

ACES: Athlete COVID Experiences Survey

The Role of *Special Olympics Canada* in
Supporting Athletes and Families During and
Following the Pandemic

Special Olympics Canada Report

YORK 



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About the Survey

Dr. Jonathan Weiss from the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research (York University) partnered with Special Olympics Canada to conduct research to learn about athlete and family well-being during the pandemic, involvement in Special Olympics, and the kinds of supports they need now and in the future – in and out of sport. The ACES study aimed to inform how to program for athlete and family support during and following the pandemic, including how to promote retention and re-engagement, which will help to create an evidence-informed strategy that increases access to sport for all Canadians with intellectual disability.



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Overview

Objective of Survey: To assess and understand how athletes and their families are faring during the pandemic and inform how best to program for athlete and family support during and following the pandemic, including how to promote retention and re-engagement

- People with intellectual disability (ID) have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, with higher rates of COVID-19 positivity, mortality and morbidity compared to the general population (Lunsky et al., 2021).
- Negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic among children and young adults with intellectual disabilities include:
 - Reductions in physical activity level (Temple, 2022)
 - Poorer mental health (Amor et al., 2021; Drum et al., 2020; Rosencrans et al., 2021)
- Research on Special Olympics suggests that athletes may benefit in terms of:
 - Fitness and health (Draheim et al., 2002)
 - Social functioning (Weiss et al., 2003)
 - Psychological well-being (Riggen & Ulrich, 1993)
- The COVID-19 pandemic has understandably changed the context of sport participation.
- We do not know how athletes with ID are faring, and what they need to remain engaged and benefit from sport involvement.
- Key Findings indicated that:
 - Athletes have experienced considerable challenges related to COVID, including a reduction in participating in Special Olympics and greater distress.
 - At the same time, families are keen to resume activities, and it is clear what they need to feel comfortable doing so: adherence to public health guidelines, vaccine mandates, and adequate number of volunteers to offer support and ensuring participants follow restrictions and regulations, good communication, contact tracing, and smaller groups some sports.
 - Families are resilient and have clear ideas of what can help their athletes. This includes social connection, greater access to day programming and support workers, opportunities for activities, physical activity and Special Olympics, resuming or obtaining a job or volunteer position, and a greater access to mental health support.

Research Report

BACKGROUND

There is considerable evidence to suggest that there are many benefits of sport for people with intellectual disability. Special Olympics is the largest international multisport organization for youth and adults with intellectual disability and presents with a unique opportunity to understand the processes behind why sport is important, the outcomes of participation, and how to improve access. Research on Special Olympics suggests that athletes benefit in terms of fitness and health (Draheim et al., 2002), social functioning (Weiss et al., 2003), and psychological well-being (Riggen & Ulrich, 1993), making research on involvement integral.

This is particularly important within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as there is evidence to suggest that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the health and well-being of Canadians with intellectual disability (Lunskey et al., 2021). Research from the United Kingdom indicates that lockdown restrictions had a negative effect on children and young adults with physical and/or intellectual disabilities, with 61% of parents reporting a reduction in their child's physical activity levels and over 90% reporting a negative effect on their mental health, which was associated with a lack of access to specialist facilities, activities, equipment, and therapies (Theis et al., 2021)¹. Studies have also demonstrated that there is increased levels of mental health problems among people with IDD during this time (Amor et al., 2021; Drum et al., 2020; Rosencrans et al., 2021). Qualitative studies have found that adults with intellectual disability miss connections with their peers and family, have felt confused by preventative measures, struggled with accessing mental health care, and how being housebound has negatively impacted their lives (Embregts et al. 2020; Lake et al., 2021). It is important that we continue to investigate and understand how adults with intellectual disability are doing during this time, what kinds of supports can be most helpful during and post-pandemic, and what they need to remain engaged and benefit from sport involvement.

There is a pressing need to understand how athletes have remained connected to Special Olympics during the pandemic, how it has helped to support their physical and mental health during this period, and how they and their families intend to become more involved post-pandemic. Identifying the modified ways that athletes have maintained a connection to sport activities, and their experiences of doing so, can help to provide a context for future programming needs.

OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to (1) understand how athletes and families have remained connected to Special Olympics during the pandemic, and how they intend to be involved post-pandemic, (2) determine the barriers to involvement in Special Olympics that athletes may experience and the supports they need for a successful return, and (3) to understand the impact of the pandemic for athletes and their families, and what factors have helped them cope. This was assessed by examining:

- Involvement before the pandemic
- Involvement during the pandemic
- Comfort level returning to Special Olympics
- How Special Olympics has helped athletes cope
- Athlete physical activity
- Athlete mental health

¹ This work did not make any distinction between physical and intellectual disability, so we are unable to identify how many individuals with intellectual disability were reflected in those results, or how results are specific.

- Supports needed to return to Special Olympics
- Positive and negative impact of the pandemic
- Caregiver concerns for their athlete and supports needed
- Caregiver mental health

METHODOLOGY

Survey Development

Dr. Jonathan Weiss (York University) and Teresa Sellitto (York University) co-produced an online survey with Tom Davies (Director of Athlete and Coach Development), Kendra Isaak (Director of Sports and Competitions), and Blair McIntosh (Vice President of Sport). The aim was to understand how athletes and their families are faring during the pandemic, their involvement in Special Olympics during the pandemic, and what they need for a successful to return to Special Olympics.

