
Physical Contact in Special Olympics Ireland Sports

These guidelines on Physical Contact in Special Olympics Ireland Sports are important points for every coach/ volunteer to understand and support in their delivery of sports training to an athlete. Your club has a duty of care to all athletes and volunteers in relation to physical contact during the delivery of sports training to athletes, e.g. when demonstrating a sporting technique to them, there may be a need to use physical contact. Concerns can arise among coaches about what level of physical contact is permitted and what is safe and appropriate to use in this training. The following guidance is provided for coaches to ensure that they are aware of the safe appropriate methods of physical contact they may have in training with their athletes.

Coaches should make themselves aware of sport-specific physical contact guidance through the National Governing Bodies of their relevant sports.

Note: Special Olympics Ireland is the National Governing Body for Bocce, Motor Activity Training Programme and Floorball

Physical contact should only be used to support the skills or activity in which an athlete is training, unless it is in an emergency situation.

It is not required for a coach/volunteer to do something for an athlete which they are able to do for themselves; this is dependent on the ability level of the individual athlete.

A coach/volunteer should ensure that when physical contact with the athlete is required:

- Permission of the athlete is given.
- The athlete understands the reason for the physical contact.
- Contact is carried out in an open environment.
- The athlete is treated with dignity and respect.
- Inappropriate physical contact or touching is never tolerated.

If a physical intervention is required it must be in an emergency situation to prevent an athlete from harming themselves or harming others or damaging property.

A coach/volunteer should understand that:

- Touching an athlete, including a well-intentioned arm on the shoulder, on a regular basis, may lead to misunderstandings or an athlete accepting similar contact from others who may not have their welfare as paramount consideration, placing the athlete at increased vulnerability.
- Use of physical intervention as a form of punishment is unlawful.
- They must act in line with the Special Olympics Ireland Safeguarding Policies and maintain appropriate boundaries between athletes and themselves. Athletes should be supported to understand and maintain the appropriate physical boundaries expected.
- There are some volunteer roles, e.g. medical volunteers, where physical contact may be used as part of the assessment and treatment of a possible injury. These roles should be filled by appropriately trained and qualified personnel who act under their own disciplines' codes of practice.

Special Olympics Ireland acknowledges that a number of our athletes may require additional support with toileting and personal care on occasion and this may require some functional intimate physical contact. Coaches/volunteers should only carry out this personal care with the athlete's permission and information from family or primary carers as to the appropriate manner in which to carry out this personal care. The Club Safeguarding Officer in the club can act as a liaison in this area.

This contact should meet the athlete's need and not the needs of a coach/volunteer. Athletes should be encouraged to speak to a parent/carer/guardian/Club Safeguarding Officer or Event Safeguarding Officer if they are not comfortable with the physical contact being made.

Some athletes can be demonstrative in their behaviour and can express this through hugging etc. It is best practice for all volunteers to encourage an alternative such as fist bumps, elbow taps or hand shaking as the appropriate expression of congratulations at all times. Athletes should be made aware of this practice thereby minimising the risk of perceived rejection on their part.

Appropriate contact is defined as physical contact for a particular purpose, e.g.

- Supporting an athlete to improve sports techniques, skills and practice
- Treating an injury
- Preventing an accident from occurring