

Protecting Special Olympics Athletes

To achieve the mission of Special Olympics, those responsible for supervising Special Olympics athletes in both training and competition must take positive steps to protect athletes as well as other participants.

Screening of staff and volunteers is but one part of our responsibility to protect Special Olympics athletes. Screening is never 100% reliable, therefore, we need to institute additional measures designed to protect athletes while they are in our care.

Below are suggestions for strategies to protect athletes when participating in Special Olympics activities. These procedures are founded in common sense. You will also note that in most respects they reflect the same precautions that would need to be taken to protect any group of vulnerable individuals irrespective of whether they have developmental disabilities.

Preventing Physical Abuse:

- Corporal punishment including spanking, hitting, slapping, or other forms of physical discipline will not be used by Special Olympics staff or volunteers.
- When assisting athletes with bathing or showers, volunteers and/or staff will check the temperature of the water to ensure that it is not too hot.
- Coaches and volunteers will not withhold water or food from athletes as a form of punishment. Water should be available for athletes during strenuous practice sessions and during competitions to avoid dehydration.
- Only medications that have been prescribed by an athlete's physician will be dispensed to that athlete as indicated on his or her consent form signed by either a parent or legal custodian.

Preventing Emotional Abuse:

- At no time will coaches or other volunteers use profanity or otherwise curse at athletes for their performance or behavior during competition or practices.
- Special Olympics staff and volunteers will treat all athletes with courtesy and respect. It is not in keeping with the purposes of Special Olympics to use denigrating or demeaning nicknames for athletes or to permit their use by others.
- Special Olympics athletes will not be threatened or intimidated for any purpose including attempts at improving athletic performance or for controlling behavior. Discipline techniques will be constructive and positive.

Preventing Sexual Abuse:

- Whenever possible, in order to protect both athletes and volunteers, there should be at least two adult volunteers present to supervise activities such as changing into team uniforms, showering, and toileting. When it is necessary for a staff member or volunteer to speak privately to an athlete, they should find a place out of earshot, but within sight of others for their conference.
- Physical contact is important for normal human development. Hugs can be especially important to reinforce the positive nature of athletic competition for those who come in first as well as last. Hugs between Special Olympics athletes and volunteers should be open (not secretive) and respect the limits set by the athlete. Any resistance by the athlete to physical contact must be respected by the staff and volunteers.
- Remember that hugging is an activity involving more than one person and respect for boundaries must be mutual for all parties. There may be times that volunteers or staff feel uncomfortable with physical contact with an athlete. Often, this discomfort has nothing to do with the athlete, but more to do with the amount of physical contact and expressions of affection to which the individual is accustomed and comfortable.
- Special Olympics staff and volunteers should be positive role models and help Special Olympics athletes develop appropriate boundaries

for physical contact. There may be times that an athlete will attempt inappropriate physical contact with a volunteer, staff member or another athlete. In such cases, the volunteer or staff member should identify the objectionable behavior, explaining that it makes the volunteer feel uncomfortable and that a better way would be to shake hands, do “high five,” or use some other more socially acceptable form of expression. Staff and volunteers need to be very specific about both the behavior that is troublesome as well as alternate ways to express the emotions that the athlete feels.

- When Special Olympics events require athletes to stay overnight, sleeping arrangements should take into consideration the gender and developmental levels of the athletes. Male and female athletes require separate accommodations. Athletes should also be assigned sleeping rooms with athletes of similar size and intellectual functioning.
- In Partners Clubs and Unified Sports® programs, athletes normally are assigned to share sleeping quarters with their partners or counterparts. To compensate for the increased opportunities for inappropriate conduct, Special Olympics suggests that all athletes in these situations be educated about inappropriate physical contact and whom to inform if infractions occur.
- In order to monitor Special Olympics athletes anytime they are in their quarters, hall monitors should be assigned on a rotating basis. They are responsible for keeping athletes in their own rooms, addressing needs of athletes that may arise and keeping unauthorized individuals out of athletes’ sleeping quarters. Room checks should be on a random basis so that Special Olympics athletes will not recognize a pattern.
- Consideration should be given to assigning teams consisting of male and female staff or volunteers as hall monitors, with men responsible for checking the rooms of male athletes and women responsible for the female athletes. Each team should work for an hour or two before being relieved by the next team.
- Special Olympics staff, with the assistance of volunteers, should know where athletes are at all times while the athletes are in the care and custody of Special Olympics.

- Special Olympics personnel should clearly explain the rules of behavior to the athletes before each road trip. Language used should be simple but explicit.
- Special Olympics staff members and volunteers should avoid touching areas normally covered by swimming suits: breasts, buttocks and groin. Kissing on the lips and seductive massaging is not permitted (massaging pursuant to an injury or strain is permitted, but should be subject to observation by others).

Responding To Signs/Allegations of Abuse:

- Any reasonable suspicion (one based upon observation or disclosure) of any form of abuse or neglect must be immediately reported to Special Olympics Maryland's President and CEO (1.800.541.7544, or 1.410.242.1515). The State of Maryland has an immunity provision for people who report suspected abuse which is based upon observation or disclosure.
- You will be asked to complete a Special Olympics Incident Report as soon as possible. Special Olympics Maryland will contact the police and/or Child/Adult Protective Services.

Special Olympics Maryland will immediately suspend the alleged abuser's contact and involvement in all Special Olympics activities until the allegations are investigated. If you are contacted by the media, refer them to the President and CEO of Special Olympics Maryland. Do not comment to the media or anyone else about the alleged incident.