



**Special  
Olympics**  
Ireland



# Young Athletes Impact Report

Empowering the  
Champions of  
Tomorrow









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# ABOUT YOUNG ATHLETES

## What is Young Athletes?

Young Athletes is a play and sports activity programme for children with intellectual disabilities from age 4 to 12 years, teaching athletes key fundamental movement skills such as running, throwing, catching, kicking and balance.

These skills are needed for lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity. It also offers their parents an insight into the support network that can be gained by joining a Special Olympics Club.





# YOUNG ATHLETES GOALS



## 01 - Athletes

### Develop Fundamental Movement Skills

Enhance physical competence in key motor skills such as balance, running, jumping, throwing and catching, which are essential for sports and everyday activities.

### Encourage Lifelong Participation

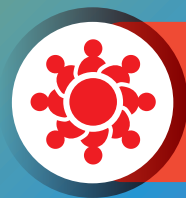
Inspire continued involvement in sports and other physical activities as athletes grow, leading to healthier lifestyles.

### Promote Social Connection

Foster relationships with peers, build confidence and develop a sense of belonging through fun and inclusive play.







## 02 - CLUBS

### Club Structure

- Stand alone Young Athletes clubs
- Existing sports club who add a Young Athletes section
- Schools who deliver Young Athletes
- Young Athletes clubs which transition into sports clubs when their athletes are ready to start sports specific training

### Engage Families and Communities

Build stronger connections by involving parents, siblings and people from the local community as volunteers.

### Create Inclusive Environments

Offer welcoming spaces where children with intellectual disabilities can play and learn together in an environment tailored to meet their needs.







## 03 - COACHES

### **Foster Positive Experiences**

Focus on enjoyment and skill-building rather than competition, ensuring athletes feel supported and encouraged.

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### **Support Developmental Progress**

Monitor and develop individual's progress, adapting activities to each athlete's unique needs to help prepare athletes to move onto sports specific training.

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### **Encourage holistic development**

Empower young athletes to achieve their potential by fostering resilience, self-esteem, and a love for movement through tailored activities.

