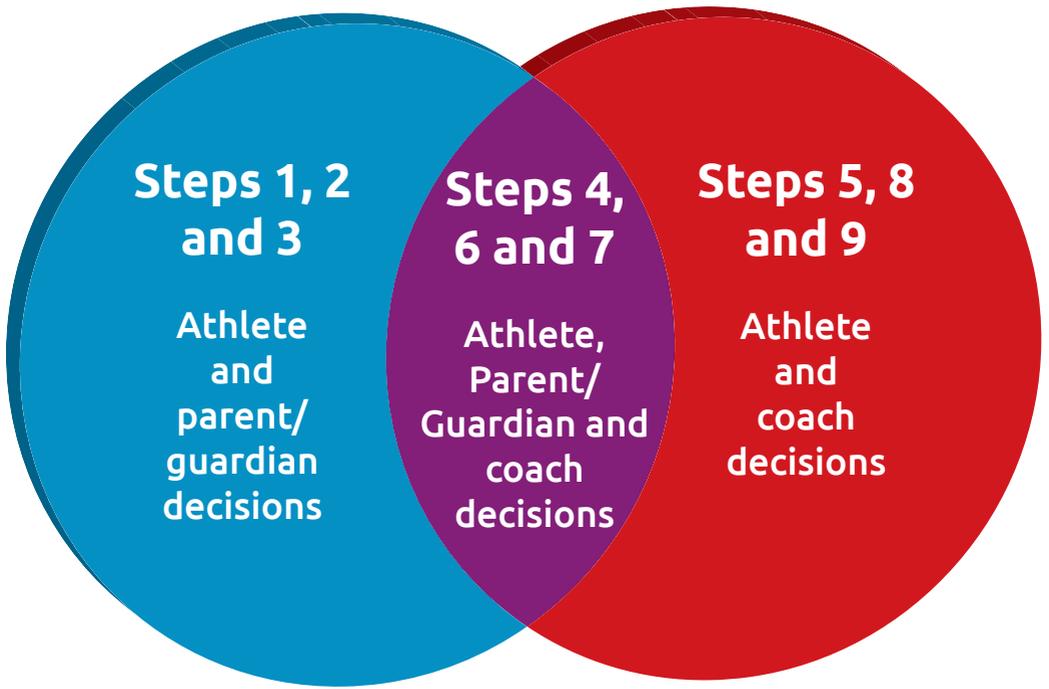




Sport and event selection





When an athlete joins Special Olympics, there are a few really important decisions they will need to make with their parents/carers, and with their coach, prior to their participation. Some of these decisions even need all 3 to talk together. If you take the time at the start of your participation in Special Olympics to carefully consider the options available to you, it is likely that you will get much more from your involvement.

The following is a step by step guide to help athletes, families and coaches make some of these important decisions about which sport to do, which club to join and which event to do in your chosen sport. Some decisions will be all about the athlete and their family, some will rest mainly with the coach and athlete and some will need everyone to work together.

It's a really great idea as a parent/carer to get to know your athlete's coach.

As a coach, getting to know your athletes' families/carers can really help you in ensuring your athletes reach their potential.

Step 1: Choosing a Sport

Athlete and Parent/Guardian

- Is your athlete interested in sport? Are these sports available in your locality?
- Does your athlete have friends in any local clubs?
- Is there availability in your local club for additional athletes? If not, is there something else on offer that your athlete would like to try?

If your athlete is not interested in sport, the priority should be to ensure they have some positive exercise experiences and develop a positive attitude to sport, rather than forcing them into structured sports training.

You must consider what sports your athlete is interested in and if they are offered in your locality. While it could be fantastic to find out your athlete wants to play Table Tennis, this is not something you can make happen without a Table Tennis club in your area, so you must try to match their interests with what is available as best as you can.

Have they got friends in a local club? Spending time with friends is one of the main reasons that young people get involved, and stay involved, in sport. You must also consider whether the clubs in your area are in a position to take on additional athletes in the chosen sport. If the club is at capacity, you may need to consider alternatives.

Step 2: Look at the athlete's previous experience

Athlete and Parent/Guardian

- Has your athlete done any Physical Education or Sport previously?
- Have they tried this sport? Did they enjoy it?
- Do you understand they will need to learn the skills of the sport at club training before they start to compete?
- Is the club coach confident that they can provide appropriate coaching/training to your athlete?



