



Fast Facts

- People with intellectual disabilities have a 40% higher prevalence of chronic health conditions compared to the general population.
- Programs that develop gross and fine motor skills at a different developmental pace can be instrumental in 'releasing the inner athlete' in children with intellectual disabilities.
- As of 2014, 13,000 children and youth ages 2 - 21 were registered in Special Olympics programs in Canada. This includes 352 in Active Start and 557 in FUNdamentals.
- Socialization is a key influence of lifelong involvement in sport. Active Start and FUNdamentals program participants learn to interact with fellow athletes, parents, and program leaders through play-based activities.
- In 2014 Special Olympics Canada updated their Young Athlete Nutrition Guide to assist Active Start and FUNdamentals participants, program leaders, and parents/caregivers learn about healthy eating habits.

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"Physical activity is the closest thing we have to a wonder drug"

Program Background

Special Olympics is a global organization that uses the transformative power of sports to engage individuals with intellectual disabilities. While a portion of programming is focused upon high performing athletes, the overarching Special Olympics goal is to enable all individuals with intellectual disabilities to enjoy and successfully engage in sport throughout their lives.

In the past, it was wrongly assumed that people with intellectual disabilities were unable to experience healthy, active lives. Today, it is widely understood that good health is a more likely option as long as key movement and motor skills are developed.

In Canada, Special Olympics engages more than 38,000 children and adults with intellectual disabilities through opportunities to have a healthy life and engage in physical activities.

Program Overview

Research has shown that children with intellectual disabilities are significantly more likely to engage in physical activities if they can access additional training to develop fundamental movement, gross and fine motor skills development at their own pace.

As a result, Special Olympics Canada (SOC) founded the **Active Start & FUNdamentals** Programs, which support

two key developmental stages outlined within their *Long-term Athlete Development Model for Athletes with an Intellectual Disability*.

Both programs provide the opportunity to develop and practice skills necessary for physically literacy and to competently and confidently engage in physical activity. The programs are designed to increase a child athlete's enjoyment in participating, which is a contributing factor to lifetime commitment to involvement in sport.

Theory of Change—Summary

If children with intellectual disabilities have opportunities to exercise and develop fundamental movement, gross and fine motor skills, then they will improve their physical literacy, have greater confidence and control in physical activity, be more likely to remain physically active and reduce their risk of social exclusion.

The Active Start Program

Active Start is a program for athletes aged two to six years old. Through Active Start athletes develop essential motor skills (i.e. jumping, throwing, and ball-rolling) over 12, one hour weekly sessions.

Most athletes participate in Active Start multiple times,

which solidifies their learning. They might enroll at 2, 3, or 4 years of age, but have certainly participated in multiple classes by the time they are ready to progress to the next level.

A key aspect of the Active Start program is the involvement of a parent or caregiver. While the athletes develop core skills that will support their involvement in sport throughout a lifetime, they also experience a new form of play. As their parents/caregivers learn how to support each child's unique skill development with fun exercises that can be repeated at home, and as a family, the parent/caregiver—child bond often deepens.

FUNdamentals

FUNdamentals is a program designed for children aged seven to 12. It solidifies and integrates the skills learned in Active Start, and then develops them further.

While parents and caregivers are not as directly involved in the program, the social benefits of involvement in sport are an important program element. In addition to experiencing the enjoyment of sport with peers and friends, participants learn about nutrition, sport-specific activities and build confidence in their own individual ability to participate in sport with children of all abilities.

Social Value Created

Individuals with intellectual disabilities without access to specialised programming to develop their enjoyment and proficiency in sport are less likely to be fit and more likely to suffer from high rates of obesity. This makes them more likely to be at-risk of secondary health conditions (fatigue, pain, etc.).¹

The development of early childhood fundamental motor skills is critical to establishing the foundation for lifelong participation in sport. Not only is chronic disease an increased risk, a child without opportunity to develop these skills may face social isolation as a result of a lack of confidence to participate in school-based physical activity programs.

Participant Outcomes

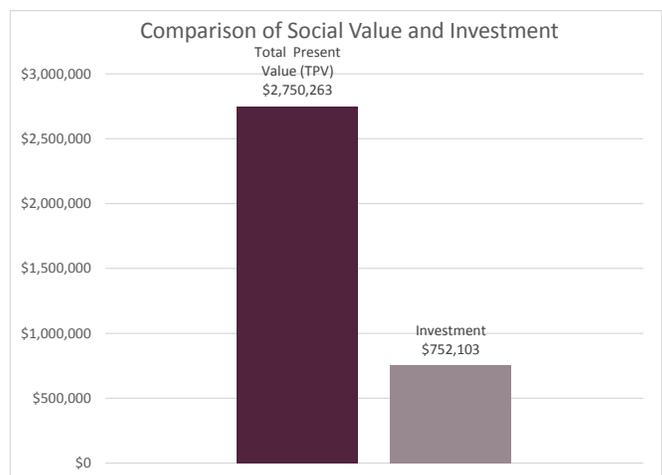
- Child-parent/caregiver bonding enhanced.
- Increased enjoyment of physical activity.
- Increased confidence in one's ability to participate.
- Decreased social isolation from peers of a similar age as a result of increased opportunity to participate with peers in an elementary school setting.
- Increased likelihood of adoption of life-long participation in physical activity.
- Decreased risk of obesity and its health consequences.
- Increased knowledge about healthy nutrition practices.
- An expanded network of parents of children with intellectual disabilities sharing knowledge and providing support.

- Improved ability to support their children with an intellectual disability.
- Increased contentment/less stress as a result of improvements in their children's physical literacy, overall development and socialization.

Looking Forward

Each year, an investment in Active Start and FUNdamentals creates value for the athletes, parents/caregivers, volunteers, the Canadian health care system, and Special Olympics Canada itself.

As illustrated above, in year 1, every \$1 invested



created **\$3.66** of value, as athletes improved their physical literacy, discovered the enjoyment of structured and personal play, and became more active as elementary school students. These improvements decrease each child's risk of social isolation as children who are not comfortable being physically active as elementary students often struggle making connections with their peers.

The goal of Active Start and FUNdamentals is to create a foundation for life-long involvement in physical activity. While research demonstrates the individual benefits of improved physical health, a healthier population will be less at-risk of chronic disease. This goal is an essential outcome of athletes involved in Special Olympics.