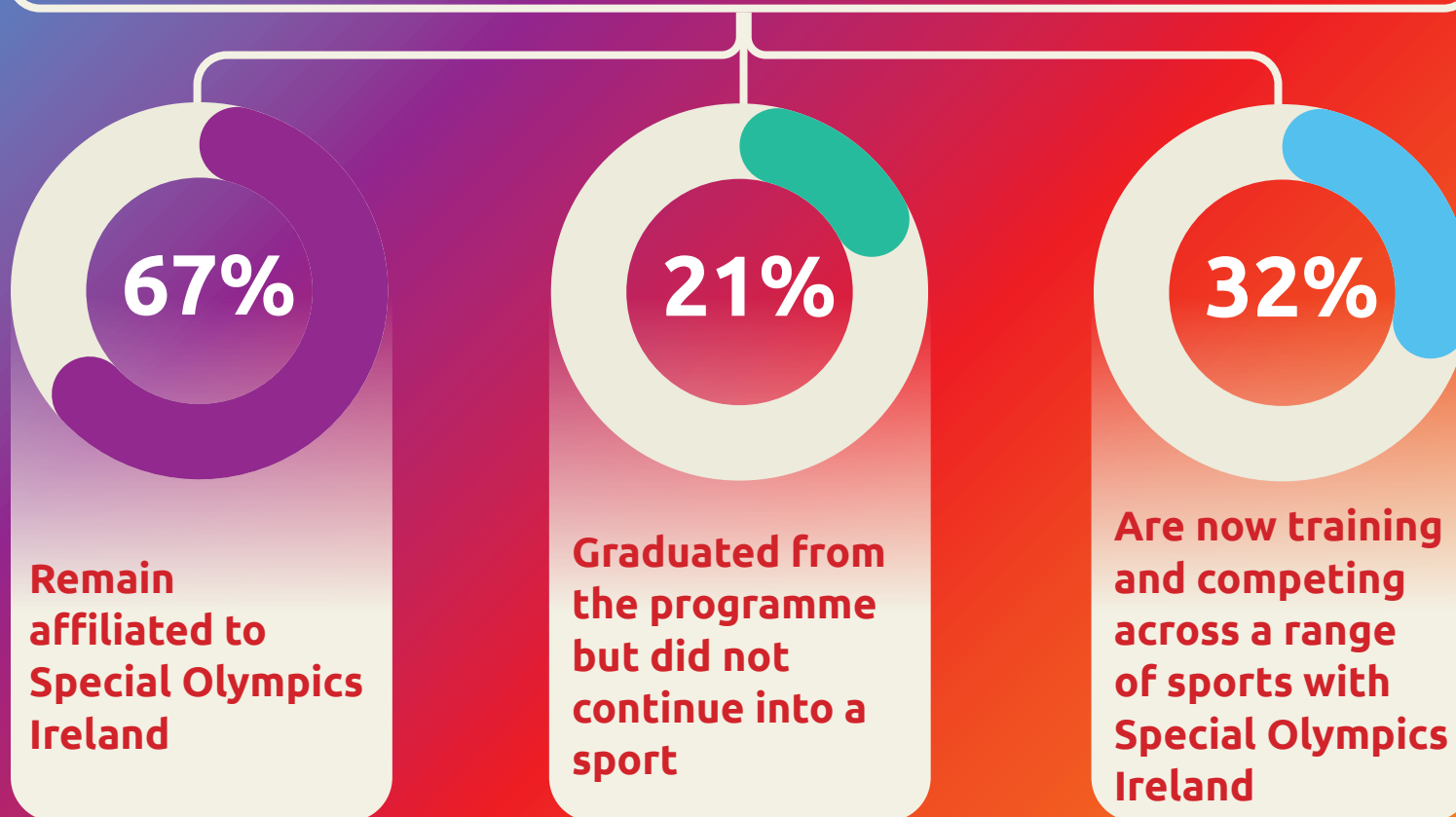
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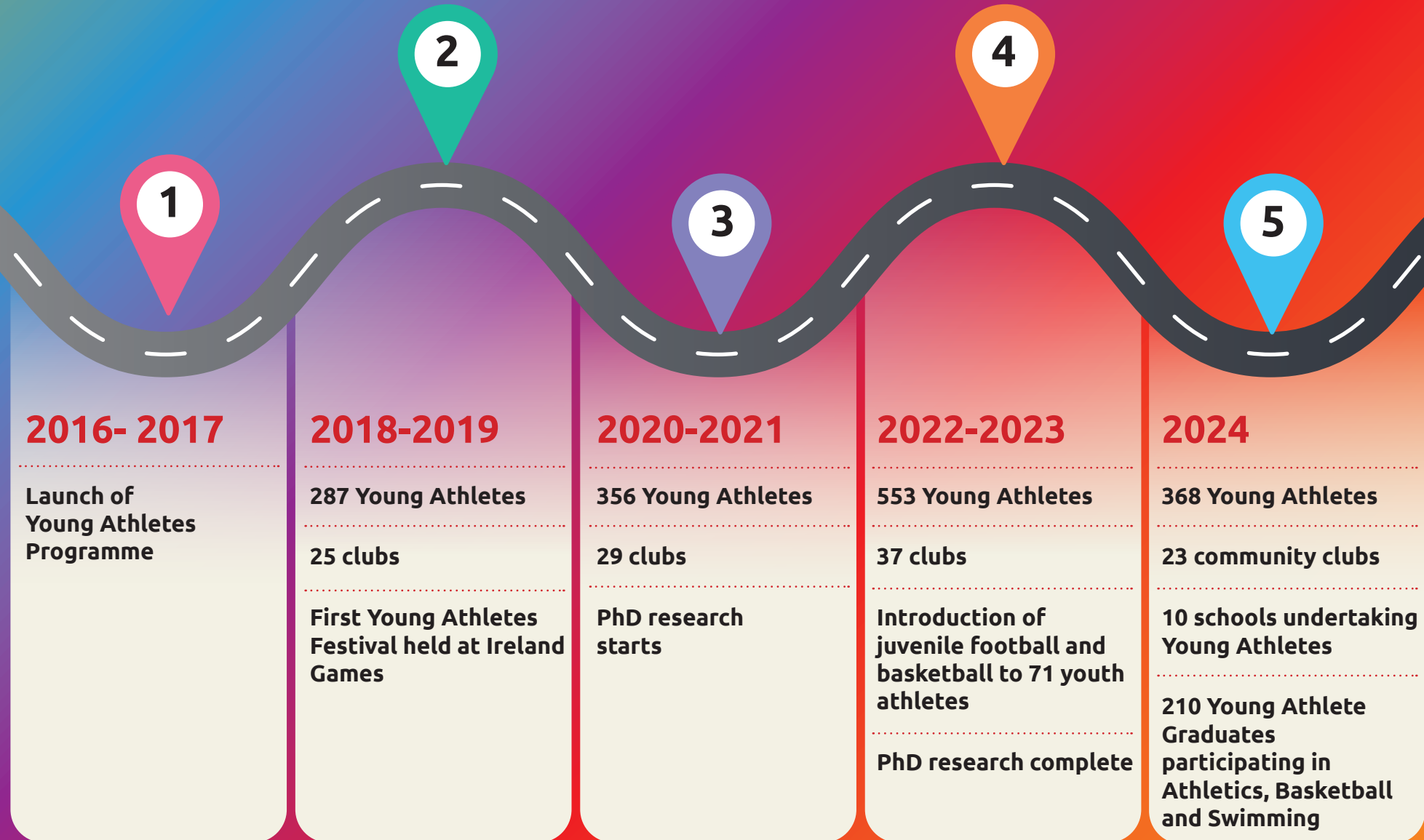