Consider your athlete's previous sports experience. It is important when starting a structured sports programme that athletes have acquired the fundamental movement and sports skills (e.g. jumping, hopping, skipping, throwing, catching, striking etc.), which will help them learn how to perform the more intricate skills of their chosen sport. If you are not sure, the club Head Coach will be able to help identify if your athlete can perform these important skills.

If they have not previously learned these basic skills, they simply will not be able to master all of the necessary elements of their chosen sport. If this is the case, it is important that their club is in a position to provide them with a fun and well structured means of developing these skills before entering structured sports specific training. This does not mean that they will never learn the skills of the sport, but you must be patient and allow them the time to develop fundamental skills first.

If your athlete has perhaps had a less than positive experience of sport in the past, it is really important that you discuss this with their coach so that they can ensure that this is avoided at all costs. As a parent/carer, it is also very important for you to understand that your athlete's coach is the person who will decide when he or she is ready to enter competition. It is important that you respect their judgement on this and discuss any concerns you might have with them.

Step 3: Practicalities

Athlete and Parent/Guardian

- Can your athlete get to and from training alone?
- Will they need your help? If so are you in a position to consistently offer that help?
- Is the sport indoor or outdoor? Are you and your athlete prepared for the elements?
- Is the club's training venue accessible for your athlete?
- Will you be in a position to ensure your athlete has the appropriate clothing and equipment to safely participate?

Where is the club training held? How will the athlete get to and from training? Will they need support to do this? If they are using public transport, will they be able to do this all year round, particularly in the dark winter months? Is training indoor or outdoor? Can you ensure they have appropriate clothing? Is there a changing area if training is outdoors? Is the training venue accessible to your athletes' needs? If not, it is important that you discuss this with the club to see what can be done to help. Remember though, it is the athlete's and his/her parent/carer's responsibility to get to and from training and to provide appropriate training clothing and personal equipment. This is not the responsibility of the club or coach.

Step 4: How many sports? Stages of Development

Athlete, Parent/Guardian and Coach

- How many sports should your athlete be playing?
- Should they still be at a multi-sport stage?
- Would they benefit from a reduced number of complimentary sports? Can you recommend complimentary sports?
- Is your athlete specialising too early? Or doing too many sports?
- Can you recognise this athlete's stage of development?

When starting sport, multi-sport participation is recommended, to help athletes develop a strong base of fundamental sports skills. Having learned these skills, athletes have the best chance of reaching their potential by participating in a variety of sports. This not only provides them with an opportunity to sample different sports to see what they enjoy most, but also allows them the chance to develop a wider range of sports skills.

Up to 11/12 years of age, a multi-sport approach is best for most children. When they have learned these basic sports skills, between 11/12 and 15/16 years of age, they can begin to focus on a smaller number of sports (2-3), ideally sports which compliment one another (e.g. sports requiring similar skills – badminton, table tennis, floorball all need good hand eye coordination; or doing sprints in athletics and swimming).

Ultimately, athletes who really aim to reach their maximum potential should be specialising in a single sport by the age of 15 or 16. For some sports such as gymnastics and swimming, specialisation is recommended at an earlier age. However it is always worth considering the goals of the athlete when deciding whether or not to specialise in a single sport. If your athlete wants to participate in sport on a recreational basis, playing more than one sport is not a bad thing. But it is important to remember that it is very difficult for an athlete to reach their potential in several sports at the same time!



Also remember that each athlete develops at a different rate, so some athletes will not master the fundamentals until much later, others will be ready to participate in structured sport sooner. Each athlete should be supported and facilitated as best as possible to ensure that they have a chance to progress and develop at their own rate. It is important for parents, coaches and athletes, not to get too focused on chronological age or on what other athletes of the same age are doing.

Step 5: Peer support / age appropriateness

Athlete and Coach

- Does the athlete have friends who are already members of the club?
- Does the club have other athletes of a similar age?
- Can your athlete compete in this sport at their age? And if not, do you and he/she understand this?
- Are you trained and experienced in coaching

athletes of this age? If not, can you up skill?

- If they are too young to compete, can you offer sufficient challenge and motivation through training and interclub events?
- Is their chosen sport/event age appropriate?

Sport is often a great way of meeting new people and making friends. In order for this to happen, it can be helpful when the group you are joining has members of a similar age. This is something worth considering when joining a club, along with whether or not there will be competition available for their age group. Coaches should also be looking at the ages of prospective athletes, and considering both whether they can provide suitable coaching to them or whether there will be sufficient activities on offer (be they training, competition or interclub activities) to ensure the athlete is sufficiently challenged and motivated.

