



# Towards Increased Health Care Professional Engagement in Special Olympics Canada: Potential Roles for Canadian Physiotherapists

PI's: Dr. Lesley Pritchard (University of Alberta), Dr. David Legg (Mount Royal University)

## PROJECT SUMMARY

This study explored how pediatric physiotherapists in Canada support children with disabilities in accessing community-based physical activity programs, particularly Special Olympics Canada. While these programs improve physical health, social skills, and confidence, many children face barriers such as limited access, lack of information, and few tailored supports.

Researchers surveyed 116 pediatric physiotherapists and held focus groups in Alberta to understand their experiences. Most therapists recognized the importance of physical activity and regularly recommended programs but lacked detailed knowledge about Special Olympics Canada, leading to hesitation in referring families. Uncertainty around eligibility, referral processes, and professional responsibilities made it more difficult to guide families. Therapists also noted that many caregivers feel overwhelmed navigating healthcare and community services, which can limit program participation.

**Conclusion:** Physiotherapists play a crucial role in connecting children with disabilities to physical activity programs, but knowledge gaps and unclear referral processes make this challenging. Improving information access, eligibility clarity, and partnerships between healthcare providers and Special Olympics Canada can help increase participation and long-term benefits for families.

## KEY MESSAGES

**Empower physiotherapists as physical activity advocates** by recognizing their role and equipping them with resources to connect children with disabilities to community programs.

**Enhance education and outreach** by providing clear information on Special Olympics Canada, including eligibility, available programs, and referral pathways, so therapists can confidently guide families.

**Strengthen collaboration and support** through partnerships, joint training, and engagement opportunities with healthcare teams and community organizations, ensuring therapists have the tools to streamline

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about this project, please contact Dr. David Legg at [dlegg@mtroyal.ca](mailto:dlegg@mtroyal.ca) or Dr. Lesley Pritchard.