



Wellness in Action: What Do Wellness Principles Look Like in Real-World Special Olympics Practices, and how can they be supported?

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) often face more health challenges due to limited access to healthcare and a common focus on deficits rather than strengths in healthcare settings. Research is now shifting toward a more holistic approach, highlighting individual strengths and the full picture of wellbeing.

Earlier work with Special Olympics Canada helped create a Wellness Framework to define what wellness means to Special Olympics athletes. From this, five key wellness principles were developed in collaboration with community members: belonging and inclusion, emotional, physical, psychological, and intellectual wellness. This research project served as a follow-up phase to explore whether these principles were already being reflected in Special Olympics Canada sports programs and how they were being put into practice. The goals were to identify wellness principles currently being used and share real-world examples for future program planning.

The research team used the Guide to Integrating Wellness Promotion into Special Olympics Programs to observe three different sites: urban, rural, and suburban. At each location, the five wellness principles were naturally embedded in sports programming. Coaches played a key role, especially in supporting physical wellness, while also fostering psychological and intellectual wellness. Athletes contributed by enhancing emotional wellness and creating a sense of belonging and inclusion. Each site offered practical strategies that coaches and teams can use to more intentionally promote athlete wellness. These strategies are outlined in Appendix A through a clear and accessible chart for coaches and volunteers.

KEY MESSAGES

Wellness is about the whole person. Programs should aim to support all areas of wellness by using the Wellness Framework. This means including activities and approaches that help athletes feel included, emotionally supported, physically active, mentally strong, and intellectually engaged.

Coaches make a big difference. Coaches play a key role in supporting athlete wellness. Through regular sport activities, they help athletes build healthy habits, feel confident, and stay active. This puts them in a great position to include wellness principles like emotional support, inclusion, and mental wellness into everyday practices.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This project shares helpful information for Special Olympics Canada coaches and volunteers to better support the wellness of athletes by using the Wellness Framework in sport programs. The findings offer simple, practical strategies that coaches can use in their programs, with a focus on supporting all areas of an athlete's health and well-being.

See Appendix A for the list of compiled coaching strategies to support athlete wellness.



Appendix A

Observed Strategies for Coaches, Athletes, Caregivers, and Volunteers to support Athlete Wellness

Wellness Principle: Belonging and Inclusion

Definition: Create a judgement-free safe place that fosters authenticity, support and belonging for athletes

Examples

- Program staff should treat the athletes as athletes first and not as people with disabilities.
- Program staff should try to provide designated social times (ex: before and after practice).
- Program staff and members should greet and welcome all athletes.
- Coaches should try to use team huddles to acknowledge personal milestones (e.g., birthdays).
- Program staff should ensure everyone has equal opportunities to wear a team uniform (e.g., team jerseys).
- Program staff should try and work with their local community to ensure the chosen practice site is physically accessible (e.g., ramps, open spaces, change rooms).
- Sports teams may consider fundraising so that every athlete can access proper equipment equally.
- Program staff should consider the use of accessible equipment to ensure each athlete can physically participate in all sports aspects.
- Program staff should remind athletes to treat each other respectfully by saying a team oath at the beginning of every practice.
- Coaches should provide equal opportunities to all athletes to participate during practice and play all positions.
- Coaches should allow athletes to work in small groups to experience social interaction and practice skills.
- Program staff and members should foster an interactive environment where athletes can engage freely in conversation to get to know each other.
- Program staff should reinforce respect and acceptance between teammates regardless of skill level.

Wellness Principle: Emotional

Definition: Build opportunities for athletes to learn about recognizing and regulating emotions/feelings inside and outside of sports and play

Examples

- Program staff should try to maintain calm when athletes exhibit different emotions.
- Program staff should calmly remind athletes to keep a positive perspective when feeling down or negative.
- When athletes feel anxious or agitated, give them time and space to regroup.
- When athletes make mistakes and exhibit distress because of it, coaches should try to provide positive reassurance to help the athletes not worry.
- When athletes experience different emotions, program staff should try to be supportive of the athlete.
- Program staff should encourage athletes to take steps toward maintaining a positive outlook during moments of distress.
- Program staff should encourage teammates to be supportive of each other's emotions.
- Program staff should try and provide positive, constructive follow-up to tactics used to gain attention.



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PROJECT SUMMARY

Wellness Principle: Physical

Definition: Build upon the skills and strengths of each athlete to encourage self-defined growth

Examples

- Coaches should try and plan a practice that encourages a lot of opportunities for physical activity within the practice timeframe: including off-ice warm-up, drills or game play with intermittent rests and provide athletes with more opportunity for additional repetitions.
- Coaches should consider dividing athletes into smaller groups and encourage athletes to try various positions.
- If competitions have an additional cost associated with them, program staff should ensure athletes have opportunities to register for competitions.
- Program staff should provide athletes opportunities to voice their physical activity goals and develop practice drills to help athletes reach their goals.

Wellness Principle: Psychological

Definition: Support athletes to work through challenges and have a positive outlook of themselves, their community and their place in the world

Examples

- Program staff should try to celebrate athlete success in a variety of ways (e.g., pat on backs, high fives, verbal praise).
- Program staff should work with athletes to get them to learn from mistakes (e.g., when they don't execute a drill well, stop them, demonstrate how to do it well, and get them to redo it).
- Coaches should try to use game-play scenarios to encourage athlete learning (e.g., pause the scrimmage, explain the scenario and have athletes learn from it).
- Coaches should try to create practice plans with progressively more challenging drills to continue to challenge the athletes to strive for greater accomplishments.
- If athletes are struggling with execution, coaches should try to encourage them to start slowly and gradually increase the speed.
- Coaches should provide athletes with “redo” moments in practice when they make a mistake helps to reinforce good habits.
- Coaches should try and utilize team huddles to talk to the athletes about scenarios that went wrong and how athletes can improve in the future.
- Coaches can ask athletes why they did what they did to challenge the athletes learning and build competence.
- Coaches should try and use moments throughout practice as teaching moments for the entire team when mistakes occur (e.g., stopping scrimmage to explain the scenario).
- When athletes are faced with more challenges, program staff should try and increase positive praise to balance out emotions or difficulties.
- Program staff should encourage athletes to cheer for and support one another to build comradery.
- Coaches can use small tactics to progressively challenge the athletes during drills (E.g., decreasing the amount of time to execute a set amount of passes or goals).



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Wellness Principle: Intellectual

Definition: Provide athletes with space to learn, play and socialize while encouraging them to strive for new goals, and develop a sense of autonomy and competency

Examples

- Coaches can use athletes to demo drills or proper game execution to provide opportunities for leadership and peer support. Coaches can help to create small achievable goals in the moment throughout practices.
- Coaches can nominate and provide athletes with leadership opportunities during practice, such as leading components of exercises.
- Coaches can challenge an athlete's decision-making throughout the drills to encourage competency building (i.e., coaches asking why an athlete chose to make that shot).
- Coaches should try to discuss and make time for athletes to set goals, both personal and sport-specific.
- Coaches can encourage leadership by nominating a new athlete each week to lead the warm-up and cool-down stretches.
- If coaches engage the athletes in team huddles, they can try to involve athletes in determining what skills they want to work on in future practices.
- Parents and other program staff can provide athletes with building autonomy and independence by being hands-off before, during and after each practice (E.g., allow athletes to get ready for practice on their own).