



Special Olympics GB Eligibility Criteria

Updated 2025

1. Eligibility Definition

The [Special Olympics General Rules](#) define the criteria for athletes to be eligible for Special Olympics pathways and registration, from which the following is extracted:

1. General Statement of Eligibility

Special Olympics training and competition is open to every person with an intellectual (learning) disability who is at least eight years of age and who is registered to participate in Special Olympics as required by the General Rules

2. Age Requirements

There is no maximum age limitation for participation in Special Olympics. The minimum age requirement for participation in Special Olympics competition is eight years of age. Children who are at least six years old may participate in age appropriate Special Olympics training programmes.

3. Registration with a local accredited club/programme

The individual must be registered and training regularly with one of our local accredited clubs or programmes as listed on our [website](#).

4. Identifying Persons with an intellectual (learning) disability

A person is considered to have an intellectual (learning) disability for purposes of determining his or her eligibility to participate in Special Olympics if that person satisfies any one of the following requirements:

The person has been identified as having an intellectual or learning disability: Which is defined as *‘a condition of arrested or incomplete development of mind, which is characterized by impairment of skills manifested during the developmental period, which contribute to the overall level of intelligence, i.e. cognitive, language, motor and social abilities’*

Source: [ICD-10 Version:2016](#), [ICD-11 for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics](#)

In other words: *‘A significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (due to impaired intelligence) with a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning) which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development’*

Source: (Department of Health (2001) Valuing People) “Before Adulthood” means before the age of 18.



In common with other national and international sports organisations, Special Olympics GB deems a person to have an intellectual (learning) disability if they have a full scale IQ score of 75 or lower and/or approximately two or more standard deviations below the mean (approximately less than the 2.3rd percentile), based on appropriately normed, individually administered standardized tests. IQ tests are acknowledged to have limitations and it is recognised this is only part of the assessment. In addition the individual is expected to have significant difficulties in, adaptive behaviour, including conceptual, social and practical-life skills. These difficulties should have been identified before the age of 18 to demonstrate they will have affected development.

Several things can cause an intellectual or learning disability. An intellectual or learning disability may occur when the brain is still developing (before, during or soon after birth).

- Before birth trauma can occur to the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) that can cause an intellectual (learning) disability. A child can be born with an intellectual (learning) disability if the mother has an accident or illness while she is pregnant, or if the unborn baby is born with certain genetic differences. Genes contain DNA which act as the blue print (plan) to how a person develops.
- A person can be born with an intellectual (learning) disability if he or she does not get enough oxygen during childbirth, has trauma to the head, or is born too early
- After birth, an intellectual (learning) disability can be caused by early childhood illnesses, accidents and seizures.

This definition covers autistic adults who have a co-occurring diagnosis of intellectual (learning) disabilities, but not autistic adults with intellectual functioning in ranges above the intellectual disabilities diagnostic criteria (e.g. those historically diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome). It is however recognised that people with intellectual (learning) disabilities are much more likely to have a co-occurring autism diagnosis than individuals who do not have intellectual disabilities (up to 22 times more likely, NHSE 2021). **For eligibility to the Special Olympics, individuals must evidence they meet the diagnostic criteria for intellectual (learning) disabilities, irrespective of their autistic diagnostic status.**

Source: [NHS England Digital](#)

Special Olympics GB receives many enquiries from people who are uncertain whether their family member is eligible to participate in Special Olympics. It is important to draw a distinction between people who have a general intellectual (learning) disability (who are eligible for Special Olympics) and those with a specific standalone learning difficulty (who are not eligible). Conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mental health issues or challenging behaviour alone, are not eligible for Special Olympics. As with those that present autistic characteristics, it is common that people with intellectual



disability may also have the above conditions alongside or associated to their intellectual (learning) disability.

Similarly, people with a physical or sensory impairment do not qualify for Special Olympics unless they also have an underlying or associated intellectual (learning) disability.

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Some indicators that suggest someone may have an intellectual (learning) disability:

- Went to specialist school for special needs related to intellectual disabilities
- Went to mainstream school but required classroom assistance
- School achievements significantly delayed compared to chronological age
- Ability to manage everyday tasks (adaptive behaviour) e.g. dressing, travel, using money, preparing food, managing risk etc. is significantly delayed
- Needs significant assistance to carry out their daily lives
- Has a medical condition or syndrome commonly associated with intellectual disabilities e.g. Down Syndrome (trisomy 21)

Conditions that are independent of an intellectual (learning) disability and subsequently do not meet the Special Olympics Eligibility Criteria include:

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ('ADHD')
- "level 1 ASD" (used to be known as Asperger's Syndrome prior to 2013)
- Challenging behaviour

If an athlete is not eligible to register with Special Olympics GB as an athlete (i.e. they do not have an intellectual (learning) disability), they may still participate as a Unified Partner in Special Olympics if their accredited programme delivers a Unified Sports® programme that is listed on their accreditation form, or should be offered an opportunity as a volunteer.

Any costs associated with obtaining the required proof of eligibility are the responsibility of the athlete concerned. Where possible, we ask that you do not go to the expense of having new tests or assessments done but send copies of any previous assessment or documentation you may have.



3. Reviewing Eligibility

After an athlete has been originally deemed eligible, if new information comes to light Special Olympics GB reserves the right to:

- ask for further proof of eligibility
- specify the nature of the proof required
- refuse or withdraw the membership of any athlete who, in our opinion, does not meet the Special Olympics eligibility criteria

Mencap can provide key information and support on all aspects of intellectual (learning) disabilities, so for additional guidance, please visit

<http://www.mencap.org.uk/all-about-learning-disability>

4. Special Olympics GB Athlete Registration

Please see our [membership resources page](#) for the **athlete registration checklist** and associated forms.

In order to register an athlete with Special Olympics GB the following must be completed and submitted to Special Olympics GB National Office:

- Completed and signed Athlete Membership Form (including Athlete Release Form and Code of Conduct) – This form MUST be signed off/ approved by the Special Olympics GB accredited club (eg. Eligibility Officer)
- A passport style photo
- Evidence of Athlete Eligibility - Eligibility endorsement material must be provided by a professional associated with the individual personally, in an appropriate position to understand what the definition of intellectual (learning) disability means, for example:
 - *Educational or Clinical Psychologist*
 - *Medical Doctor, Geneticist or medical professional*
 - *Teacher or SENCO*
 - *Local intellectual (learning) disability team advisor (local authority)*
 - *Manager of a care home*
 - *CEO or senior leader of an intellectual (learning) disability specific organisation*
 - *Social Worker*
- Health Information Forms/ One Page Profiles (club only)

Eligibility endorsement material can take many forms, including a letter or copy information from a professional (a clinical or educational psychology report, SEN report or letter from your GP), which contains sufficient evidence supporting the conclusion that the athlete has an intellectual (learning) disability in line with the Special Olympics GB Eligibility Criteria. An Athlete Eligibility Endorsement Form can be used if required, to acquire the relevant sign off from a professional, which may be submitted instead of letters or copy information.



If required, eligibility endorsement material can be provided for a group of individuals, only if the professional providing the material is associated with all individuals concerned. For example a letter that lists all names of the individuals applying for membership.

Please note that Special Olympics GB will never deny registration outright, but will instead always ask for additional evidence where required.

Where possible, the above information should be sent to Special Olympics GB National Office via an email to Athletes@sogb.org.uk with the subject line 'Athlete Registration – INSERT CLUB NAME'. If you have any questions or concerns in relation to eligibility please get in touch via this email address.