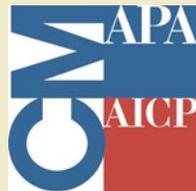


MARCH 5, 2026

Celebrating Trails for People with Intellectual Disabilities:

Programming, Accessibility
and Sensory Guidance from
Special Olympics Athletes
and Programs



Special Olympics Kansas' Trails and Treats Day

Before we begin:

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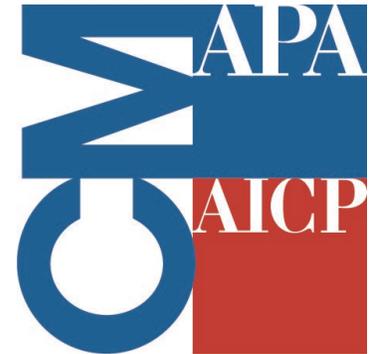
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Celebrating Trails for People with Intellectual Disabilities:
Programming, Accessibility and Sensory Guidance from Special
Olympics Athletes and Programs

Event #9324770

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Celebrate
Trails
Day

powered by rails to trails conservancy

Save the date: April 25, 2026

**Coming soon to
a trail near you!**



By the Numbers:



MORE THAN **33,000 People**
PARTICIPATED IN **275+ Celebrations**
HOSTED BY **375+ Partners**
ACROSS **49 States, Washington, D.C**
AND **Puerto Rico**

Direct Impact:



More than 3.4 million active minutes
spent outside on Celebrate Trails Day in 2025.*



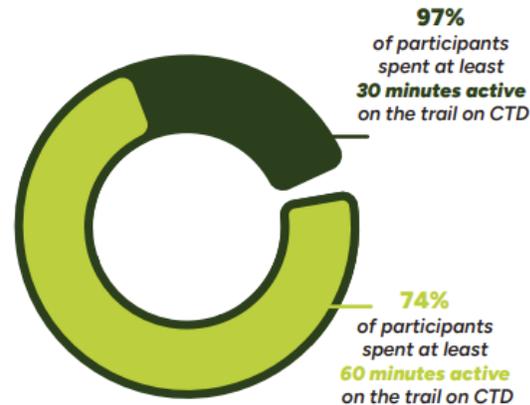
104 active minutes per person
spent outside on Celebrate Trails Day.*



\$1.3 million estimated total spent
for Celebrate Trails Day, with an average of \$41 spent by respondents
who indicated that they visited a business on or to prepare for
Celebrate Trails Day.*



97% of people agree
that using trails makes a difference for their mental health and well-being.



Meet Today's Presenters



Abe Assaad
Special Olympics New Mexico Athlete

Melissa Otterbein, MPH, CHES, ACSM-PAPHS
Director, Fitness and Healthy Lifestyles, Special Olympics International



Charita Boseman, MS
Senior Manager, Health, Special Olympics North America

Jen Hansen
Director, Early Childhood Development, Special Olympics International



Today's Agenda



1. Introduction

- Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD)
- Physical activity and health of people with IDD