- Is there any relevant information about your athlete's ability that you can share with the coach?
- Are there certain things he/she has more of a challenge with?
- What have you observed the athlete to be competent and confident in doing?
- As a coach, do you have some knowledge of stages of development so that you can capitalise on windows of trainability, and deliver appropriate training?
- Can you assess the athlete's current physical condition and where development is required for the chosen event/sport?

Parents/carers will have a wealth of information about what an athlete's strengths and weaknesses are. As a parent/carer, you may have observed that your athlete has more of a challenge with balance activities, or coordination of complex skills. This kind of information can help your athlete's coach identify events that might be particularly suitable and just as importantly, what your athlete may not yet be ready for.

Coaches should have some knowledge of physical development and windows of trainability. These are phases of development where specific capacities can be best developed in youths and adolescents (e.g. strength, coordination, endurance). These phases apply for all individuals regardless of ability or disability, but may occur at slightly varying times depending on the individual – having this knowledge means that you can tailor your training programmes to the athletes’ stages of development. Having knowledge of the stages of development also means that you can help to identify events or activities which are appropriate for your athletes’ stages of development.

You also need to consider whether the athlete has the physical conditioning to participate in a given event, for example, are they strong enough to be able to shot put with correct technique?

Step 6: Solo flyer or team player?

Athlete, Parent/Guardian and Coach

- Does this athlete appear to be more of a team player or an individual?
- How would they manage socially within a team? Would they need the support of a team to retain focus?
- Are there enough athletes of a suitable/similar ability level to make a cohesive team?

Team sports can be a great way of building social skills. They have a real sense of community and team mates learn to share collective responsibility for their training and performance. Remember though that many individual sports have a team element (relays/doubles), but few if any team sports have individual elements – there’s no “I” in Team.

Individual sports can help an athlete develop confidence and trust in their own ability and provide real satisfaction when goals are achieved because the athlete has done it all themselves. The other side of this coin is that there is nowhere to hide when performances do not go according to plan.

Each has its merits and it is important for the athlete, coach and parents/carers to consider the options available in your club/locality and discuss these options together.

Athlete, Parent/Guardian and Coach

Step 7: When it comes to competition

- Can you identify whether your athlete is ready for competition?

When starting to train in a new sport, there is a certain amount which must be learned prior to entering competition. You must understand that your athlete will need time to prepare before he/she is ready for competition. The coach has a crucial role to play in helping the athlete to make the decision as to whether he/she is ready. For more information, check out the Readiness for Competition resources on www.specialolympics.ie

Step 8: Which event?

Athlete and Coach

- Has the athlete developed fundamental movement skills/sports skills? If not, can you help them to develop these skills?
- Can you assess the current skill level of the athlete? And devise a plan to help them progress?
 - Consider their strengths and preferences.
 - Consider their physical condition and the potential for changes in this.
- Think about what events will provide them with competition and a good competition experience.
- Can you coach the skills of this sport and the chosen event to this and other athletes?

Having chosen a sport, it can be equally as difficult to choose an event within that sport. When helping an athlete to make such an important decision, the key things to consider are: what are the athlete’s interests and strengths? What event will provide appropriate challenge? Is the event suitable/offered for their age?



What can you as a coach work on with them? Have you got the skill level/training as a coach to help the athlete reach their potential in this event? Can you up-skill to provide them with more technical input?

Remember, you should only coach to the level of your expertise – if you need more training to help your athletes to progress, contact your regional office to discuss training opportunities with your Regional Development Officer Sport.

Step 9: Keep checking in *Athlete and Coach*

- In order for your athlete to stay interested in their sport/event, it should provide a challenge that is not too great that it is unattainable, nor too little that it is too easily accomplished – are there ways he/she can progress when they accomplish certain goals (e.g. a longer distance, heavier weight, higher divisions?)
- You have a crucial role to play in ensuring that every athlete is challenged.

Sounds simple, but the hard part is that each athlete needs a unique challenge, tailored to his/her ability and potential – are you up for that challenge?

We all want to see athletes achieve and experience success. Together we must work hard to ensure that all of our athletes are appropriately challenged. For ideas on how to ensure this happens, check out the Coaching Tips document. It will give you lots of ideas around preparing athletes for competition, setting goals and lots of other useful tips too.

Medical/Health Status – things can change quickly with our athletes so be prepared to re-evaluate/change events or sport if there is a change in the athlete's health or welfare, while keeping up safe and monitored involvement.

Don't forget to ask your athletes how they feel about training and about their performance. They may have some valuable feedback and insight to share with you!



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