



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools**

Inclusive Sports and Fitness



Getting
Ready



Establishing a
Leadership Team



Whole School
Engagement



Inclusive Youth
Leadership



Inclusive Sports
and Fitness



Special Olympics
Resources



Inclusive Sports and Fitness: Activities for All

Inclusive gross motor education and sports provide students with and without intellectual disabilities opportunities to meaningfully participate in fitness activities alongside one another in a variety of settings. Unified Sports® are one specific type of inclusive sport. Other activities such as walking or fitness clubs, are inclusive and lots of fun, though they don't fall under the official category of Unified Sports®.

What do inclusive gross motor education and sports look like?

Inclusive sports opportunities vary by students' ages and from school to school. While some students work on developing basic gross motor skills, others compete on sports teams. Schools may provide a variety of opportunities, ranging from a weekly fitness club to an ongoing inclusive PE class to a seasonal intramural basketball team. All inclusive sports opportunities have one thing in common—they provide opportunities for all students to achieve their personal best and experience the joy that comes from physical activity.



From Learning to Competing

Special Olympics Young Athletes

Children ages 2 to 7 develop fundamental gross motor skills as well as social and cognitive skills in an inclusive sports play program.

Developmental Sports Activities

Children ages 6 to 12 learn more sport-specific skills in inclusive settings, such as Unified Physical Education classes.

Unified Sports®

Students with and without disabilities train and compete together on the same teams.



Why are inclusive sports opportunities important?

Inclusive sports

- improve students' physical fitness.
- enhance social and emotional skills.
- provide opportunities for students to build friendships on and off the playing field.
- teach acceptance, inclusion, and camaraderie—lessons that translate to all aspects of life.
- are a catalyst for social inclusion.

Powerful impact

- Inclusive sports lead to **new friendships**, improved self-esteem, positive changes in attitudes and behaviors, increased sports skills, and a deeper connection to the school.
- Children who participate in Young Athletes show **motor skill gains** at twice the rate of children who do not participate.
- 82% of family members in the United States report that athletes **improve** their self-esteem and confidence after participating in Unified Sports.



What Are the Main Models of Inclusive Sports?



There are three basic models of inclusive sports. It is up to each school to choose which model or combination of models will be most beneficial for its students. Many elementary schools do not have an existing structure for competitive team sports. There are many other options, though, including the ideas starting on page 140. Since sports are the foundation for Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools, it is essential that each school provide one or more inclusive sports opportunities. Ideally, each school would provide a variety of inclusive sports or fitness opportunities for students.

Player development and mentoring

- Students with higher skill levels might serve as mentors, assisting teammates of lower skill levels in developing sport-specific skills.
- All teammates are of similar age.
- There is a noncompetitive, cooperative team environment.
- The Young Athletes program may be implemented as a player development opportunity.

Competitive

- Students with and without intellectual disabilities train and compete on the same team.
- All teammates are of similar age and ability levels.
- Teams adhere to training, competition, and team composition requirements.
- Teams compete within an intramural setting, an interscholastic athletic league, or through Special Olympics tournaments.
- An inclusive intramural flag football team is one example.



Recreation

- This is the most flexible model because it requires fewer training and team composition criteria.
- Recreational sports take place solely on school property and do not advance into competitions.
- There is a noncompetitive, cooperative team environment.
- Examples include a Unified Sports Day and a Unified Fitness Club.

See the **checklists** on pages 143–145 for steps in getting started with these models.



What Are the Goals of Inclusive Sports?



- **Friendship and socialization:** Students with and without intellectual disabilities will have opportunities for positive social interactions and the development of long-lasting friendships.
- **Meaningful inclusion:** Each student will be an active participant and have a valued role on a team or in a sport or fitness activity.
- **Skill development:** Students will enhance their overall physical fitness and develop specific sports skills that enable them to participate in the sport with greater proficiency.
- **Personal growth:** Students with and without intellectual disabilities will benefit from physical and mental challenges by participating in a variety of sports activities.



Principle of meaningful involvement

A socially inclusive school ensures that students with and without intellectual disabilities have multiple opportunities throughout the school year to participate in sports.

Indicators of meaningful involvement

- **Equal participation:** All students have the ability and opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the sports activity or performance of the team.
- **Sports rules:** Students participate according to the rules of the sport or competition.
- **Safety:** Students participate without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others.
- **Commitment:** Students are committed to doing their best, including regularly attending any scheduled practices.

Lasting impact

- The benefits of the Young Athletes (YA) program continue even after the program ends. At five- and ten-month follow-ups, children who participated in YA maintained a **four-month advantage** in development on two of three areas where they improved.
- The program raises parents' expectations of their child with intellectual disabilities. In the United States, 21% of teachers report that YA benefited families by **raising parental expectations** of their child's capabilities.

