



# Quality Participation Experiences in Special Olympics Sports Programs

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## PROJECT SUMMARY

Special Olympics offers **Traditional and Unified sports programs**—Traditional programs include only athletes with IDD, while Unified programs bring together athletes with and without IDD. This project examined **how athletes, coaches, and parents experience Special Olympics programming**, using surveys and interviews from the **Inaugural Invitational Youth Games (May 2019)**.

**Researchers explored three key areas:** 1) Athlete experiences in Traditional vs. Unified sports. 2) Unified Sports' impact on young athletes and coaches. 3) Parents' role in supporting Unified athletes.

A **quality sports experience** is shaped by **autonomy, belongingness, challenge, mastery, engagement, and meaning**. Athletes reported positive experiences, with stronger belonging leading to greater engagement. However, the study revealed gaps in inclusion between athletes and coaches in Unified sports. Parents of Unified athletes played a key role but often struggled to balance support, independence, and life skills. Many felt unclear about their role, making it harder to guide their child.

### Findings Were Reported Through:

- **Surveys** on athlete, coach, and parent perspectives.
- **Interviews** providing deeper insights into sports experiences.
- **Analysis of quality participation** using six key elements of engagement.

**Conclusion:** This project highlights ways to improve youth engagement in Special Olympics programs. A quality sport participation model can help coaches enhance athlete experiences. Stronger Unified Sports coach training in both sports skills and inclusion strategies is needed. Additionally, parents need more resources to support their child's development and participation.

## KEY MESSAGES

### Enhance coaching support:

Training for Unified Sports coaches should focus on **both sports skills and inclusion** to create a more accessible and supportive environment.

### Improve outreach and resources

**for parents:** Many parents feel unclear about their role. Providing **guidance and information sessions** can make their child's sports experience smoother.

### Strengthen athlete engagement:

Using a **proven model of quality participation** can boost **youth involvement and retention** in Special Olympics programs.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information regarding the Unified PE curriculum, contact Kelly at [kelly.arbour@utoronto.ca](mailto:kelly.arbour@utoronto.ca).