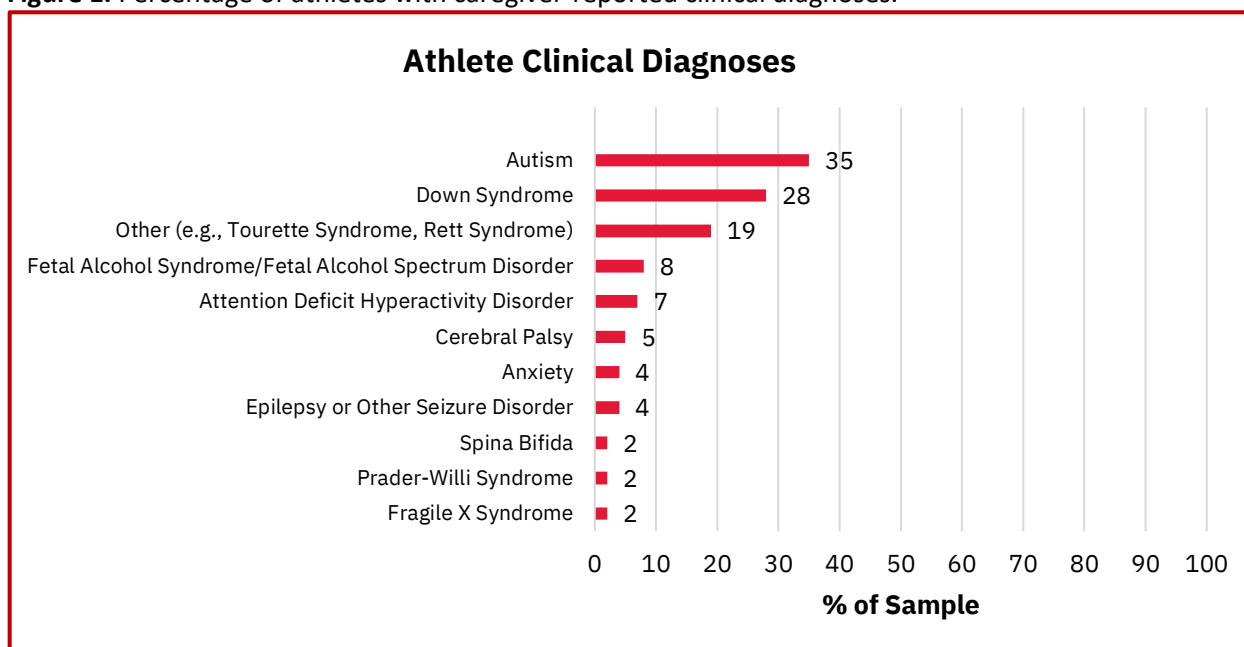
All participants provided informed consent before completing the survey. This survey was approved by the York University Human Participants Review ('Ethics') Sub-Committee.

PARTICIPANTS

Survey respondents included 225 caregivers of Special Olympic athletes from across Canada. Caregivers were between 27 and 81 years of age ($M = 56.7$, $SD = 9.32$). Most caregivers were mothers (76%), identified as White (84%), and had a post-secondary education (81%), such as a college degree (37%) or a bachelor's degree (32%). Approximately 19% of caregivers reported an annual family income at or below \$49,000, 31% reported between \$50,000 and \$99,999, 20% reported between \$100,000 and \$149,000, 10% reported between \$150,000 and \$199,000, 5% reported at or above \$200,000, and 15% reported at they prefer not to disclose.

