



***Special
Olympics***
Ontario

Athlete Empowerment

**A Resource Guide
for Communities**

Introduction

Special Olympics Ontario is committed to ensuring that athletes participate in all key areas of the organization through athlete empowerment initiatives. Athlete empowerment is not a new concept to Special Olympics Ontario. In fact, supporting athlete empowerment initiatives simply expands Special Olympics Ontario's commitment to athlete development. In 1965, Frank Hayden proved through research that individuals with intellectual disabilities have the ability to reach optimal levels of health and deserve opportunities to participate in sports. From the beginning, Special Olympics Ontario has been committed to helping athletes reach excellence in sports. Empowerment is meant to develop the inner excellence of an athlete's character by giving them the opportunity to foster their drive for self-achievement.

All across the province, athletes are demonstrating athletic ability combined with leadership skills. Whether volunteering at school competitions, as athlete committee members, as community council representatives, as volunteer coaches or as public speakers, they are proving that people with intellectual disabilities are vibrant, active, talented members of the Special Olympic clubs and communities in which they participate.

The purpose of this booklet is to educate communities on athlete empowerment. Included in this manual is a definition of athlete empowerment as well as a description of initiatives which Ontario Special Olympics is committed to. Through this manual, we are providing you with empowerment tools to increase opportunities for athlete empowerment in your community

One of the keys to successfully encouraging athlete empowerment is for volunteers and ambassadors to embrace the idea of empowerment and to make athlete empowerment a priority at all practices, competitions and all community meetings. You have to live empowerment philosophies everyday as it is something you have to continually work on.

Now is the time to celebrate athletes' accomplishments and to recognize your community's good work! This manual was created to provide you with tools to expand current initiatives. Much of the information in this manual has evolved in collaboration with Special Olympics International. Athlete empowerment is a world-wide initiative, encouraging and recognizing the talents and contributions of Special Olympians everywhere!



What is Empowerment?

Empowerment can be defined as feeling, acting and being in control of one's own life as much as possible, and involves having the power to make choices and decisions about your own life.

Special Olympics Ontario wants to foster an environment where all athletes feel, act, and are empowered! Each and every athlete should have the utmost confidence in their capacities and our Athlete Leadership Committees' goal is to ensure that athletes feel that they can have confidence in their abilities, and show them how they already do!

How does empowerment apply to everyday life?

Athlete Empowerment Components

- The athlete is personally responsible for his/her actions
- The athlete is able to speak up for him/herself
- The athlete feels that they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
- The athlete can actively problem-solve and make decisions
- The athlete feels they are an active participant in their own life

Empowerment within Special Olympics Ontario

Special Olympics Ontario provides a supportive environment for athletes to realize their goals of empowerment. For example, Special Olympics Ontario provides opportunities for an athlete to realize empowerment by:

- Experiencing greater control over their lives
- Allowing athletes to provide critical feedback on sports training
- Putting their thoughts into action
- Interacting within the Special Olympics Ontario environment in an empowering manner
- Exercising personal responsibility within the Special Olympics Ontario community

But how does this empower?



SOO Athletes Experience Greater Control over their Lives

Special Olympics Ontario, through sports training, aids athletes in their efforts to take control of their own lives. Empowered athletes make choices that affect them physically and emotionally. Empowered athletes make decisions that affect their participation in sport at all levels, in practice and during competitions. For example, empowered athletes make choices about attending practices regularly, or who to pass the ball to in a basketball game, and why. Taking control involves making choices about eating healthy foods, and properly warming up and stretching before a game.

Athletes Provide Critical Feedback on Programming By having Athlete Ambassadors in each region, as part of the Athlete Leadership Committee, Special Olympics Ontario athletes will have a direct empowerment link across the province. They will have an established network for getting questions across communities and relaying information back.

SOO Athletes Put their Thoughts into Action

The Special Olympics Ontario oath, "Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt," is a great example of empowerment in action. Empowered athletes know what it takes to be a winner. While medals are won through hard fought competition and athletic commitment, there are many other ways to win. All SOO Athletes are winners when they follow their oath. They have the power to be winners in the truest sense through sportsmanship and believing in their oath, "If I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt". When athletes follow their oath, they try their best and encourage/respect their fellow athletes in training and participating. Our athletes have been recognized internationally because they embody this oath. They truly support each other and play sports the way sport is meant to be played, with passion, courage and dedication.



SOO Athletes Interact within the SOO Environment in an Empowering Manner

Empowerment is determined by the relationship between an individual and his/her environment. Special Olympics Ontario encourages the continuing empowerment of athletes through a supportive environment. It is important that athletes understand their rights within Special Olympics Ontario.

An Athlete Rights and Responsibilities document has been created by athletes for athletes. It is important that Athlete Ambassadors are well read in this area because it is a key empowerment tool for athletes in communities. These Rights and Responsibilities are included below this section.

