

Special Olympics Unified Sports Research

[SUMMARY PAGE](#)

WHY UNIFIED SPORTS?

While it is important for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) to have social experiences with their peers, oftentimes these experiences are elusive. For example, adolescents with ID are more likely to participate in activities with their family or on their own than with their peers.^{1,2} Research suggests that organized social activities, such as sports, may be necessary to facilitate social involvement of people with ID in their communities.² **Unified Sports provides people with and without ID the opportunity to play on the same sports team, creating a space for friendships, physical activity, and fun.** Research on Unified Sports has found that Unified Sports athletes (participants with ID) experience improved social competence and social inclusion while decreasing problem behaviors.^{3,4} Moreover, Unified Sports partners (participants without ID) improve their attitudes toward people with ID as a result of participating in the program.³ In order to build upon this impact, Special Olympics continues to conduct research and evaluation to identify best practices and demonstrate the impact of Unified Sports on athletes, partners, and the community.

“I can tell you this, there aren’t really many opportunities at all for her to leave and have a fun day like that, and be with peers, whether Unified friends or other special needs peers. It doesn’t happen at all. ...I think, something like this, to look forward to, having a feeling of activity of her own, friends of her own, that sort of thing, there’s no question in my mind that that’s a positive experience.”

—Parent⁵

1 Hall, L. J., & Strickett, T. (2002). Peer relationships of preadolescent students with disabilities who attend a separate school. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 37*(4), 399-409.

2 Abells, D., Burbidge, J., & Minnes, P. (2008). Involvement of adolescents with intellectual disabilities in social and recreational activities. *Journal on Developmental Disabilities, 14*(2), 88-94.

3 Özer, D., Baran, F., Aktop, A., Nalbant, S., Ağlamış, E., & Hutzler, Y. (2012). Effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disability. *Research in developmental disabilities, 33*(1), 229-239.

4 McConkey, R., Dowling, S., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2012). Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 57*(10), 923-935.

5 Nanavati, J. (2015). *Unified Sports in School Settings: Evidence of Impact*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics International.

IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

Unified Sports is a key Special Olympics program, and over the course of the past five years it has seen tremendous growth. In 2016, over **1,397,000 people with and without ID participated in the program**, a 14.7% growth rate from the previous year.⁶ Athletes and partners benefit from Unified Sports in a number of ways. First and foremost, Unified Sports is a fun, challenging experience for athletes and partners that allows them to improve their sports skills and be part of a team.

- Participants enjoy their experience in Unified Sports. An [evaluation in Europe](#) found that large numbers of athletes (54%) and partners (40%) thought that **having fun was one of the most important aspects of Unified Sports**.⁷ In the United States, having fun was one of the areas athletes and partners liked the most about participating in the program.⁸
- Unified Sports creates a place where athletes and partners strive to seek personal bests. An evaluation in Europe found that **partners reported feeling challenged** all (43%) or some (52%) of the time during training.⁷
- Participants improve their sports skills. Unified football athletes and partners in Europe **reported that their football skills improved** a lot (46%) or a little (46%).⁹ A 2015 Special Olympics survey conducted into 6 countries found that 91% of athletes and partners felt that their sports skills improved.⁵
- Preliminary research suggests that **Unified Sports can improve physical fitness among participants**. One study found that both athletes and partners improved their physical fitness after participating in Unified Sports when compared to those who did not participate.¹⁰

Similar to traditional Special Olympics sports, **Unified Sports also helps athletes and partners build confidence and self-esteem.**

- 82% of family members in the United States reported that athletes improved their self-esteem/self-confidence after participating in Unified Sports.⁸
- Unified athletes and partners in Europe also experienced improvements in self-esteem. Athletes reported feeling a lot (53%) or a little (34%) better about themselves after participating in the program. Similarly, 38% of partners felt a lot better about themselves, while 30% felt a little better.⁷

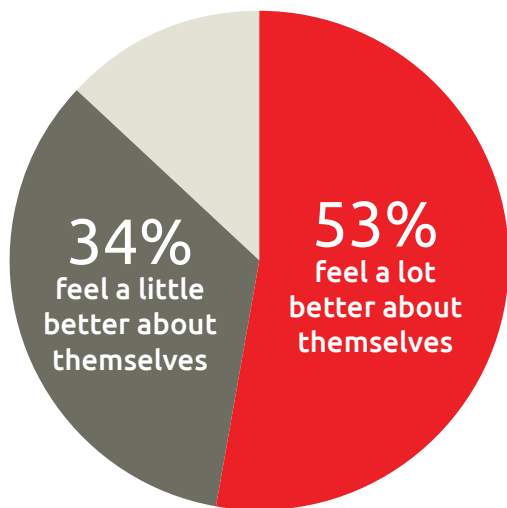
6 2016 Reach Report (2016). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

7 Norins, J., Haradan, C., Parker, R. (2006). *Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc. & University of Massachusetts Boston.