# YOUNG ATHLETES THE BIG PICTURE

Since the Young Athletes programme first launched in 2016/2017,  
**1,009 children with intellectual disabilities**  
have engaged with the programme



# TIMELINE OF YOUNG ATHLETES





# YOUNG ATHLETES RESEARCH STATISTICS

Young Athletes  
Who Participated  
in Phd Study

100 

No. of Fundamental  
Movement Skills  
Assessed

12 

No. Academic  
Publications

4 

Young Athletes  
Who Participated  
in 2024 Research

80 

Coaches Trained  
as Part of 2024  
Research

23 

Parents Who  
Participated  
in Playshop  
Workshop

37 



# PhD RESEARCH FINDINGS

## Findings related to Young Athletes



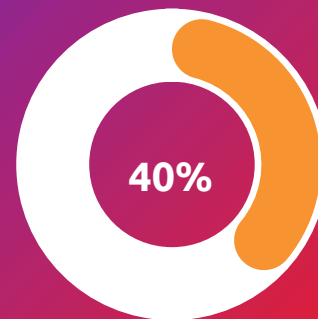
It was clear from our research that Young Athletes are currently demonstrating extremely low levels of motor skill competence.

There is a clear need for a fundamental movement skills intervention to target specific skill weaknesses and help to improve overall motor skill proficiency levels among Young Athletes.

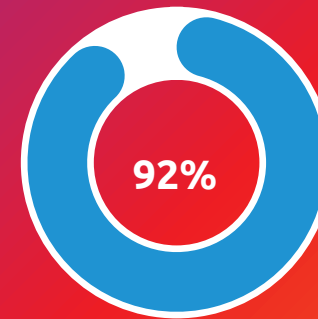
**52%** of Young Athletes have not achieved mastery of any key fundamental movement skills assessed.



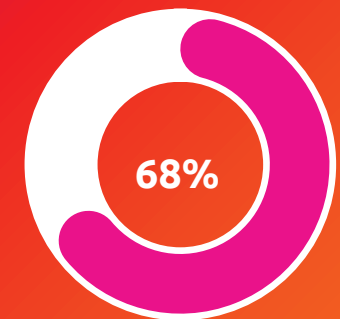
### Motor skill proficiency of young athletes



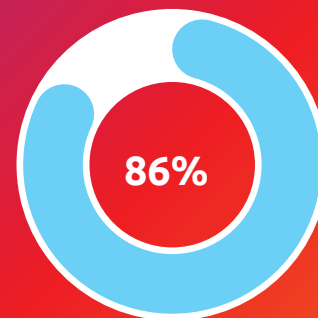
Can't run



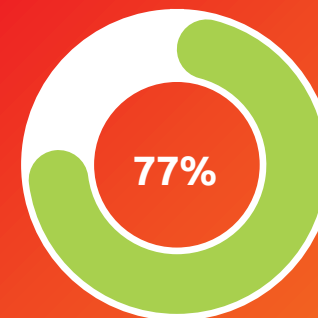
Can't skip



Can't catch a ball



Can't throw a ball



Can't kick a ball



Can't balance



## Findings related to Coaches



of Young Athletes coaches interviewed agreed that overall they had a positive experience while coaching as part of the Young Athletes Programme.

