

Preventing Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse of Special Olympics Athletes

SPECIAL OLYMPICS MISSION

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for all children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.

I N S P I R E
G R E A T N E S S



Special Olympics

Massachusetts

WHAT VOLUNTEERS NEED TO KNOW

As a Special Olympics Massachusetts volunteer, your efforts are critical to achieve the Special Olympics Massachusetts mission and assure that all athletes have a positive, safe and rewarding experience in Special Olympics.

These guidelines are designed to protect athletes and volunteers by providing information on how to prevent emotional, sexual and physical abuse of athletes. Please take a moment to review this information carefully and ask your local coordinator if you have any questions.

PREVENTING PHYSICAL ABUSE OF ATHLETES

- Do not use corporal punishment including spanking, hitting, slapping, or other forms of physical discipline. Any discipline techniques used should be constructive and positive.
- Do not withhold water or food from athletes as a form of punishment. To avoid dehydration, water should be available for athletes during practice sessions, especially strenuous ones, and during competitions.
- Only medications that have been prescribed by an athlete's physician should be dispensed to that athlete, and then only as indicated on his or her consent form signed by either a parent or legal custodian.
- Check to make sure water for bathing is not too hot.

PREVENTING EMOTIONAL ABUSE OF ATHLETES

- Do not use profanity or otherwise curse at athletes for their performance or behavior during competitions or practices. Special Olympics athletes are not to be threatened or intimidated for any purpose including attempts at improving athletic performance or for controlling behavior.
- Treat all athletes with courtesy and respect.
- Do not use demeaning nicknames or other negative or abusive language.

PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE OF ATHLETES

- There should be at least two volunteers or staff members present to supervise activities such as changing into team uniforms, showering, and using toilet facilities.
- When speaking privately with an athlete, volunteers should find a place out of earshot, but within sight, of others for their conference.
- Hugs between Special Olympics athletes and volunteers should be open (not secretive) and be respectful of limits set by the athlete.
- Avoid touching areas normally covered by swimsuits: 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 open to observation by others).
- If an athlete attempts to initiate inappropriate physical contact with a volunteer or staff member, the volunteer or staff member should identify the objectionable behavior, explain that it makes the volunteer feel uncomfortable, and suggest more appropriate ways to communicate feelings such as "high fives" or handshakes.
- When Special Olympics events require athletes to stay overnight, the gender and developmental levels of the athletes should be taken into consideration when making room assignments. Male and female athletes require separate accommodations. Athletes should also be assigned sleeping rooms with athletes of similar size and intellectual functioning.
- It is always helpful to have a sleeping chart, clearly marking which athletes are sleeping where.
- Hall monitors should be assigned to protect athletes anytime they are in their sleeping quarters. Hall monitors ensure that athletes are in their assigned rooms and that unauthorized individuals are kept out of athletes' sleeping quarters.
- Special Olympics staff, with the assistance of volunteers, should know where athletes are at all times when 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.

IDENTIFYING THE SIGNS OF ABUSE

In addition to statements by the athlete, there may be physical or behavioral indicators of abuse. Physical indicators include questionable injuries such as bruises, burns or lacerations in the soft tissue areas of an athlete's body. Bruises change color during the healing process and the colors indicate different stages of healing, thereby indicating that the injuries happened on more than one occasion. Injuries to genital areas may indicate sexual abuse: for example, cigarette burns on the inside of the upper leg or on the buttocks. Tether marks or rope burns and abrasions caused by tying wrists, ankles or neck are also indicators of probable abuse.

Some athletes' injuries are a consequence of athletic competition, and the location of the injury may indicate whether the injury was due to abuse or competition. Injuries that happen due to athletic competition are most likely to be on the shins, knees, elbows, etc. They are less likely to be on the abdomen, across the back, on the backs of the legs, or on facial cheeks. If you notice that an athlete has been injured, ask how the injury happened. Could the incident described by the athlete have resulted in the injury you observed?

REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

When an athlete discloses possible abuse to you or you have reasonable grounds to suspect that an athlete has been abused, you should immediately notify your Program's Executive Director (ED) or another appropriate Special Olympics staff member if the ED is not available. Inform the person you notify of the actions you have taken to protect the athlete. If you cannot reach Special Olympics, you should report your suspicions to the appropriate protective services agency. In addition, the athlete should be encouraged to report the abuse to the proper authorities. The priority is to protect the athlete from further abuse. In addition, if you are a "mandatory reporter" under your state's law, you must satisfy the reporting requirements related to your profession in addition to making a report to Special Olympics. If you are unfamiliar with the mandatory reporting requirements and/or are unsure as to what specific actions to take, please contact your local Special Olympics Program.