



ACES: Athlete COVID Experience Survey

PI's: Dr. Jonathan Weiss and Teresa Selitto

PROJECT SUMMARY

COVID-19 has significantly affected the health and well-being of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID). Individuals with ID have experienced reduced levels of physical activity and worsened mental health. They also experienced isolation, confusion about restrictions, and difficulty accessing mental health care.

The goals of the project were to:

1. Understand how athletes and families have stayed connected to Special Olympics during the pandemic, and how they plan to stay connected post-pandemic.
2. Identify the barriers to involvement with Special Olympics.
3. Understand the impact of the pandemic on athletes and their families, and how they coped.

A total of 225 caregivers of Special Olympics athletes across Canada completed an online survey. The survey showed that during the pandemic, 58% of participants stayed involved in Special Olympics, but most athletes became less physically active. While many caregivers felt comfortable returning post-pandemic, families expressed concerns about safety, including worries about crowds and risks for high-risk athletes.

The pandemic led to decreased physical activity and worsened mental health for most athletes, with stressors such as isolation and missing important celebrations. However, 49% of participants reported that Special Olympics helped athletes cope through opportunities for physical activity and social connection.

Conclusion: This project provides valuable insights into the experiences of caregivers and athletes during and after the pandemic. The results offer important information on how to promote more involvement in Special Olympics, while keeping in mind the lasting impact of the pandemic on caregivers and athletes.

KEY MESSAGES

Families are keen to resume programming: By knowing what families need to feel comfortable resuming activities, we can create programming that meets their needs.

Special Olympics as a coping mechanism: Special Olympics programming can be used to help athletes manage stress and improve their well-being.

Families know what will help their athletes: Social connection, greater access to day programming, support workers, and mental health services can all support athletes in their recovery post-pandemic.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact Jonathan A. Weiss, PhD, CPsych, Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Director of the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research and the York Research Chair in Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disability Mental Health, York University. Email: jonweiss@yorku.ca