Throughout the interview process it was identified that there was a need for improvement in 2 key areas:

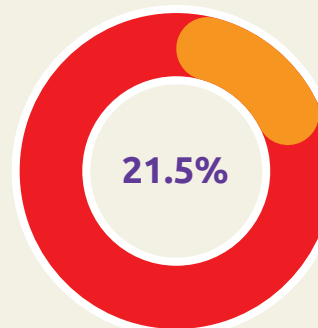
### 1. New Coach Education Model

To continuously develop the skills and experience of coaches delivering the Young Athletes programme

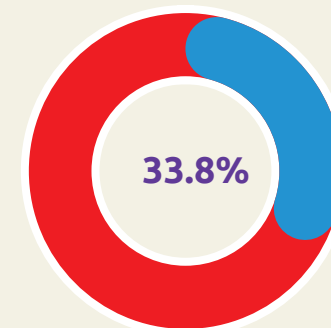
### 2. Development of a Juvenile Pathway

To make it easier for athletes to transition into sports specific training environments within their community

Additionally, our research found that Young Athletes coaches are currently overestimating children's ability to perform locomotor and object manipulation skills by the following percentages:



Locomotor skills



Object Manipulation Skills

This has a direct impact on their ability to develop, progress and improve the motor skills proficiency of the Young Athletes that they coach.

## Plan of Action



Based on the PhD Research Findings the following action points were identified ....

1

### Develop And Implement a Multicomponent Intervention With Parental Involvement

Use the intervention to help create and pilot a new toolkit (including session plans) and at home activities and equipment bag for the Young Athletes programme.



2

### Create a Tailored Coach Education Course

Create a new coach education course using a 'bottom up' approach to ensure the voice of the coach is incorporated into the content and delivery style. Undertake Sport Ireland Coaching, course accreditation process.



3

### Design a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Module

The CPD module is designed for existing coaches to upskill them on observing, detecting and correcting errors in children's motor skill performance to improve overall skill development.





# INTERVENTION STUDY

## Methods



57 children with intellectual disabilities, 66% boys aged 4-12 years, participated in an 8-week fundamental movement skill (FMS) intervention once a week across 8 Special Olympics clubs in Ireland, delivered by 8 coaches.

Three study arms:

- Normal Special Olympic club activity (control)
- An FMS-only group (evidence-based sessions )
- An FMS + parents group (evidence-based sessions + at-home activities led by parents).

The FMS sessions targeted: run, hop, skip, horizontal jump, throw, catch, kick, and balance.

Each planned session included a 10-minute warm-up, 40 minutes of FMS practice and games, and a 10-minute cool down (coaches were trained and followed a session plan).

Parents (n = 29) in the FMS + parents group received a physical literacy workshop called 'PLAYshop' and were asked to do 10-15 minutes of FMS activities at home twice per week.