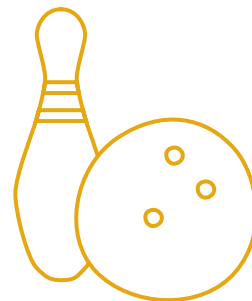


Get Started with Inclusive Sports

There are various ways to implement inclusive sports, but a typical first step is to have a planning meeting with your school's Unified Leadership Team. Consider discussing topics such as the ones below. Once you agree on one or more inclusive sports activities, use the action plan form on page 147 to organize the details.

Topics to discuss

- Which Unified Sports model (competitive, player development, or recreation) or combination of models is the most appropriate for the students in our school? For example, a school may have a Young Athletes program for kindergartners and a competitive Unified bocce team for older students. A school is not restricted to using one model.
- Are there existing opportunities, such as PE classes, that can be made socially inclusive?
- Which sports are of greatest interest to students with and without intellectual disabilities?
- Who will be the adult leaders for the activities we choose?
- Is any training needed for the adults leading the activities?
- Is any paperwork required for participants?
- How will general education students be selected to participate? Will the selection be based on grade level, or is an application process a better fit?
- When will the activities be held? Before, during, or after school?



Need ideas? Check out these suggestions.

See pages 140–142 for details and other creative options.

- Special Olympics Young Athletes
- Unified Sports Day
- Unified PE
- Fitness Friends
- Basketball Buddies

If the leadership team is interested in **interscholastic competition**, contact your state Special Olympics Program to find out about local inclusive sports opportunities. Be sure to check into your school and district athletic policies, too.

Get illustrated, leveled **exercise cards** for endurance, strength, and flexibility here: <https://resources.specialolympics.org/Fitness-Cards/#.WmeqU9ArJBy>



Inclusive Sports Opportunities

Every student should have a chance to share in the joy of sports, interact with other students, and be part of their school through sports. As students participate in inclusive sports, they establish environments of acceptance and respect. In addition to Unified Sports teams, there is a wide variety of inclusive sports options. See the ideas below and on pages 141–142 for several ways to make inclusive sports part of your school.



- **Special Olympics Young Athletes:** This is the first stage of Unified Sports. It is an inclusive sport and play program for students with and without intellectual disabilities, 2 to 7 years. Students develop fundamental gross motor skills, improve their social and emotional skills, and learn healthy habits. To celebrate students' achievements, conclude the program with a Young Athletes Demonstration Day and invite families and community members to attend. Begin the event with a parade of athletes. Have students rotate through skill stations to demonstrate what they have learned. Conclude the event by presenting award ribbons to athletes for their participation. Special Olympics resources, including posters, activity guides, a curriculum, and videos are available here: https://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Young_Athletes/Young_Athletes_Toolkit.aspx
- **Developmental Sports Activities:** After students ages 6 to 12 years have learned the fundamentals, they're ready to learn more sport-specific coaching and instruction. They learn individual skills as well as the basic rules of a chosen sport. The instruction format might include a warm-up activity, skill stations, a team-building activity, and time for students to reflect on what they learned that day. For resources, visit <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/community-building/young-athletes/DevelopmentalSportsOverview.pdf>
- **Unified Sports:** Students with and without intellectual disabilities train and compete together on sports teams. Students increase their sports skills, have fun together, and bond as a team. For students who have never been on a competitive team, a sport such as bocce or bowling might be a great first experience. Find out more at https://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Sports/Unified_Sports.aspx





- **Unified Physical Education:** This class is a unique opportunity for students of various ability levels to come together on equal terms through ongoing fitness, sports, leadership, and wellness activities. The Unified PE course is based on the national PE standards and empowers students to create an inclusive school environment. For Special Olympics resources, including tips for inclusion, sample units, and resources for student self-reflection visit <http://www.specialolympics.org/SimpleStories/SimpleStory.aspx?id=42662>.

- **Unified Sports Day:** Invite students to demonstrate and celebrate sports skills they have learned and practiced during a special day of inclusive sports activities for the entire student body. Encourage families to attend and celebrate what students can do. Use the planning checklist on page 145 to organize the event.

- **Fitness Models:**

- **Unified Sports Fitness Club:** For example, a year-round walking club
- **Fit Families:** A six-week fitness challenge for families or teams
- **SOfit:** An eight-week program that explores the four pillars of wellness: physical, nutritional, emotional, and social

Find resources for these wellness programs here: <https://resources.specialolympics.org/Fitness-Model-Resources>.



