

INTERACTING WITH SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATHLETES

Special Olympics is one of the most exciting movements today, combining sports with the opportunity to interact with athletes with intellectual disabilities. All of us vary in our experience level with Special Olympic athletes. The suggestions below are meant to help you feel more comfortable in your interactions.

1. People with intellectual disabilities and people without intellectual disabilities are more alike than different. Athletes with intellectual disabilities learn at a slower pace; however they do learn. Athletes with intellectual disabilities experience the same likes, dislikes, pressures, insecurity, and affronts to their dignity as any other person does. Working with people with intellectual disabilities usually requires no specialized training. Good sensitive human relations are the basics to working successfully with athletes with intellectual disabilities. If you are unsure how to respond to a Special Olympics athlete, ask yourself how you would want someone to treat you.

2. A common misconception is that Special Olympics athletes need to be talked down to or talked to as if they were very young children. While athletes' reasoning abilities may be delayed, talk with them and treat them according to their age.

3. Both children and adults participate in Special Olympics. Always refer to Special Olympics participants as athletes rather than kids. Special Olympics does not, at the request of the United States Olympic Committee, use the term Olympians.

4. Using appropriate body language makes any conversation with athletes and coaches more positive. Maintain eye contact to let the person know you are interested. Keep an open body posture, arms by your side or in your pocket. Incline your head toward the person. Closed arms and leaning away from a person created a closed or unfriendly position or atmosphere.

5. Be yourself. Use your normal voice and give support, but try not to over praise. Don't exaggerate the accomplishments of athletes. Special Olympics athletes will gain the most from being judged fairly and without overstatement.

6. Most athletes you'll meet are very friendly and enjoy your attention. Along with fun, we encourage behavior that is appropriate to athletic events. If you have any questions, just remember that behavior that is not appropriate for persons without intellectual disabilities is not appropriate among persons with intellectual disabilities. Appropriate behavior and sportsmanship are two skills emphasized in Special Olympic training. Reinforce them whenever possible. Please do not interfere if a coach is disciplining an athlete. If you have a question, ask the coach when it is convenient and out of hearing distance from the athlete.

7. Athletes thrive on receiving encouragement, but let them take the lead as to what type of recognition they are comfortable with (pat on the back, high five, handshake, etc). You should also be comfortable setting your own limits and should caution an athlete if an action makes you feel uncomfortable, as well.

8. As a volunteer, you will want to do everything you can to respect the dignity of the athletes that you will meet. Respecting dignity and being sensitive to cultural differences is probably as important as anything you will do at the Games.

9. When approaching an athlete, always ask if they need assistance before giving any.

10. If working with an athlete who is visually impaired, always identify yourself by name to announce your presence. Allow them to take your elbow with their hand (do not grab theirs). In a calm, normal tone, describe the area to them being aware of people and things on either side. When sitting down, take the individual's hand and place it on the back of the chair, telling them which way the chair is facing; they will seat themselves.

11. If working with an athlete who is hearing impaired, understand that there is a wide range of hearing losses. Do not shout or exaggerate your speech, as this does not help with communication. To get a person's attention, call their name. If you do not get a response, lightly touch their arm or shoulder. Always make direct eye contact and keep your face and mouth visible at all times.

12. Whenever possible, always deal directly with the athlete. Direct all questions, comments or concerns directly to the individual and do not hesitate to ask an athlete for advice. We learn together.

13. As you perform your volunteer duties, don't be afraid to ask coaches or other volunteers for help if you see a problem occurring.

Relax, enjoy yourself and have fun! This will be one of the most memorable experiences of your life. Get to know as many athletes and coaches as you can. The more people you see and meet, the more you (and they) will enjoy the Games.

Thank you for sharing your time to provide Special Olympics athletes from all over the state, a world class competition and the experience of a lifetime.