, although, the parents did mention difficulties they had to face as well. Researchers also found that parents felt a sense of pride for their child and were even amazed at their child’s athletic ability. When collecting data for question two, researchers found that “parents almost unanimously agreed that Special Olympics had a positive impact on their children” (The Positive Contributions of Special Olympics to the Family). The Parents also commented on the social benefits that the Special Olympics had on their child. Parents talked about how beneficial the event is as a whole, by explaining that their child would most likely just be sitting around playing video games, as where this gives them something to work and look forward to. Lastly, for question three, researchers found that there is a good amount of family involvement and support for the athletes. “Based on the primary parents’ report, in the vast majority of families (82%), at least one parent attended their child’s competitions most of the time or always.” The study also showed that 22% of siblings say that the Special Olympics help improve their relationship with their brother or sister. Over half (53%) of Special Olympic athletes said that seeing their family at competition made them happy (The Positive Contributions of Special Olympics to the Family).

22%

53%

82%

Being involved has brought their families closer together. This study focuses on families and the many ways they contribute to the Special Olympics through their athlete’s success. Through the Special Olympics, parents and siblings gain more pride and respect for their loved one’s strengths and abilities.

**Study 2**. (Special Olympics Website, 2018. Special Olympic Research Overview). In the last study, based on our findings we were able to find that the Special Olympics has benefitted an abundance of people with disabilities in many ways. Studies in this article show that more than approximately 5.7 million Special Olympics athletes compete across 172 countries which averages out to be 289 competitions each day around the world. As shown in the graphs below, 94% of people with intellectual disabilities that have competed in the Special Olympics have reported improved sports skills, and 79% of Unified teammates without disabilities reported increased understanding of people with intellectual disabilities after they have competed. Also shown below, 70% percent of people with intellectual disabilities that had competed in the Special Olympics felt as though it had somehow positively impacted the amount of time they had spent together as a family (Special Olympic Research Overview). I feel that these statistics are beneficial to look at, because they show a real representation of just how much of an impact the Special Olympics has on people in many different ways.

65% of parents

Felt that participation in Special Olympics had raised their expectations of their sons or daughters

70%

79%

94%

94% of the people with intellectual disabilities that had competed in the Special Olympics claimed that they thought that it made them healthier and that after participating, the majority of partners with the Special Olympics reported that their understanding of people with intellectual disabilities had improved. This even has given insight, knowledge, and understanding to people who believed people with intellectual disabilities were incapable of the same things as them. Coaches in the Special Olympics mentioned having witnessed improved confidence, enhanced communication (including previously mute athletes talking in order to communicate with teammates) and improved social inclusion among people with intellectual disabilities who had chosen to take part in the Special Olympics (Special Olympics Research Overview). The Special Olympics is paving the way for social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities, by crushing the negative stigmas and attitudes people have toward these powerful people.

**Study 3.** (Tedrick, 2009. Growing Older in Special Olympics: Meaning and Benefits of Participation). This study is about athletes’ motivations for participating in and leaving Special Olympics Programs in the United States. The Special Olympics is a competition for people with intellectual disabilities of all ages, but uncommon to the Olympic games, Special Olympic athletes usually compete until they are around fifty years old. These amazing athletes have such a passion and love for what they do, nothing can stop them. Researchers have reviewed studies on the effects of aging for people with intellectual disabilities and stated, “the cumulative research suggests that older adults with intellectual disabilities have rates of common adult and older age-related conditions that are comparable to or even higher than that of the general population” (Tedrick, T.). Studies also show that adults with Down Syndrome may decline in adaptive skills at earlier ages and change is often present in their 50s. In the study, the author interviewed two Special Olympic athletes of older age. Walter, age 54, was a swimmer for the Special Olympics. Walter mentioned how he liked how exercising and winning made him feel and all the life skills he learned from his time competing. When asked how he viewed himself, Walter explained how he liked to tell people he was a Special Olympic swimmer and that he liked to encourage people. The next person the author interviewed was 42-year-old Patrice. Patrice ran track for the Special Olympics and the idea of getting a medal was enough to make her want to compete. Unlike Walter, who felt he was in good shape from competing, Patrice’s mother “critically indicated that strength and health were not improved the way they should” (Tedrick, T.). During her time competing, Patrice made many friends and had a good time. When she was asked how she felt about herself, her mother mentioned that she feels good about herself and really enjoys showing people her medals when she wins.

