Title: Examining the Impact of Participation in Young Athletes on Families of Children with Intellectual Disabilities

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Introduction: The Special Olympics Young Athletes (YA) program engages children with and without intellectual disabilities between the ages of 2 and 7 in sport and play-based learning, with a focus on activities that are important to mental and physical growth. YA introduces basic sport skills, such as running, kicking and throwing and can be conducted in schools, communities and homes. Research conducted by Special Olympics and its partners has found that the YA program improves the motor skills of young children in both U.S. and international contexts (Favazza, Siperstein, Zeisel, Odom & Moskowitz, 2011). Research has shown that participating in Special Olympics inspires joy, improve self-confidence, bolster family relationships and improve parents’ expectations of their children with ID (Kersh & Siperstein, 2008). What is missing however, is a clear understanding of the impact on families who participate in YA. There is anecdotal evidence from teachers indicating that participation in YA raises parent expectations of their young children (Favazza & Siperstein, 2006). In the current study, we present data from a family survey designed to measure parent attitudes and expectations before and after participation in the YA program. This represents a first step in understanding the impact of the YA program on the family.

Method: 961 parents or caregivers across 11 countries and 87 Young Athletes sites completed the family survey and reflected on their attitudes before and after their child participated in YA. As part of this survey, the following eight statements were included for parents or caregivers to consider: I have access to resources that help me support my child, I am hopeful for my child’s future, I have high expectations of my child, I am comfortable talking with other people about my child, I am comfortable doing activities with my child, My friends and family are comfortable interacting with my child, My child is comfortable interacting with other children, and My child is accepted by others in our local community. Parents or caregivers were asked to indicate where they agreed, disagreed, or were not sure about each statement.

Additionally, each site coordinator provided information on duration (less than 8 weeks, 8-12 weeks, or more than 12 weeks) and frequency (more than 3 times per week, 1-2 times per week, or 1-3 times per month) of Young Athlete activities.

Result: McNemar’s chi-square for within-subjects designs were used to assess change in the proportion of agreement for each of the eight statements. Results across the whole sample indicated that the proportion of agreement for all eight statements increased significantly from pre- to post-participation in Young Athletes at p < .001. Specifically, after participating in YA parents or caregivers agreed that they had access to more resources (53% to 88%), were more hopeful for my child’s future (69% to 88%), had high expectations of their child (50% to 68%), were more comfortable talking with other people about their child (71% to 88%), were more comfortable doing activities with their child (71% to 89%), agreed that friends and family were more comfortable interacting with their child (69% to 85%), agreed that their child was more comfortable interacting with other children (66% to 84%), and agreed that their child was accepted by others in their local community (66% to 86%). There were no differences among regions or countries.

Preliminary results also suggest that the impact of YA participation was greatest when program duration was more than 8 weeks (either 8-12 weeks or greater than 12 weeks) and when activities were conducted more than three times per week. Full results will be presented at the conference.

Discussion: These results demonstrate that as a whole, parents or caregivers reported positive impacts of participating in YA on both their own attitudes towards their child and attitudes of those in their community towards their child. It is particularly noteworthy that there were no differences among countries given the different cultural and educational contexts that exist globally. Additionally, preliminary results suggest but that these impacts were greatest when the YA program was longer and more frequent. Implications for YA programming and family participation will be discussed.

References/Citations: