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Aligning Occupational Therapy and Special Olympics: Maximizing Global Participation for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

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Introduction: Occupational Therapy aims to maximizing engagement in meaningful activities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics, a world-wide non-profit organization, provides opportunities for youth and adults to engage in competitive sports. A volunteer run organization, Special Olympics coaches and trainers have limited experience in guiding, adapting, and training athletes with special needs. Occupational therapy can enhance an understanding of the needs of athletes and create strategies in training for greater success.

Objectives: Participants will articulate the aim of Special Olympics and the role of occupational therapy in training and promoting meaningful activities for individuals with intellectual disabilities in competitive sports.

Method: This case study is based on years of experience as an occupational therapist and alpine ski coach in Special Olympics. The athlete, who has Down syndrome, coordination and balance deficits and low muscle tone, was guided in training in alpine skiing using adaptations and assistive devices provided by the occupational therapist. The journey was recorded through photos and video over 16 years.

Results: This poignant story co-presented with the Special Olympics athlete demonstrates the power of occupational therapy as a profession to promote full participation in meaningful activities through motivation, adaptation, therapeutic use of self, and the rewards that come from a Can Do! attitude. The athlete won a Silver Medal at the World Games in Austria in March, 2017.

Conclusion: Occupational therapy world-wide has potential to collaborate with Special Olympics in a multitude of competitive sports by expertise in training and adaptation for individuals with intellectual disabilities.