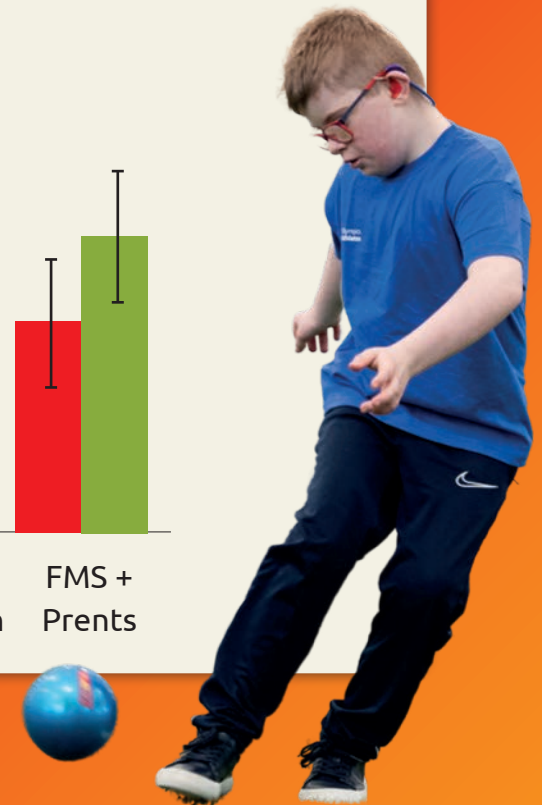
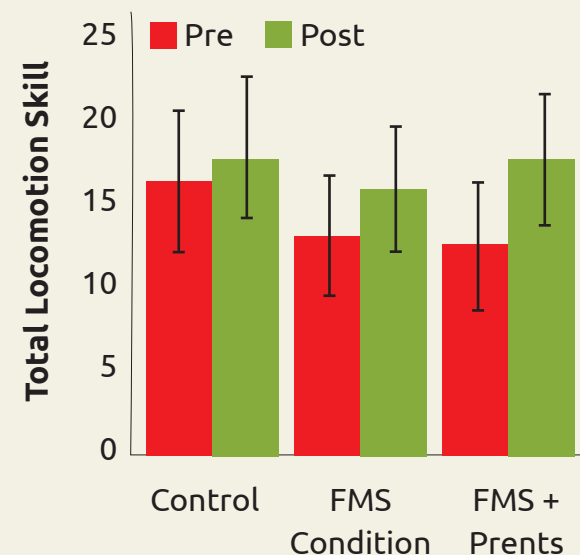
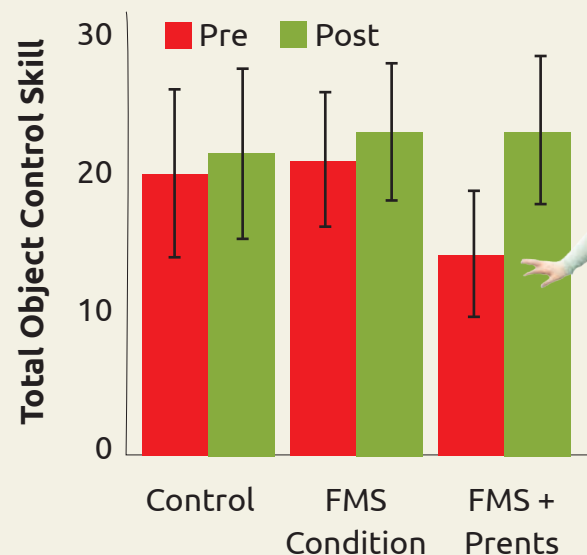
## Findings



Results from this intervention indicate that Young Athletes in the 'FMS + Parents' group significantly outperformed their peers in the locomotor (running, skipping, jumping etc) and object manipulation (catching, throwing, kicking, dribbling etc) skills during the follow up motor skill assessments compared to those who took

part in the typical Special Olympics club activity.

Parents benefit from the workshop (significant increases in both their knowledge and confidence) and can influence their children's skill development in just 8 weeks.





# PLAYshop Workshop

What is PLAYshop?



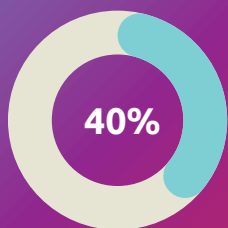
PLAYshop is a brief parent-focused physical literacy program (Lane et al., 2021, p. 3) that aims to increase parents' knowledge and confidence in supporting their child to develop all components of physical literacy.

In collaboration with



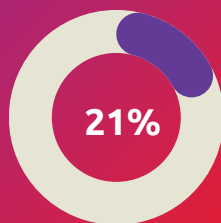
**UNIVERSITY  
OF ALBERTA**

Our research showed a ...



increase in parents  
knowledge

to support their Young Athletes physical literacy  
development at home after participating in  
PLAYshop.



increase in parents  
confidence



of parents reported high  
levels of satisfaction  
with workshop content,  
delivery and resources  
provided.



## What Parents Think of PLAYshop...



### When Asked What They Liked The Most About The PLAYshop Workshop:

*"Learning the different skills to work on to help my child reach their full potential"*

*"Practicing the exercises proved very valuable and far more useful than watching a demonstration or a video."*

*"It is based on expert research and delivered with professionalism".*

### How Parents Feel About The Tools And Resources Provided Alongside The Playshop Workshop:

*"The kit, felt I have the tools at hand and am well equipped to readily do the exercises"*

*"Very practical & informative"*

*"The ideas given for the activities were really easy but things I never would have thought of doing"*