Reading this study was so inspirational, because just like typical athletes, these athletes train, work hard, and are devoted to their sport. They participate because it is something they are passionate about and the progress they make is something they can be proud of.

**Discussion**

The Special Olympics has indeed bettered the lives of its intellectually disabled athletes and their families in more ways than one. Parents of these intellectually disabled athletes credit the Special Olympics with having helped them to better understand their child’s capabilities and potential for growth. This type of relationship growth is incredible, because no parent wants to believe their child will never be normal or get to participate in the same things as other kids. The Special Olympics has given parents a clarity and made them see that their child can do so much more. This event has not only created better relationships between families, but between competitors as well. This is because, “individuals with developmental disabilities are often excluded from many common peer situations and have less opportunity to learn the necessary social skills for effective interaction. This results in isolation and inability to successfully function in a social setting” (Benefits of Special Olympics). Research has shown that physical activity has helped to improve the motor skills, muscular strength, diet, and nutrition of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Research has also shown that it is not just physically beneficial, but that it also increases one's ability to adapt to stressors (Our Mission). The Special Olympics has proven to many different individuals around the world who had underestimated the abilities of people with intellectual disabilities the true level of success that they can achieve through hard work, dedication, and determination just like the rest of us. Far beyond just the physically benefits toward people with disabilities, studies have also shown that having fun was the most important aspect of the Special Olympics to not only its intellectually disabled participants but also their families, coaches, and volunteers. The Special Olympics has helped create inclusive communities, by consistently challenging the negative perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities by demonstrating all that they are truly capable of achieving. The Special Olympics indeed creates “bridges to social inclusion” in the community (OurMission)*.*

**Recommendation**

Based on the information and the data collected during our time spent researching the benefits that the Special Olympics has on its participants with intellectual disabilities, we were able to find that families that have children with Down Syndrome, as well as various other intellectual disabilities, benefit from the Special Olympics both physically and socially. The Special Olympics is growing increasingly due to the positive impact that it has had on its intellectually disabled participants in previous years. This event gives people with Down Syndrome and other intellectual disabilities the chance to show off their strength and capabilities. While accomplishing all of this, they are also crushing the stigma that follows people with intellectual disabilities who are not as fortunate to still be able to accomplish some of the similar skills and tasks as those who do not face any of these problems. As the results from this study shows, the motivations for people with intellectual disabilities to participate in the Special Olympics are consistent with athleticism but extend beyond the mission of sports training and competition (Siperstein, Gary). Through our research we also found that there is a division of the Special Olympics designed for young athletes. We feel that if parents involve their children in this event when they are younger, there will be so many health benefits for them in the future.

**Conclusion**

The Special Olympics has been an extreme asset to societies around the world and has positively impacted the lives of many since its creation. This event has opened so many doors for its participants as far as health and happiness go. The Special Olympics has brought families together, shown the strength of these athletes, and given the participants a sense of equality among their “normal” peers. Longwood University has hosted the Special Olympic powerlifting team and cheerleaders for the past three years and the event is so inspirational to be a part of. As a spectator, you gain more of an appreciation for these incredible athletes, their strength, and their determination despite the cards they have been handed. Being involved with this event is something we highly recommend, because as athletes we know how much dedication and determination we put into our sport and we are sure these athletes put the same into their sport. More universities should become involved in hosting the events of the Special Olympics and getting the universities athletes involved, to show recognition and appreciation to these extraordinary athletes.

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