



513 Progress Drive / Suite P / Linthicum, MD 21090-2256
Ph: 410-789-6677 / 800-541-7544 (in MD) / Fx: 410-789-5955
www.somd.org



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for the benefit of persons
with intellectual disabilities

AGE GROUPING: WHAT IS IT and WHY DO WE DO IT ?

From a backyard summer camp to a global movement, Special Olympics has been changing lives for over forty years – all thanks to the courageous efforts of Eunice Kennedy Shriver. With a vision all her own, she saw beyond every horizon to create new opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. And through Special Olympics, her dream was realized. With over 3 million athletes and a program that reaches into 180 countries, Special Olympics is well-known and well-respected around the globe.

Yet the disability community still remains one of the most under-served and certainly most misunderstood populations. The same misconceptions and stereotypes that created barriers to participation four decades ago are still believed by some to be true today, and the real gifts and skills that persons with intellectual disabilities have to share are still to be discovered.

It is with that in mind that we would like to take the opportunity to share with you and all of our constituents the background and rationale surrounding the age grouping rule that SOMD recently took steps to enforce, beginning with the summer sports season. While grouping athletes together by age was always part of Eunice Kennedy Shriver's philosophy for the Special Olympics movement and is a part of the Sports Rules set out by Special Olympics, Inc, it is because of the growth and success of SOMD that we recently took steps to ensure that we are adhering to this policy at all levels of the organization. Noted as a positive development by numerous parents who had valid concerns about allowing their younger children to compete against older, larger and more experienced athletes, it has also been met with some resistance – resistance that seems to be largely rooted in common misconceptions about Special Olympics athletes. It is our hope that by explaining the principles behind this ruling and attempting to dispel some of the misinformation and misunderstanding that support those who do not believe in it, that the age grouping policy will be seen as a positive part of our ever-expanding movement.

To explain it briefly, age grouping simply means that athletes in specific age ranges should be playing with and/or competing against athletes of a similar age. This is the standard in all other sports programs, be they purely recreational or competitive leagues. In fact, this is a non-issue for all other sports programs, as parents, athletes, coaches, and supporters intuitively understand and accept the notion that age-appropriate teams are formed, and that this is in the best interest of the athletes involved. It is also safe to say that most parents would question a program that would allow an 8 or 9-year old to participate alongside and compete against 15 and 16-year olds.

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Be a fan of sports and of competition and winning, of courage and determination, of dignity and strength and grace under pressure, of empowerment and of victory, of acceptance and tolerance, of inclusion, of unity and togetherness, of fun and joy, of courtesy and kindness, of inspiration. Be a fan of possibilities.

What Special Olympics Maryland is enforcing is no different. What is different, of course, is the population we are serving. However, we reject the notion that age doesn't matter when it comes to persons with intellectual disabilities, because to do that would be to validate the old stereotype that all people with intellectual disabilities can be lumped together and treated the same – as if they have no contributions to make, no skills and no talents of their own. Quite the opposite, we are here to champion the athletes we serve as the strong, capable individuals that they are. Therefore, we do not believe that just being an SOMD athlete is enough of a reason to deny any of our participants a normal, positive sports experience alongside their peers. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have long stressed the importance of normalized social relations and interactions.

We do not pity the athletes we serve, we celebrate them. So to bend or break the rules for them because they have disabilities runs counter to our very mission.

Unfortunately, in a few isolated cases around the state, this has proven to be a very emotional issue, having affected the playing status of some athletes. While we are equally disappointed that enforcing this policy has negatively affected these athletes and their families, we stand firmly behind our decision to enforce this age grouping rule, as it is in the best interest of Special Olympics Maryland as a whole.

It is equally important to note that the age grouping policy was not designed to exclude a particular athlete or athletes – quite the opposite; its intent is to create a positive experience for all of the SOMD athletes involved. There are very real reasons why we deem it necessary to adhere to these age guidelines that are the norm for sports programs, including:

- The Health and Safety of the competitors. We place this above all else. The parents demand it, the athletes demand it and our Insurance carrier demands it.
- All sports come with risk of injury due to collision or other factors, and if the size and stature of one player is proportionately smaller or larger than another, the risk of serious injury increases to a non-acceptable level
- A player with 20+ years of playing experience is not at the same level of skill as a player in his or her teens, and such a match-up does not create an optimal competition environment

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- While we are a sports organization, the benefit to those participating does extend beyond the playing fields, offering much-needed social opportunities to a population that largely remains isolated. To that end:
 - Athletes should be developing friendships with other athletes their own chronological age, not with athletes 25+ years older or younger. Their social, emotional, and increased years of experience are not a match even if their I.Q. and sport skills level is a match.
 - A team member well above or well below the age range of the rest of the team will be automatically excluded from social opportunities that arise by virtue of their interests, and/or simply by virtue of being under the age of 21.

It is also important to note Special Olympics Maryland serves individuals with intellectual disabilities of ALL ages. Enforcing age grouping as a means of determining teams and competition brackets is in no way, shape or form restricting the overall organization to a more narrow age range. In fact, thanks to the addition of the Young Athletes Program several years ago, we are now reaching children as young as 2, introducing them and their families to the concept of Special Olympics, and providing early intervention tools that are helping to maximize their physical, cognitive and social development. And at the other end of the spectrum we are happy to point out that at last year's Summer Games, the oldest competitor was a 73-year-old woman.

However, this does not mean that every athlete involved with SOMD is entitled to whatever sports experience he or she wants. Ideally, there would be age-appropriate teams at every age level in every sport. Realistically, this simply isn't the case. Softball and volleyball have the lowest participation of all of our team sports, with nearly all of the teams made up of adults. This means that a youth player interested in playing softball isn't going to find a team within Special Olympics.

What we can and will do as we enforce the age groups is to increase our outreach efforts and work with local management teams and families to identify those areas where interest exists, and where an all-call to the community to get a team together within a particular age range – be it traditional or Unified – will result in an even better experience for all involved.

In closing, we want to remind everyone that SOMD is a SPORTS organization whose goals include fostering age-appropriate friendships and increased self-esteem in persons with intellectual disabilities through their efforts on the playing fields. By adhering to rules that are the norm in the larger sports community, we are in fact validating their overall experience, and preserving the dignity of all players involved.

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