SOO Athletes Exercise Personal Responsibility within the Special Olympics Community

The last part of empowerment is accepting and taking personal responsibility for your actions and behaviour. Rights never exist without balancing responsibilities. Every individual with an intellectual disability has the right to join Special Olympics Ontario. Every member of SOO has the responsibility to uphold the athlete oath. You cannot have one without the other. As ambassadors, you have to explain and help maintain this balance.

→ Take a look at the **Athlete Rights and Responsibilities**. You will find that they are fair and the responsibilities are balanced equally. Athlete empowerment is about sharing power. As athletes realize the power they have, they will also be held accountable with responsibilities. Athletes created these responsibilities along with their rights.



A Guide to Assist Athletes in Knowing their Rights and Responsibilities as a Special Olympics Ontario Athlete

Special Olympics Ontario ATHLETES RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

1. I have the RIGHT to belong to Special Olympics Ontario (SOO). It is my RESPONSIBILITY to uphold its Oath & be dedicated to my sport & my team.
2. I have the RIGHT to be treated fairly & equally. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to know the rules, follow the rules & accept the consequences of ALL my actions.
3. I have the RIGHT to speak & be heard. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to communicate with others respectfully, & not to use any foul language or unkind words or gestures.
4. I have the RIGHT to a qualified & dedicated coach who will respect my rights as an athlete. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to work together with my coach, & respect his or her rights as a coach.
5. I have the RIGHT to enjoy my sport in a safe place & in a safe way. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to tell my coach, or another person I trust, if I feel unsafe.
6. I have the RIGHT to be united in sportsmanship & fair play. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to treat others fairly, encourage sportsmanship & fair play.
7. I have the RIGHT to bring to events my personal items & my sports equipment. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to look after my sports equipment & report any theft or damage of my sports equipment to someone I trust. I will not take another person's property.
8. I have the RIGHT to be respected on & off the field, or wherever I play my sport. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to respect others on & off the field.
9. I have the RIGHT to be the best I can be & to receive recognition for my successes. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to encourage & support others to do their best.
10. I have the RIGHT to win, & if I cannot win, be brave in the attempt. It is my RESPONSIBILITY to have fun & participate in the sport of my choice in a safe & positive way.



Encouraging Athlete Voices on Teams

Try these ideas to make certain athletes have a chance to speak and that you are making a concerted effort to hear.

TOP FIVE WAYS OF ENCOURAGING EMPOWERMENT:

1. Ask questions and listen to the answers
 - What I like about my practices ...
 - What I do not like about my practices ...
 - What I like the most about Special Olympics ...
 - What I do not like about Special Olympics ...
 - These are the things I do/not have control over ...
2. Ask athletes to pretend they are the coach, & ask them to complete the following sentence: "If I was the coach, I would ..."
3. Adopt a suggestion box -- have an athlete randomly choose a topic from the box, and discuss this issue at each practice
4. Encourage athletes to lead warm-ups...Ensure each athlete lead an exercise/activity.
5. Review Athletes Rights & Responsibilities Code



Encouraging Athlete Voices in Communities

Athlete Speakers

SOO communities are training athlete speakers and creating Athlete Speakers' Bureaus. Athlete speakers "speak from experience" at schools, group homes, special events, to sponsors and volunteers. They let people know about Special Olympics Ontario and all the great things we have to offer. By being given the chance to be heard by individuals who are listening, athletes become empowered to do so in other aspects of their lives. An empowered athlete that believes in the magic of Special Olympics should be given the opportunity to share that, and that opportunity comes from Athlete Speaker training.



Athlete Committees

The Athlete Leadership Committee in Ontario has 12 athletes representing each region in the Province whose purpose is to build stronger athlete voice in the Special Olympics Organization empower their fellow athletes to do the same. Included in their 2009-2010 initiatives are an athlete website and online community, a newsletter, and an athlete hotline for means of appeal, information, and support. The athlete members report information and athlete concerns to SOO and then report back to the community. As well, Community Council's across Ontario have been inviting athletes to attend their meetings to represent the athlete population and share their views on the organization, which is very beneficial as much knowledge is gained about how Special Olympics services are being delivered.

Ready to test your empowerment skills?

A. I don't really know what is going on but the coach says, "Don't worry. I'll let you know when it is time."

1. Is the situation empowering or disempowering for athletes?
2. Athlete Empowerment (Which elements of the following five are present in this situation?)
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
3. If the five elements are not present, how can you turn this situation into an opportunity where all five are occurring?
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
4. And finally, is your solution balanced?
 - a. Personal control, competence, and respect
 - b. A shared relationship between the individual athlete and his/her team, coach,
 - c. Mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding



B. I want to have pizza for every practice. I've identified my wants – now let's see if the coach listens.

1. Is the situation empowering or disempowering for athletes?
2. Athlete Empowerment (Which elements of the following five are present in this situation?)
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
3. If the five elements are not present, how can you turn this situation into an opportunity where all five are occurring?
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
4. And finally, is your solution balanced?
 - a. Personal control, competence, and respect
 - b. A shared relationship between the individual athlete and his/her team, coach,
 - c. Mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding



C. I can only show up for practice once every two weeks because I work. The coach says that I can't have a uniform.

1. Is the situation empowering or disempowering for athletes?
2. Athlete Empowerment (Which elements of the following five are present in this situation?)
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
3. If the five elements are not present, how can you turn this situation into an opportunity where all five are occurring?
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
4. And finally, is your solution balanced?
 - a. Personal control, competence, and respect
 - b. A shared relationship between the individual athlete and his/her team, coach,
 - c. Mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding



Answers to A

A. I don't really know what is going on but the coach says, "Don't worry. I'll let you know when it is time."

1. Is the situation empowering or disempowering for athletes?
- Disempowering
2. Athlete Empowerment (Which elements of the following five are present in this situation?)
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
NO
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
NO
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
NO
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
NO
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
NO
3. If the five elements are not present, how can you turn this situation into an opportunity where all five are occurring?
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
- To be personally responsible a person needs to have information. Give athletes a written schedule of events so they can plan around other activities in their lives
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
- They have spoken up but their request was not listened to so they probably will not speak up again. Acknowledge that you have heard what the problem is and suggest a strategy, or better yet, allow the athlete to suggest a strategy for resolving the problem.



- c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - It is difficult to feel valuable when you are not listened to – acknowledgement helps someone feel valuable
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - It is impossible to problem solve if you have no control – decide on delivery mechanisms together.
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
 - It stops being your own life if you are entirely reliant on someone else for information. By addressing this question, athletes regain control
4. And finally, is your solution balanced?
- a. Personal control, competence, and respect
 - Athlete has control, you are respected as the person who delivers the schedule. The entire team has information, and the athlete understands their responsibility to keep on top of the information you have given them
 - b. A shared relationship between the individual athlete and his/her team, coach,
 - All team members should have the same information. Team members should be encouraged to share this information with each other. Written information often helps to avoid misunderstandings.
 - c. Mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding
 - The situation is respectful



Answers to B

B. I want to have pizza for every practice. I've identified my wants – now let's see if the coach listens.

1. Is the situation empowering or disempowering for athletes?
 - The athlete is very empowered but they are not showing responsibility – to let the athlete make irresponsible demands is disempowering for the coach and athlete

2. Athlete Empowerment (Which elements of the following five are present in this situation?)
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
NO
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
YES but the coach needs to as well
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
YES but may not be recognizing needs of other
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
Here is a chance to test this!
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
YES

3. If the five elements are not present, how can you turn this situation into an opportunity where all five are occurring?
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
 - The coach can remind the athlete to show respect for each other – coaches give sport instructions, they are not responsible for feeding athletes or lending them money
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
 - The rights and responsibilities exists so coaches can speak up as well without getting angry or frustrated – they can point to the document and say "These are your rights. Pizza is not a right."



- c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - As an athlete, I need to solve my want for my own pizza
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
 - To truly be in control of your life, you must accept personal responsibilities and be able to problem solve.
4. And finally, is your solution balanced?
- a. Personal control, competence, and respect
 - b. A shared relationship between the individual athlete and his/her team, coach,
 - c. Mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding
 - The situation should be resolved so the athlete understands the coach's role. The coach makes it clear that s/he understands that the athlete really likes pizza. Pizza will be on the menu for special events, but the rest of the time the athlete will have to buy it for themselves. The situation is respectful.



Answers to C

C. I can only show up for practice once every two weeks because I work. The coach says that I can't have a uniform.

1. Is the situation empowering or disempowering for athletes?
- **Disempowering**

2. Athlete Empowerment (Which elements of the following five are present in this situation?)
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
Not sure from question
 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
More talk is necessary; a balance between being fair to the team and the situation the athlete is in needs to be made
 - c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
More discussion is needed
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
The coach and athlete need to consider all of the options
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
No, not unless they are heard out and understood

3. If the five elements are not present, how can you turn this situation into an opportunity where all five are occurring?
 - a. The individual is personally responsible for his/ her actions
- **If the athlete has to work and there are no other teams in the area, perhaps s/he can practice individually. They can have certain skills to work on. If it is clear that the athlete is following through with their individual practices, they can earn the right to their uniform**

 - b. The individual is able to speak up for him/herself
- **More talk is necessary, a balance between being fair to the team and to the athlete needs to be made**



- c. The individual feels they are a person with valuable thoughts & opinions
 - d. The individual can actively problem-solve and make decisions
 - The coach and athlete need to consider all the alternatives (another sports team, change of work schedule or individual practice for the athlete)
 - e. The individual feels they are an active participant in their own life
 - Only if they are able to have a quality discussion
4. And finally, is your solution balanced?
- a. Personal control, competence, and respect
 - b. A shared relationship between the individual athlete and his/her team, coach,
 - c. Mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding
 - By talking and problem solving, a solution is reached where the athlete can make a choice between different alternatives. They are a team member with responsibilities, of which they are fulfilling. The situation is respectful.