For additional **information and resources** on inclusive sports, visit the Special Olympics Resource webpage: https://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Sports/Unified_Sports.aspx





More Inclusive Opportunities

- **Fitness Fridays or Super Sports Days:** Each week or month, organize a special inclusive PE class. You might focus on a different sport each time to expose students to a wide variety of sports. Another option is to set up a different obstacle course for each class. Promote leadership skills by having students design the course.
- **Unified Walking Club:** Invite school staff members and students with and without intellectual disabilities to walk regularly as a group. Schedule club meeting times that work well for your school, such as before school, during lunch, or right after school. It's a wonderful way to promote fitness, and it is a great opportunity for students to strike up conversations with peers with whom they might not otherwise have the opportunity to socialize.
- **Fitness Friends:** Gather students with and without intellectual disabilities weekly to enjoy physical activities together, such as yoga, walking, and jumping rope. Vary the activities from week to week to keep interest high.
- **Unified Intramural Teams:** If your school already has an intramural team for one or more sports, explore ways to make it socially inclusive. Consider having current team members extend personal invitations to friends who have intellectual disabilities, or ask the special education staff to encourage their students to give playing a try.
- **Basketball Buddies:** Host an informal afterschool Unified basketball program that focuses on basic skills and teamwork. Check with your local high school athletics department for students who might be interested in assisting.
- **Inclusive Recess Opportunities:** What better time to promote social inclusion than recess? Schedule a variety of inclusive opportunities, such as kickball games or yoga instruction. Another option is to establish a group that focuses on one sport for several weeks, such as an inclusive bocce group. The more frequent the opportunities, the easier it will be to promote friendships!
- **Training Mentors:** If you have the Young Athletes program or Special Olympics athletes in your school, pair students without intellectual disabilities with younger athletes to help them train. It's a wonderful opportunity for students to develop friendships with students with whom they might not otherwise interact.



The **Young Athletes** program is for children ages 2 to 7. Once a child turns 8 years old, he or she may enter general Special Olympics programming. Special Olympics trains people with intellectual disabilities to compete in Olympic-style sports events. 4.9 million athletes from more than 172 countries participate in Special Olympics!





Checklist for Inclusive Sports Player Development and Competitive Models

- 1. Meet with the Unified Champion School Leadership Team to discuss providing a Unified Sports opportunity in your school. Develop a timeline for recruiting athletes and adult volunteers and to prepare for the season or program.
- 2. Contact your state Special Olympics office to begin the process of forming a Unified Sports program or team at your school.
- 3. Choose the sport that the school will implement and when/where it will take place.
- 4. Recruit an adult head coach and identify other adults who can support the athletes in different ways.
- 5. Have the coaches complete training requirements. A free online course is available here: <https://nfhslearn.com/courses/36000/coaching-unified-sports>
- 6. Recruit students with and without intellectual disabilities. Ensure that there will be a meaningful role for each student who is interested in participating.
Player Development: Focus recruitment on students without disabilities who will be of similar age as students with disabilities and be committed to the program or team.
Competitive: Use a targeted approach to focus recruitment on students without disabilities who will be of similar ability as students with disabilities and will be committed to the team.
- 7. Ask interested students/parents to complete and submit required participation forms in a timely manner.
- 8. Establish a practice or training schedule. Establish a competition schedule for intramural or interscholastic teams.
- 9. Address transportation needs, if necessary.
- 10. Conduct an orientation meeting with students and families.
- 11. Encourage whole school engagement through pep rallies and other shows of fan support.
- 12. Use the school's website or social media to post photos, videos, and stories about the team.





Checklist for Inclusive Sports Recreation Models

- 1. Meet with the Unified Champion School Leadership Team to discuss starting Unified Sports in your school. Develop a timeline for recruiting participants and volunteers and preparing for the sport or activity.
- 2. Choose the sport or activity you will implement and when/where it will take place.
- 3. Contact your state Special Olympics office to begin the process of initiating a Unified Sports program at your school.
- 4. Recruit an adult to help and identify others who can support the program in different ways.
- 5. Have coaches complete training requirements. A free online course is available at <https://nfhslearn.com/courses/36000/coaching-unified-sports>
- 6. Recruit participants with and without intellectual disabilities. Ensure there will be a meaningful role for each student who is interested in participating.
- 7. Ask interested students/parents to complete and submit required participation forms in a timely manner.
- 8. Set a schedule and work out any other logistics such as transportation needs.
- 9. Conduct an orientation meeting with all students and adults involved. (This meeting could include parents.)
- 10. Use the school's website or social media to post photos, videos, and stories about activities or team events.