2. Stories from Special Olympics Programs

- Programming examples from 5 Programs

3. Strategies to Engage People With and Without IDD in Trail Programming Across the Lifespan

- Sensory and nature-based play
- Built environment

4. Call to Action

- Connect with your Special Olympics Program

5. Q&A

Introduction



Intellectual and Developmental Disability



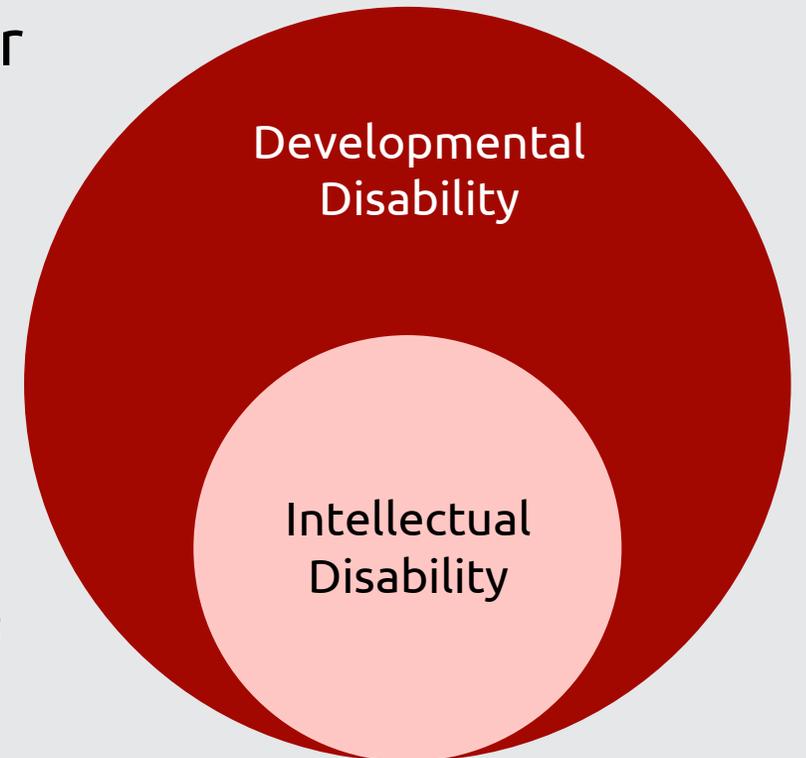
- **Intellectual disability (ID):** Significant limitation in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior starting before age 22

(American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, n.d.)

- **1-3%** of the global population has ID

(Maulik et al., 2011; Patel et al., 2020)

- **Developmental disability:** Broader category of often lifelong challenges that **can be intellectual, physical, or both**



Physical Activity and Health of People With IDD



- Higher rates of **obesity, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, depression and anxiety** (Danon, 2024)
- **Die**, on average, **16 years earlier** than their age-related peers (Heslop, 2016)
- Physical activity *improves* **with appropriate supports** (Brewer & Tchounwou, 2023)

Physical Activity Barriers Experienced by People With IDD



Inaccessible environments:

- Facilities; lack of programming (Jacob et al., 2023)

Psychosocial:

- Lack of social support; injury and falling fears (Savage & Colombo-Dougovito, 2023)

Cost:

- Programming, transit

Caregiver attitudes towards PA:

- Correlated to activity levels of people with ID (Kreinbacher-Bekerle et al., 2022)

Where We Come Together



- Responding to global calls to action for outdoor health and play
- Increasing access to children's opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings-at home, school, in childcare, the community, and nature (2025 Position Statement on Outdoor Play)
- When we play outdoors, we can **create inclusive spaces, reduce social isolation, improve health and wellbeing, and create intergenerational connection and belonging for people with and without IDD.**



Stories from Special Olympics Programs



Special Olympics Kansas



- Guided walks through community spaces, parks, and trails designed to empower individuals with ID
- **Key Features:**
 - Community navigation
 - Access to key resources
 - Safety & independence
- **Impact:**
 - Boosts community awareness
 - Establishes sustainable networks



Special Olympics Northern California

Spring 2026 Walking Club (April 13, 2026 - May 25, 2026)



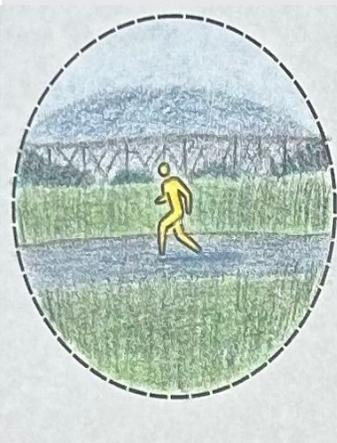
Photos from the 2026 USA Games Training Camp Walk

Virtual & In-Person Engagement:

- Walkers encouraged to submit their outdoor/ local trails walks weekly
- Fun outdoor challenges each week to stay motivated.
- 21 host walk sites registered this season.
 - 10 teams hosting a Trail Day Walk on/around April 25.

Generating Buzz:

- Trail Art Contest for athletes to showcase their creativity.
- Builds excitement for Trail Day and links to prior trail events, like the USA Games Training Camp walk.
- Winning art will be showcased on limited-edition Walking Club Trail Day buttons, sent to in-person teams and virtual participants who pledge to log a walk on a local trail on April 25.



