

MENTORING AN ATHLETE-LEADER

Fast Facts

Special Olympics



Athlete Leadership creates opportunities for Special Olympics athletes to develop and demonstrate leadership skills, utilize their voices and abilities to undertake meaningful leadership roles (such as speaker, board member, or coach), influence change in Special Olympics, and help create inclusive communities.



Aspiring athlete-leaders almost always need a volunteer **Mentor** who supports them in their quest to become the best athlete-leader they can be. Being a mentor is much like being a sports coach, who assesses the skill level of the athlete and builds the skills necessary for success. And, like a sports coach, the mentor is in the background when it is time for the athlete to give a speech, serve on a committee, or coach a team.

The relationship between the athlete-leader and the mentor changes over time as the athlete-leader gains knowledge, skills, and self-assurance; developing the competence to work more independently. While some athlete-leaders require ongoing support, even the most capable benefit from having a trusted helper throughout their athlete leadership career.

Agency staff, parents, caregivers, and some volunteers may find it difficult to serve as a Mentor because they may 1) be the primary decision-maker in everyday life for the athlete-leader, 2) are protective of the athlete-leader and find it challenging to give the athlete-leader “room to learn or fail”, or 3) have strong feelings about Special Olympics, and can’t help expressing their own views.

Once the mentor has qualified as a Class A volunteer and learned the basics of Special Olympics, the partnership between athlete-leader and mentor is established while attending classes in the Special Olympics Athlete Leadership Training Series. In these classes, the athlete-leader decides how he/she would like to contribute to the organization, then takes classes focused on communications, governance, sports, health, or technology. Each class is followed by a practicum where the athlete-leader obtains local experiences related to the class. It’s the mentor’s role to facilitate these practical experiences that are required for completion of the class.

Requirements of Mentors

- Must be at least 18 years of age
- Must be a Special Olympics Class A volunteer
- Agrees to support an athlete-leader for 1+ years
- Completes Mentor training
- Attends all applicable courses from the Athlete Leadership Training Series with athlete-leader

ATHLETE LEADERSHIP

The core of a successful mentor experience is the relationship with the athlete-leader. Understanding of the athlete's reading, writing and speaking abilities enables the mentor to provide support and guidance where needed. Staying in touch at least monthly and always valuing the athlete-leader's opinions provides the foundation. The mentor also provides constructive feedback and facilitates transportation and technology support as needed. Mentors also help create the environment for success by working with parents, caretakers, and Special Olympics volunteers to ensure they understand Athlete Leadership and the goals of their athlete-leader.

MENTOR FAST FACTS

Helpful Hints for Mentors

- Respect the athletes' rights to make their own decisions, speak for themselves, and disagree.
- Give athletes a chance to explain things, even if it takes time.
- Don't try to guess what individuals are going to say. Let them finish their own sentences and stories.
- If needed, simplify written information. Think about other creative ways to format information.
- Encourage the athlete-leader to socialize when appropriate. Leadership involves relationships.
- If you have a question for a person, ask! Open the lines of communication from the beginning.
- Be specific and honest about the athlete's role.
- During a meeting, point out issues of confidentiality that should not be discussed outside the meeting (if necessary).

As a mentor you are lending your time and talents to a most-important element of the Special Olympics vision – ensuring that athletes are seen as respected and capable members of their community.

STAGES OF MENTORSHIP

Athlete leaders benefit from the support of a volunteer **Mentor**.

At all times, the mentor should reserve their own opinions, while supporting the athlete leader's involvement and ability to make decisions.

