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Prospective Examination of Special Olympics Sport Retention in Ontario

The overall goal of the current research is to understand the factors that lead to sport participation for Canadian youth with intellectual disabilities (ID). We examined sport participation of youth with ID in the largest Multisport Service Organization for individuals with ID in Canada: Special Olympics (SO). More specifically, this project aimed to (1) determine the characteristics that are predictive of involvement in SO, and (2) identify the characteristics that are predictive of retention in SO over time. We originally surveyed 498 parents of SO athletes in 2012, and then examined who was registered as an active athlete in 2015. We compared athletes who were active in 2015 to those who were not active in 2015 in their 2012 survey information, including demographic and clinical characteristics, sport involvement, access to resources, experiences in sport. Athletes who did not remain active had lower levels of positive sport experiences and coach-athlete relationship scores, and less access to resources to enable their participation in sport. They did not differ with respect to clinical characteristics, level of ability, demographics, or social and community participation outside of SO.

Research methods

We invited all parents of athletes registered in Special Olympics (SO) in 2012 to participate in a survey. Youth 11 to 21 years of age and their parents were recruited from SO Ontario, which has the greatest active youth programming in the country (with 16,000 registered athletes overall). We will target youth across Ontario (rural, suburban, and urban areas). The broad age range is purposeful, as it has been identified as the greatest growth area for SO, and consequently for understanding youth sport participation more generally. Inclusion criteria for youth consist of having a diagnosis of an ID by a registered health professional (Psychologist, Physician). We collected in 2012: Demographic Variables and Involvement in Sport, Adaptive Behaviour, Mental Health, and Parent Support of Physical Activity. We then examined which of these athletes remained registered in SO in 2015, and compared those who were registered from those who were not, in terms of the information collected in 2012. We obtained some initial information from 498 athletes in 2012, and after screening to ensure the presence of an intellectual disability, being registered in community programs (rather than only a school program), and having sufficient information to ensure the potential for a match between 2012 and later registration lists, we obtained a final sample of 345 athletes.

Research results

Approximately 10% of 2012 athletes were no longer registered in 2015 (inactive athletes). In terms of 2012 variables, inactive athletes were less likely to have participated in non-sport Special Olympics events, such as parties or dinners, and participated less frequently in sport than athletes who remained registered. Inactive athletes also had lower ratings on friendship quality in SO, on overall positive experiences in sport, and on the athlete-coach relationship, and less access to environmental supports to participate in SO, than athletes who remained registered. There was no difference in athlete clinical characteristics, such as their diagnoses,

adaptive or maladaptive behaviour, or mental health. There was also no difference in demographics (e.g. age, gender, location) or in the degree of parental support for sport participation. These results support that retention in sport is related to proximal and sport specific factors, rather than broader youth or family characteristics.

There are a number of limitations to these findings. We relied solely on parent report, and it would be important and informative to incorporate athlete perspectives. Research examining the level and frequency of sport participation often focuses on high levels of involvement in one particular sport (i.e., sport specialization), whereas this study examined high levels of involvement across all SO sports. A focus on sport specialization among athletes in SO is an important area to investigate further as the outcomes may differ. Future studies could also explore how the type of sport (e.g., team sport versus individual) and level of competition influence outcomes. While longitudinal, 2012 was not a baseline year for athletes – they may have differed in other variables prior to 2012.

Policy implications

This research can have significant social impact for individuals with intellectual disability in Canada. Special Olympics and other sport organizations that aim to improve retention of their athletes with cognitive impairments can aim to make programming improvements to target the variables that we identify as predictive of sport involvement and retention in this population: Refining access to resources for participation, sport experiences, and coach training. Given the global reach of SO, this may also support international sport participation.

Next steps

Our data was based solely on parent report, and results may differ if athlete experiences were collected from athletes themselves. This is a particular challenge with this population, as many individuals with intellectual disability struggle to participate in structured interviews or completing questionnaires developed for individuals without cognitive impairments. Qualitative methods may be better suited to elucidate this information. We also focused on athletes 11-21 years of age, and understanding what predicts retention in younger athletes can further speak to early retention efforts.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Special Olympics Canada
- Special Olympics International