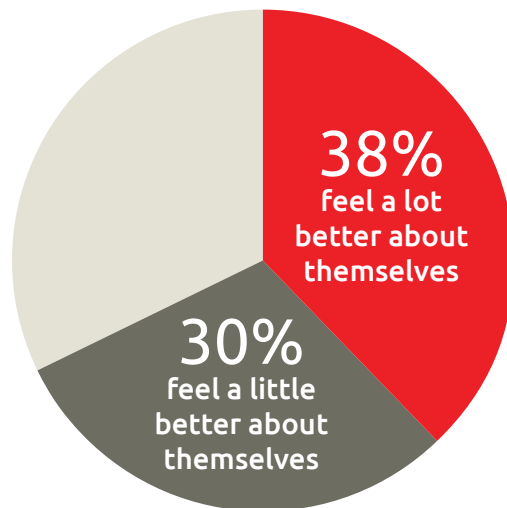
8 Siperstein, G., Hardman, M., Wappett, M., & Clary, L. (2001). *National evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Sports program*. A special report. Washington, DC: University of Massachusetts Boston, University of Utah, & Special Olympics, Inc.

9 Nanavati, J. & Haas, K. (2015). *Unified Sports Evaluation*. Washington, DC: Special Olympics International.

10 Baran, F., Aktop, A., Özer, D., Nalbant, S., Ađlamiş, E., Barak, S., & Hutzler, Y. (2013). The effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports Soccer training program on anthropometry, physical fitness and skilled performance in Special Olympics soccer athletes and non-disabled partners. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 34(1), 695- 709.