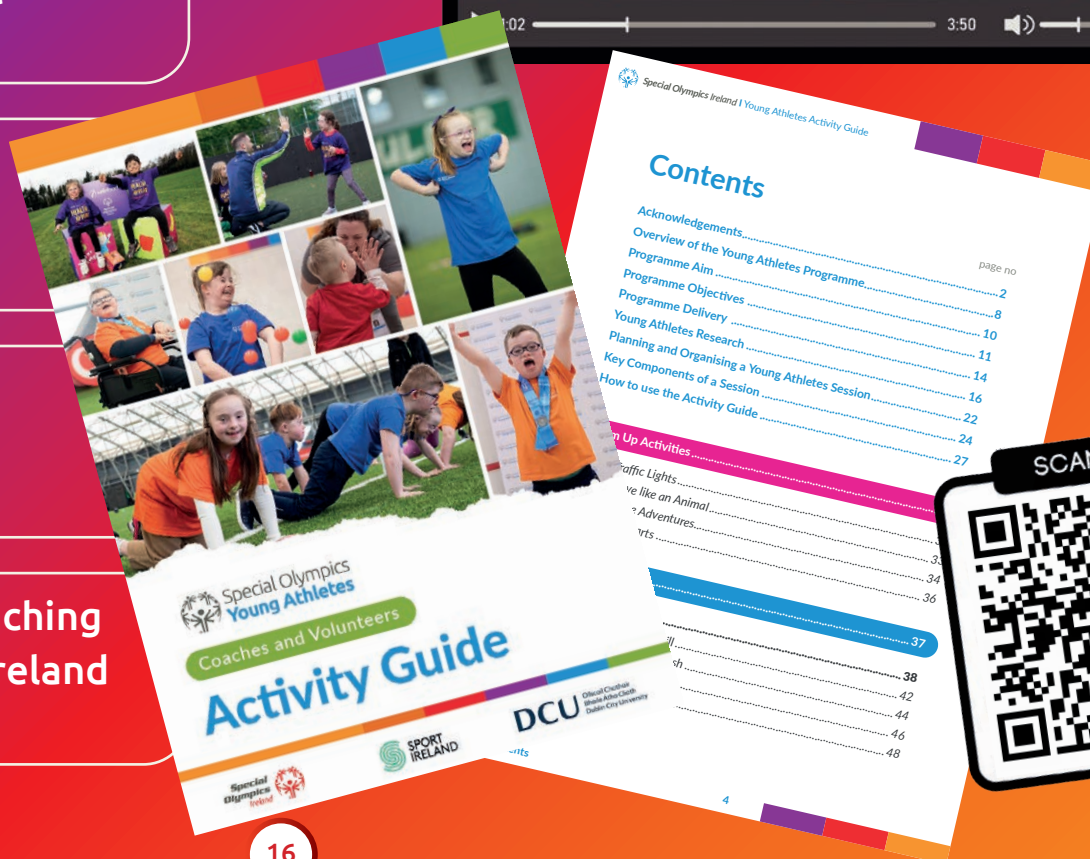
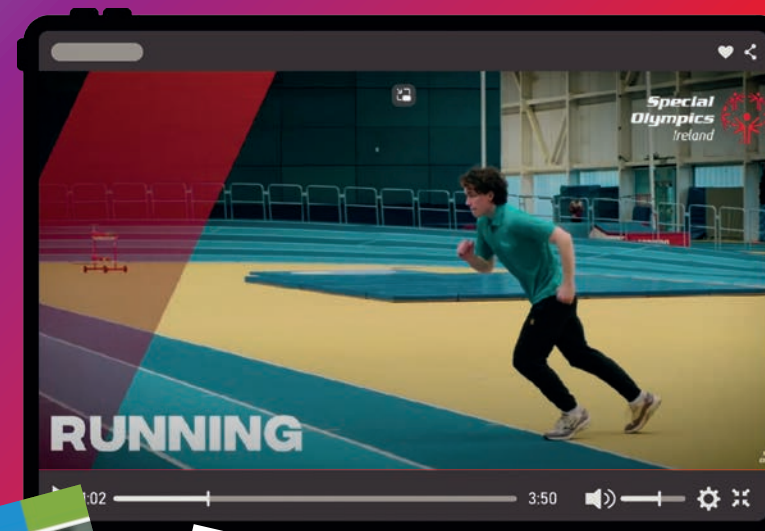
# NEW RESOURCES DEVELOPED

New Young Athletes Activity Guide

Updated Equipment Pack

12 Fundamental Movement Skill  
Demonstration Videos (YouTube)

Coach Education (Introductory Coaching  
Qualification accredited by Sport Ireland  
and online CPD developed)



# WHAT COACHES THINK ...

Coaches highlight how social connectedness increases as a result programme participation for both Young Athletes and parents!



