



Tips on How to Interact with Special Olympics Athletes

As a volunteer, you may not have much experience working with children and adults with intellectual disabilities. Here are some tips that should help you feel more comfortable and knowledgeable in your volunteer role.

People with intellectual disabilities are more like you than they are different.

Working with people who have intellectual disabilities requires no specialized training. They may learn at a slower pace or have a limited capacity to learn. Chances are they like and dislike many of the same things you do. If you are unsure about how to respond to an athlete, you should respond as you would to anyone else.

Treat athletes according to their ages.

A common misconception is that Special Olympics athletes need to be talked to as if they are young children. They are not all “kids,” in fact roughly half of Special Olympics Indiana athletes are over the age of 21.

Most athletes you meet will be friendly and appreciate your attention.

The best way to interact with athletes is to be friendly, maintain eye contact, listen carefully, and show interest in what they have to say.

When congratulating athletes, you may wish to tell them they did a good job, offer a handshake, a high-five, or a pat on the back—whatever is comfortable for the athlete and you.

You should not tolerate Special Olympics athletes who act inappropriately just as you would not tolerate it from anyone else. Chaperones, coaches, and games officials should be called upon to handle any problems.

Be yourself!

Special Olympics athletes really appreciate being treated like everyone else. They don't want pity or exaggerated praise. Your normal voice and honest encouragement is the best way to show your support and respect for their efforts and achievements.

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