

Health@Play - Healthy Know How - For Active Kids

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Background

Special Olympics Ireland (SOI) and safefood work with people across the island of Ireland, through the delivery of campaigns, research and supports in the community SOI provide an estimated 8,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities (ID) meaningful opportunities to participate in sport, competition and health programmes. People with ID experience more ill health and have a lower average life expectancy than the general population. However, a lot of these chronic illnesses and diseases are preventable through appropriate health education and prevention programmes targeted to meet the needs of people with ID. Health@Play aims to improve health and wellbeing amongst children with ID, in order to establish positive health behaviours from an early age as good habits set in childhood can last a lifetime. The programme aims to prevent the development of chronic illnesses such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease among this population. This programme, in its scale, is the biggest initiative targeted at children with ID currently available.

The partners

Special Olympics Ireland

Globally, Special Olympics (SO) is the leading provider of sports, physical activity and health opportunities for people with ID (Harada, *et al.* 2011; Pochstein, *et al.* 2023). The benefits derived from participation in organised sports for people with ID include positive health outcomes, transferrable life skills and enhanced personal development (Harada and Siperstein, 2009; MacDonald, *et al.* 2015). SOI is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is also the National Governing Body of sport for children and adults with ID (in Ireland), providing year round sports training, competition up to international and World Games level, leadership and health opportunities for athletes from four years of age with no upper age limit (What We Do Special Olympics Ireland, 2019).

The SOI Health and Wellbeing programme encompasses four key areas 1) Health Education, 2) Healthy Athletes, 3) Healthy Communities and 4) Health Messenger Team. The aim of this programme is to strengthen and develop the health skills of athletes and clubs, empowering them to make healthy choices that will enhance their involvement and participation in sport.

safefood

safefood is an All-island body, funded by the Departments of Health in Ireland and Northern Ireland. safefood works closely with many stakeholders in healthcare, education and policy development to address public health issues such as obesity and food poverty. The role of safefood is to promote awareness and knowledge of food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland. To do this it provides healthy eating and food safety advice to the public, carry out research, fund a range of community initiatives and public health nutrition campaigns, such as the START campaign.

The START campaign is a five-year, public awareness campaign from safefood in partnership with both Departments of Health, Healthy Ireland, the Health Service Executive and Northern Ireland Public Health Agency. The campaign aims to support and encourage parents to start making small daily changes to their children's diet and lifestyle and in so doing, get them started on their way to a healthier life. The campaign aims to motivate and inspire parents to take the first step in improving their child's health and to stick with those changes. START is one of the actions outlined in the Healthy Weight for Ireland 2016-2025 strategy (ROI) and continues the work outlined in the Fitter Futures for All 2012-2022 strategy (NI).

The campaign focus on key health messages to promote healthier lifestyles. These messages are tangible and transferrable can be used in different settings and delivered through different approaches.

The programme

safefood and SOI partnered in 2022 to develop a programme that would support the delivery of START messages to young athletes and their parents. The 'Health@Play' programme builds upon the work of SOI and complements their existing Health Promotion Programme which is available to athletes aged 16 and over. With 'Health@Play,' we've focused on healthy habits such as encouraging limiting foods high in fat sugar and salt, promoting healthier snacks including more fruit and vegetables, promoting more sleep, reducing screen time, and staying hydrated. This programme has been developed to meet the needs of children with ID aged between 4 - 15 years. The key health messages are delivered using games and play activities which are implemented in a fun and supportive way. This gives all children the opportunity to succeed and learn through play. Healthy habits and being physically active go hand in hand and this programme helps establish healthy habits from a young age. By doing so, children get a better understanding of healthy lifestyles as they grow older. It's more difficult to introduce a healthier lifestyle later in life, so programmes like this can help children with ID to understand its importance and make healthy choices early on.

Conclusion

In publishing this work the authors are hoping to stimulate the field to develop more programmes aimed at this target group. Furthermore, it is hoped that evaluation of such programmes can inform other organisations and lead to best practice guidelines. Our aim is to help end the preventable health disparities that people with ID face, through inclusive health education programming.

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