A few submissions from the Trail Art Contest

Special Olympics Vermont



- **SOVT and RTC – Project Liaison**
 - 4 Individuals across Vermont
 - Implement an outdoor program which incorporates local trails in their community
 - 2/4 Filled
 - Chittenden County – Fitness Walk
 - Montpelier High School – Unified Snowshoeing
- **SOVT and Lululemon Run Club**
 - Run on Burlington Island Line Trail (Burlington Greenway) - 14-mile trail along Lake Champlain
- **Vermont City Marathon and Relay**



Special Olympics Colorado



- Hosts an annual outdoor camp for youth with IDD
- This year, will conduct a trail scavenger hunt with fitness checkpoints along the way for campers.
- **Unified Hiking Clubs:** Hiking program for people with and without ID while promoting continued physical activity, health eating, and hydration



Special Olympics Pennsylvania



- Unified Fitness event on Schuylkill River Trail- a 120 mile connected trail in populous PA counties where many athletes live!



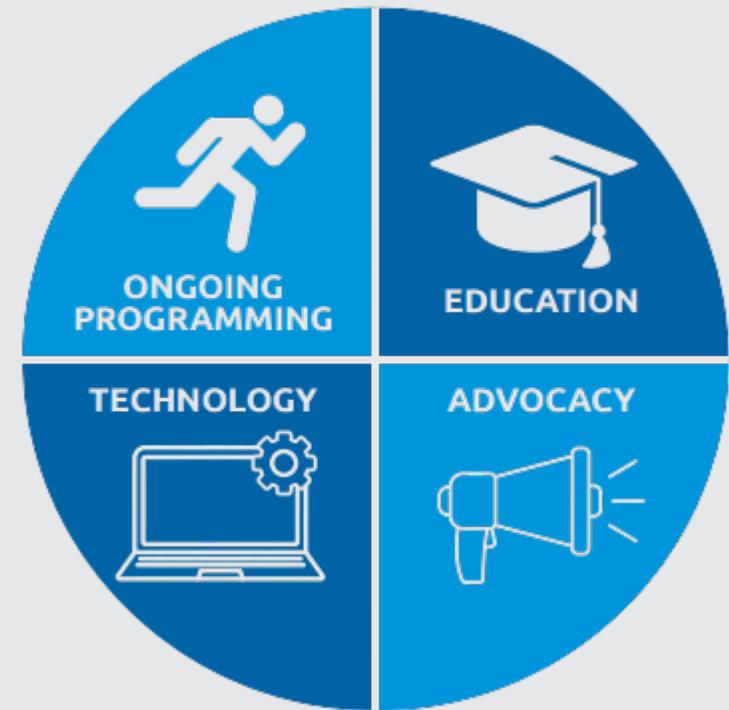
Strategies to Engage People With and Without IDD in Trail Programming Across the Lifespan



Lifespan Approach Overview



- Preventative health focus on early childhood (age 2) through older adults
- Focal settings: Sports, schools, communities, and at home



Young Athletes



Introduction

- Jennifer Hansen, Director of Early Childhood, Association of Forest and Nature Therapy Certified Guide
- Special Olympics Young Athletes and Early Childhood Development Programming
- Young Athletes Findings

Inclusive Outdoor Play

- Importance of nature-based play for children with IDD and caregivers
- Strategies for Inclusive Outdoor Play

Call to Action and Questions

- Connect with your Special Olympics Program



Special Olympics Young Athletes & Findings



- **Special Olympics Young Athletes** is a sports and play program for children aged 2 to 7, with and without intellectual disabilities. It teaches basic skills like running, kicking, and throwing, and promotes inclusive play in schools, communities, and homes.
- **Children in the program** can improve gross motor skills by 7-9 months in just 8 weeks with regular practice.
- **Young Athletes is highly adaptable** for outdoor settings like trails and parks

Importance Of Nature-based Play For Children With IDD



Nature-based activities improve sensory function, attention, social communication, and behavior regulation for children with IDD.

For parks and recreation, natural play areas and sensory-rich outdoor environments are important, evidence-based supports for children with IDD, especially autism.

Citation: JAMA Network Open — Fan, M. S. N., et al. (2023).



Importance Of Nature-based Play for Caregivers of Children with a Diagnosis IDD



Natural outdoor settings boost comfort, stimulation, and family interaction, encouraging caregivers to support outdoor play.