Athletes



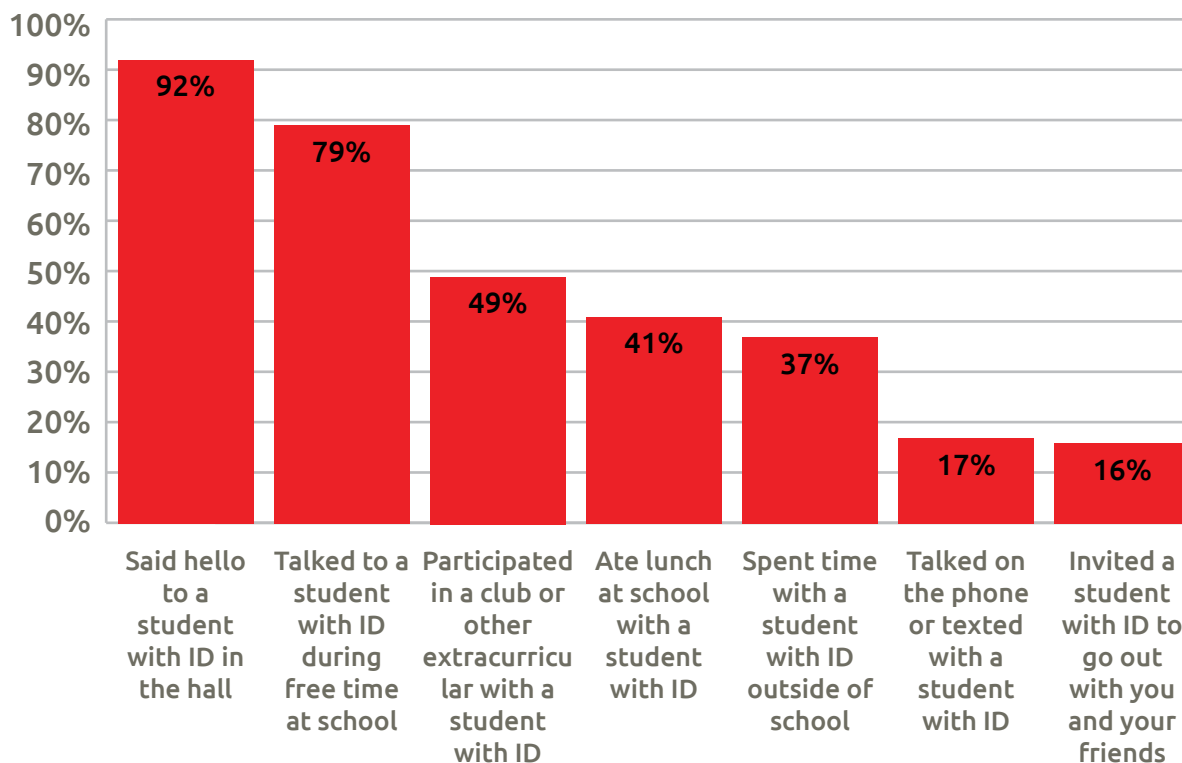
Partners

Through sports, athletes and partners are given the opportunity to spend time together, oftentimes for the first time, and share a common interest and goal. **This supports the development of friendships between athletes and partners as well as social inclusion on the team.** As partners spend more time with athletes, their attitudes and beliefs about athletes begin to shift, paving the way for greater acceptance of all people with ID.

- A study in Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia found that for many of the partners (57%), playing Unified football was also their **first experience interacting with people with ID.** After participating, the majority of partners (79%) reported that their understanding of people with ID improved.⁷
- Oftentimes, **Unified Sports teams socialize outside of practices and competitions, further building friendships and promoting social inclusion.** In a European study, many athletes (41%) and partners (39%) reported that they spent time with teammates outside of training and competitions.⁷ In another Special Olympics survey, 65% of respondents reporting that they did activities together as a team outside of training and competition.⁹

- In a survey conducted by Special Olympics in 6 countries, **48% of partners reported that their closest friend on the team had ID.**⁹
- An [analysis of data on Unified Sports in U.S. schools](#) found that 79% of Unified Sports partners reported talking to a student with ID during free time at school and 41% reported eating lunch with a student with ID. They also held **positive beliefs about classroom inclusion** for students with disabilities.⁵

UNIFIED SPORTS PARTICIPANTS REPORTED INTERACTIONS WITH PEERS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN U.S. SCHOOLS⁵



Building friendships and social inclusion among the team is a key impact of Unified Sports. Evaluations have shown that finding committed partners and creating an environment where there is meaningful involvement of all players is important to building a successful program.⁸ **Coaches also play an important role in this process** by serving as a role model for attitude and behavior toward people with ID, promoting equal and meaningful involvement of all players, and encouraging social interactions between athletes and partners outside of Unified Sports.¹¹

¹¹ Dowling, S., McConkey, R., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2010). Unified gives us a chance: An evaluation of Special Olympics youth unified sports

In addition to being a fun, engaging experience, Unified Sports has a multitude of benefits for athletes and partners. As a result, participants express enthusiasm about the program and a survey conducted by Special Olympics found that **95% of athletes and partners indicated they plan to play Unified Sports again.**⁹ The commitment and excitement about the program demonstrates the value of Unified Sports for people with and without ID around the world.

“...I like how they developed a friendship. And I noticed it after we came back from our first event and I saw kids interacting in the hallways either just saying hi or giving a high five. And normally those kids wouldn’t even talk to each other prior to participating with this unified team.”