**We have seen huge changes in children. We had a boy who wouldn't come into the hall, wouldn't even make eye contact. Now he is playing basketball with his friends — he isn't even wearing his noise-protection earphones anymore. The confidence it gives them is incredible.**

**The athletes run eagerly into the sports hall because they know they're going to see their friends.**

**The support system of like-minded families is something that parents of children with ID may never have experienced prior to joining SO.**





# WHAT ATHLETES THINK ...



## Elliot Higgins-Portet Young Athletes Graduate

At age 4, Elliott joined the Young Athletes programme and now at age 10 Elliott has graduated and is playing Basketball with Lucan Special Olympics Club!

*"I like my coach Ronan. I enjoy scoring a goal with my friends I am so happy in my sport. I learnt Lámh from my coach through Special Olympics and now I teach my whole school Lámh signs during assembly" - Elliot*

*"We are a sporty family and we wanted Elliott to play sport like this brothers. We tried a session with Young Athletes and Elliott said he wanted to stay. We have never looked back." - Stephane, Elliott's Dad*



## Anna Kilmartin Young Athletes Graduate

At age 6, Anna's parents enrolled her in the Young Athletes programme and now, at age 13 Anna is more active than ever!

*"I play basketball, football, horse riding, and rugby. I love it—being with my mum who helps me. I like playing and seeing my friends." - Anna*

*"Young Athletes gave Anna the foundation to play sports. It filled her with confidence, and now she's thriving. Her sisters even volunteer with Special Olympics—it's brought so much joy to our family. Anna plays so many sports we need an Excel sheet to keep track!" - Jenny, Anna's Mum*

## WHAT STAFF THINK ...

### Karen Coventry

Special Olympics Ireland  
Director of Sport

*"I am so proud of what has been achieved with the Young Athletes Programme. We have come so far, and it is down to each and every one of you—coaches and parents—working with us in the clubs to support the athletes! This research and future research are so important. It has shown us what needs to be done, and our work continues. I cannot wait to come back in a few years and really show you what you have all achieved."*

### Dr. Hayley Kavanagh

Special Olympics Ireland  
Youth Pathways & Impact Lead

*"This sense of belonging is fostered from a young age in the Young Athletes programme with children with ID as young as four years old being able to identify themselves as an 'athlete'. It is evident that the benefits that participation in Special Olympics has on people with ID extend far beyond those that are demonstrated on the sports field."*







# Launch of New & Improved Young Athletes Programme

16th Nov 2024 - Sport Ireland Campus





# 2024 IMPACT IN NUMBERS



# 2024 IMPACT IN NUMBERS

Come & Try  
Sessions

7 

Health@Play  
Participants

108 

Clubs Delivering  
Health@Play

8 

Young athletes  
coaches

78 

Coach  
Educators

17 

Coaches  
Trained

39 





# YOUNG ATHLETES PLANS FOR 2025

**Establish  
5 New Young  
Athletes  
Clubs**

**Continue To  
Support And  
Develop The 33  
Current Clubs  
Undertaking Young  
Athletes**

**Host 4 Young  
Athletes  
Festivals**

**Train 50  
Young Athletes  
Coaches**

**Launch New  
Continuous  
Professional  
Development  
Module**

**Deliver The  
Playshop Workshop  
To 60-80 Parents  
Across 6 Clubs**



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to our funders and partners for their vital support.  
Without you, the advancement of our Young Athletes programme would not be possible.

Official Founding Partner of Special Olympics  
Ireland's Young Athletes Programme



**40 years**  
1985 - 2025

supporting

**Special  
Olympics**  
Ireland



Programme Funders



SPÓRT ÉIREANN  
SPORT IRELAND

**RETHINK  
IRELAND**

Our  
Social  
Innovation  
Fund

Research Collaborators



**UNIVERSITY  
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Your contributions make it possible to advance the Young Athletes programme, fostering inclusion and development in sport and physical activity, for young people with intellectual disabilities across the island of Ireland.

**THANK  
YOU**







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