These environments offer diverse sensory experiences that aid children's development, including those with disabilities, and motivate caregivers to spend more time outside, enhancing play and family bonds.

Citation: Moore, R. C. & Cosco, N. (2019–2025). Outdoor play and naturalized environments for children with disabilities. In Outdoor Play (Child-Encyclopedia).

Strategies for Inclusive Outdoor Play



Marketing & Registration: Share programming information with local disability parent networks, communicate inclusivity to families, and gather information on children's needs beforehand to ensure proper activities and staffing.

Safe Environment: Choose an accessible, enclosed location with visible markers and volunteers around the perimeter to monitor children.

Take it Slow: Offer outdoor programs gradually, starting with short sessions and increasing over time.

Recruit Support: Bring in extra staff or volunteers to assist families, especially those with children needing individualized care.

If at First You Don't Succeed, Try and Try Again!



Strategies for Inclusive Outdoor Play



Activity Recommendations

- Collaborate with your nearby Special Olympics Program to provide Young Athletes activities, tailoring them to suit your outdoor setting.
- Explore the use of natural elements and recognize the importance of creating multi-sensory environments.
- Assign each child a specific "sit spot" to start, receive instructions, and conclude the session.
- Teach the "Hug a Tree" technique for safety and children who wander.
- Gather the children back to their designated spots using an animal call.
- Promote awareness of the natural environment by pairing children for a find-and-seek activity.



Fitness



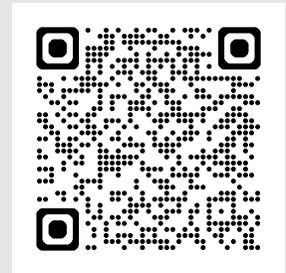
- Activities for people with and without IDD to support physical activity, nutrition, and hydration
- Unified Walking, Hiking, Fitness Clubs
- Fit Families and Friends
- Outdoor skills programs



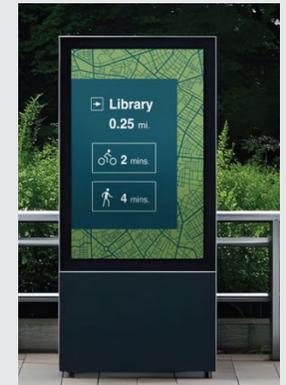
Built Environment Strategies



- Center for Nutrition and Health Impact’s *Bridges to Belonging: Adapting Built Environment Approaches to Meet the Needs of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Toolkit*
- Signage-pictures, maps
- Access via public transit
- Crosswalks with timer, lights, or designated handheld crossing flags



“I bowl on Monday, so I walk to the **bowling alley**, which is about 35 minutes, 30, 35 minutes, depending on how fast I walk. The **grocery stores** are about the same, about 20-30 minutes away.” [SO13]



Fitness Free Courses



- **Special Olympics Inclusive Fitness Training:**
 - Principles and strategies for effectively communicating, instructing, and motivating individuals with ID
- **Community Physical Activity Leader course:**
 - 6 module course to create inclusive, safe, and effective fitness programs for individuals of all ages and abilities



Special Olympics Inclusive Fitness Training >

Approved by: ACE

Call to Action



Ways to Engage



Physical Activity Advocacy-Sign up to meet with an athlete!



Get connected to your SO Program



Audience Q&A

TrailNation Collaborative

The TrailNation™ Collaborative is a peer learning community from Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) where advocates, public leaders and professionals can come together to **share their experiences, their challenges and their strategies** for accelerating the pace of **equitable and connected trail** and active transportation infrastructure.

Member Benefits: Monthly webinars and virtual dialogues, dedicated Facebook group, regular newsletter, grant announcements, early warning system alerts,

railstotrails.org/trailnation/#collaborative or
trailnation.org/#collaborative



Join the Collaborative!



2026 Webinar Topics

- Trails as Social Infrastructure: Practical Strategies to Build Connection in a Disconnected World
- E-Bikes, E-Motos, and Emerging Mobility: What Belongs on Trails and Why
- Model Trail Networks for Safer Transportation Systems
- Beyond ADA: Accessibility, Dignity and Choice on Multiuse Trails
- Planning for the Next Disaster: Building Resilient Trail Networks Before Crisis Hit

And more!



Stay in Touch



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