— Coach, Special Olympics Florida⁹

CREATING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

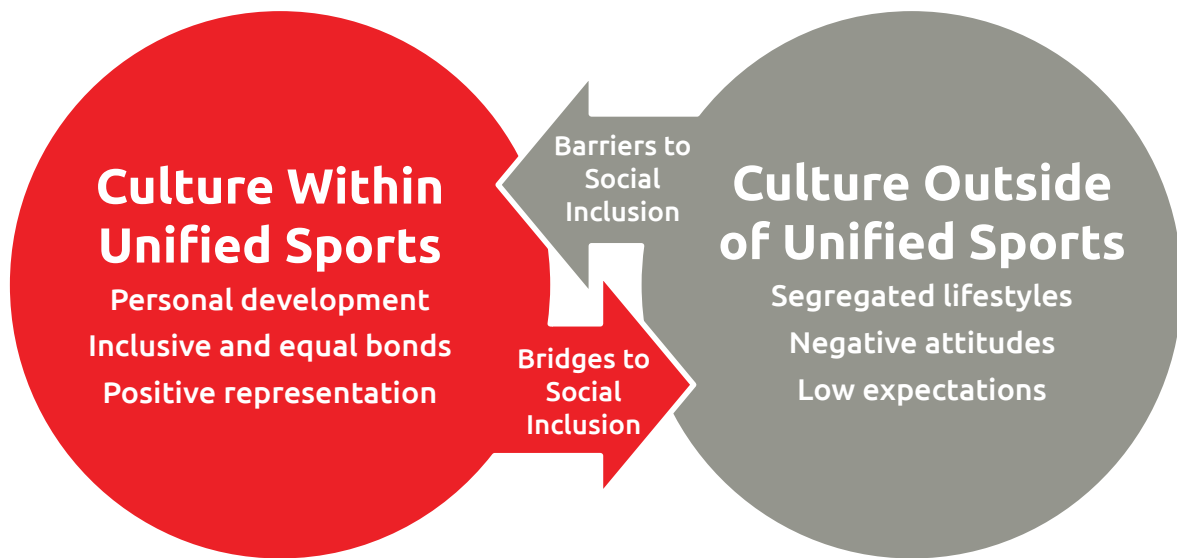
In many communities, playing inclusive sports is thought to be infeasible. According to one study surveying public attitudes, **the vast majority of the public in nine out of ten countries thought people with ID were not capable of playing sports with people without ID.**¹² Unified Sports brings people with ID into the community and highlights their strengths and potential, in stark contrast to the negative stereotypes that are often pervasive.

A [study in Serbia, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and Hungary](#) sought to determine how Unified Sports contributed to social inclusion not only among teams, but in the broader community. It found that Unified Sports creates a culture of inclusion that is embedded in a wider culture of stigma and discrimination. **By consistently challenging the negative perceptions of people with ID and demonstrating their capabilities, Unified Sports creates “bridges to social inclusion” in the community.**¹³

¹² Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

¹³ Dowling, S., McConkey, R., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2010). Unified gives us a chance: An evaluation of Special Olympics youth unified sports programme in Europe/Eurasia. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

UNIFIED SPORTS AS A BRIDGE TO SOCIAL INCLUSION¹²



There are four main elements of Unified Sports that challenge barriers to inclusion in the community. These are:

- 1. Promoting the personal development of athletes and partners.** Developing social and sports skills while focusing on ability, rather than disability.
- 2. Creating inclusive and equal bonds among athletes and partners.** Promoting true partnerships that are positive and inclusive.
- 3. Generating positive perceptions of athletes.** Serving as a platform to inform the community about people with ID.
- 4. Building alliances within the community.** Building parent support/advocacy networks and connecting with local sports organizations, schools, governments, etc. for support.¹³

These processes allow social inclusion to occur within Unified teams and in the broader community. Evaluations have shown that Unified Sports has in fact helped athletes enhance their involvement in the community. According to one Special Olympics survey, as a result of participating in Unified Sports, 83% of participants reported that they do more activities in their community.⁹ Through the power of sport, Unified Sports connects people with and without ID, building bridges to social inclusion in the broader community and breaking down stigmas.

“This team includes everyone, we play as one, we work together, that is the best way for Unified teams.”

—Unified partner, Ukraine¹

KEY FINDINGS:

SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED SPORTS RESEARCH



82% of family members in the United States reported that athletes improved their self-esteem/self-confidence after participating in Unified Sports.⁸



A survey in five countries found that 85% of athletes reported exercising more every week as a result of participating in Unified Sports.⁹



94% of athletes and teammates say Unified Sports made them healthier and 91% of athletes and teammates report Unified Sports improved their sports skills



Coaches mentioned improved confidence, enhanced communication (including previously mute athletes talking in order to communicate with teammates!) and improved social inclusion



After participating in Unified football, the majority of partners (79%) reported that their understanding of people with ID improved.⁷



Unified football athletes and partners in Europe reported that their football skills improved a lot (46%) or a little (46%).⁷



In 2016, over 1,379,000 people with and without ID participated in Unified Sports.⁶



In a survey conducted by Special Olympics, 48% of partners reported that their closest friend on the team had ID.⁹



By consistently challenging the negative perceptions of people with ID and demonstrating their capabilities, Unified Sports creates “bridges to social inclusion” in the community.¹¹