



Integrating Wellness Promotion into Special Olympics Canada Programming

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Wellness is essential for Special Olympics athletes, coaches, and staff, taking a holistic approach that supports meaningful, active lives. While physical activity is foundational to Special Olympics, mental and emotional wellness are equally important.

Special Olympics Canada partnered with Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital to explore how athletes define wellness. They found that wellness is rooted in strengths, rather than limitations, and varies by individual. While families often join Special Olympics for physical activity, athletes develop social and emotional wellness over time, which may not always align with caregiver or coach priorities.

Together, researchers, athlete leaders, and Special Olympics Canada developed **five wellness principles** to shape programming:

1. **Facilitate emotional development** by helping athletes recognize and regulate emotions inside and outside of play.
2. **Promote resilience** by encouraging athletes to overcome challenges and build confidence in themselves and their communities.
3. **Value individual strengths** by supporting self-defined growth in physical activities.
4. **Foster belonging and inclusion** by creating safe spaces where athletes feel supported.
5. **Encourage personal growth** through play, learning, and goal-setting, fostering autonomy and competence.

Conclusion: Wellness looks different for every individual, but taking a holistic approach ensures athletes thrive physically, mentally, and socially. This collaboration highlights the importance of integrating wellness principles into Special Olympics programming, helping athletes build resilience, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

KEY MESSAGES

Build on Existing Efforts: Many current programs already support wellness. Consider reframing activities to align with key wellness principles rather than starting from scratch.

Engage Athletes in Program Development: Involve athletes in shaping wellness initiatives by asking them to define what wellness means for them.

Recognize and Motivate Growth: Establish a system that celebrates personal progress, reinforcing motivation and confidence in athletes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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