Checklist for a Unified Sports Day

A Unified Sports Day is a festive and fun way to involve all students and families in a day of inclusive sports activities. Use the checklist below to make the event a success.

- 1. Meet with the Unified Champion School Leadership Team to discuss hosting a Unified Sports Day at your school. Develop a timeline for recruiting volunteers and planning the event. Consider whether to seek any sponsors or donors.
- 2. Meet with the principal to discuss plans for the event and ensure the administration's support and approval.
- 3. Communicate with school staff about the event. Seek their input on possible activities to include. Invite student input, as appropriate. Solicit volunteers.
- 4. Reach out to the physical education teacher(s) and encourage collaboration for organizing activities and making accommodations to ensure all activities are accessible to all students.
- 5. Develop a plan.
 - Set the date for the event and a schedule for the day.
 - Invite members of the parent-teacher organization to help plan or carry out activities.
 - Decide whether the day will have a theme or focus on a specific sport.
- Finalize the activities and clear them with the necessary school personnel before releasing the information to others.
- Determine how to ensure that all students will have equitable opportunities to participate.
- Create a plan for each task that needs to be completed, including deadlines and a list of who is responsible for carrying out each step.
- 6. Publicize the Unified Sports Day within the school. Invite students' families. Reach out to the local newspaper and radio station. Include information about the event on the local access television station.
- 7. After the event, thank everyone involved with making the event a success. Send a special thank-you note to any sponsors or donors.
- 8. Use the school's website or social media to post photos, videos, and stories about the event.





Inclusive Sports: Tips for Success

- **Use people-first language.** Always put the athlete first and the disability behind. For example, say “My student with special needs,” not “She’s a special needs student.”
- **Ensure opportunities for socialization:** Regularly incorporate a get-acquainted activity at the beginning of inclusive sports activities or practices. Keep in mind that individual sports provide fewer natural opportunities to build social relationships than team sports.
- **Tailor the models to students:** It’s valuable to offer all three sports models, but it might not be practical. Consider the skill level of students. For example, if it’s the first year the school has a bocce club, the player development model is the best fit. If students have had more exposure to basketball, the recreation or competitive model might be a good choice.
- **Promote leadership:** Involve students in leadership roles such as setting up skill stations, designing an obstacle course, or leading warm-up drills.
- **Practice!** The more students practice basic gross motor skills, the greater their progress. Encourage families to help their children practice at home.
- **Keep it positive:** Avoid elimination activities and having students pick teams. No one wants to be “out” or the last player chosen.
- **Strike a balance:** Make it easy for students to join a sports team or club, but stress the importance of being committed to attending practices and being an active member. It’s a real-life opportunity for students to learn about responsibility and dependability.
- **Generate enthusiasm:** If your school has a Unified intramural team or interscholastic sports team, include the game dates and team achievements on the school’s morning announcements. Invite students and the school staff to show their support with pep rallies.
- **Periodically encourage reflection:** Ask students questions such as “What are the qualities of a good teammate?” and “What is your favorite sports activity and why?” Invite students to respond verbally or have each student write his or her response in a journal.
- **Share events and accomplishments:** Use the school’s website or social media to post photos, videos, and stories of socially inclusive sports clubs, events, and activities.



Unified Champion Schools

Inclusive Sports and Fitness Action Plan Form

Strategy/Activity	Tasks	Date of Completion	People Responsible
Connects with: <input type="checkbox"/> Inclusive Youth Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Whole School Engagement <input type="checkbox"/> Other			
Connects with: <input type="checkbox"/> Inclusive Youth Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Whole School Engagement <input type="checkbox"/> Other			



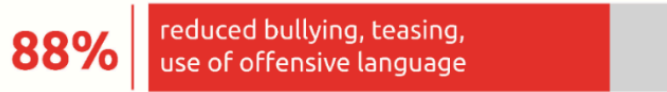
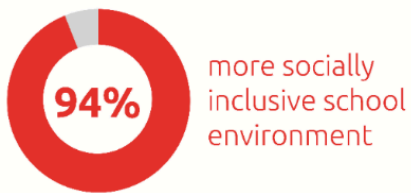
Inclusion by the Numbers

With each year that Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools continues, the reach and impact that UCS has grows.

A UCS program does not simply create opportunities for those students with intellectual disabilities—it teaches students *without* intellectual disabilities important lessons of inclusion and compassion, changing the whole school climate. Take a look at some of the feedback from students themselves:



Educators have noted the impact of Unified Champion Schools as well:



Just by working with this Elementary Level Playbook, educators and Special Olympics Programs are making their mark to strive for socially inclusive school environments everywhere.

This data was collected as part of the University of Massachusetts Boston yearly impact reports of Unified Champion Schools.