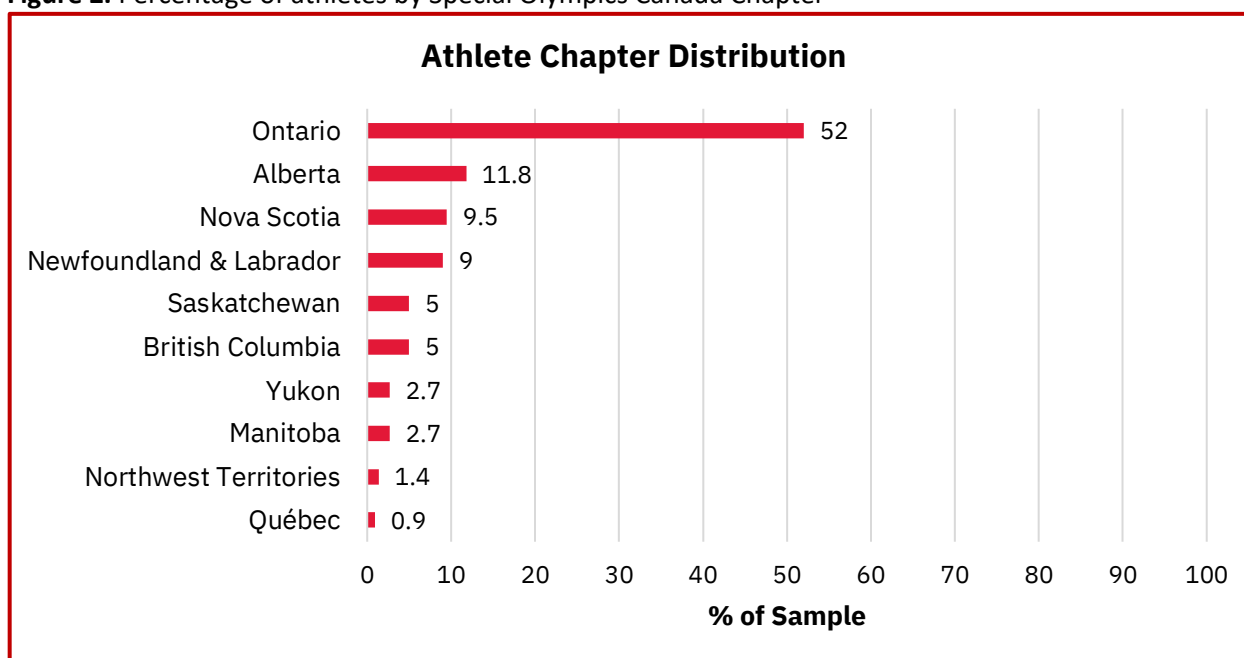
Athletes were between 12 and 52 years of age ($M = 27.3$, $SD = 8.37$). 62% identified as male, 37% as female, 1% as non-binary/third gender, and one athlete preferred to self-describe. Most athletes were living with their family (77%), such as parents, grandparents, and/or siblings. All athletes had a diagnosis of an intellectual disability or related diagnosis (e.g., Down syndrome). Additional clinical diagnoses are shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Percentage of athletes with caregiver-reported clinical diagnoses.



Athletes were involved in Special Olympics Chapters across Canada, with the majority participating with Special Olympics Ontario (52%). Please see **Figure 2** for full Chapter distribution. There was a fairly equal distribution of athlete competition level from local to national levels, with 24% competing at the local level, 19% at the regional level, 31% at the provincial level, and 21% at the national level, however few competed at the world level (5%).

Figure 2. Percentage of athletes by Special Olympics Canada Chapter



Note. 4 cases missing

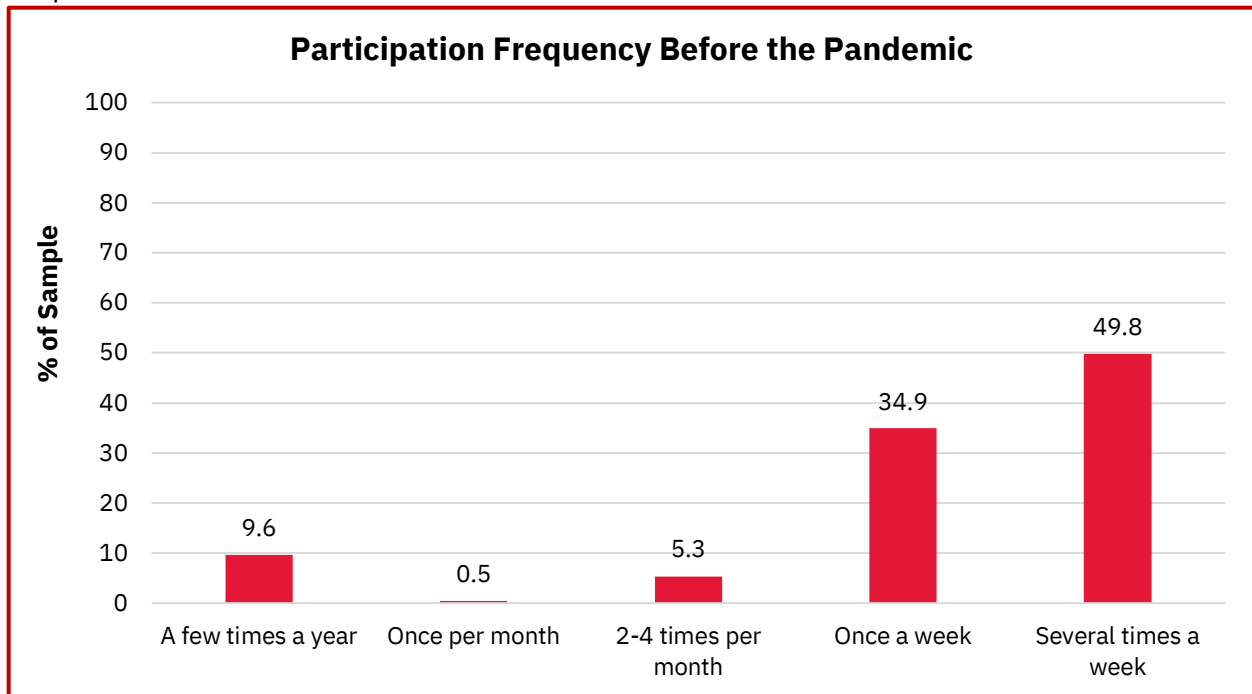
RESULTS

Involvement in Special Olympics

Involvement Before vs. During the Pandemic

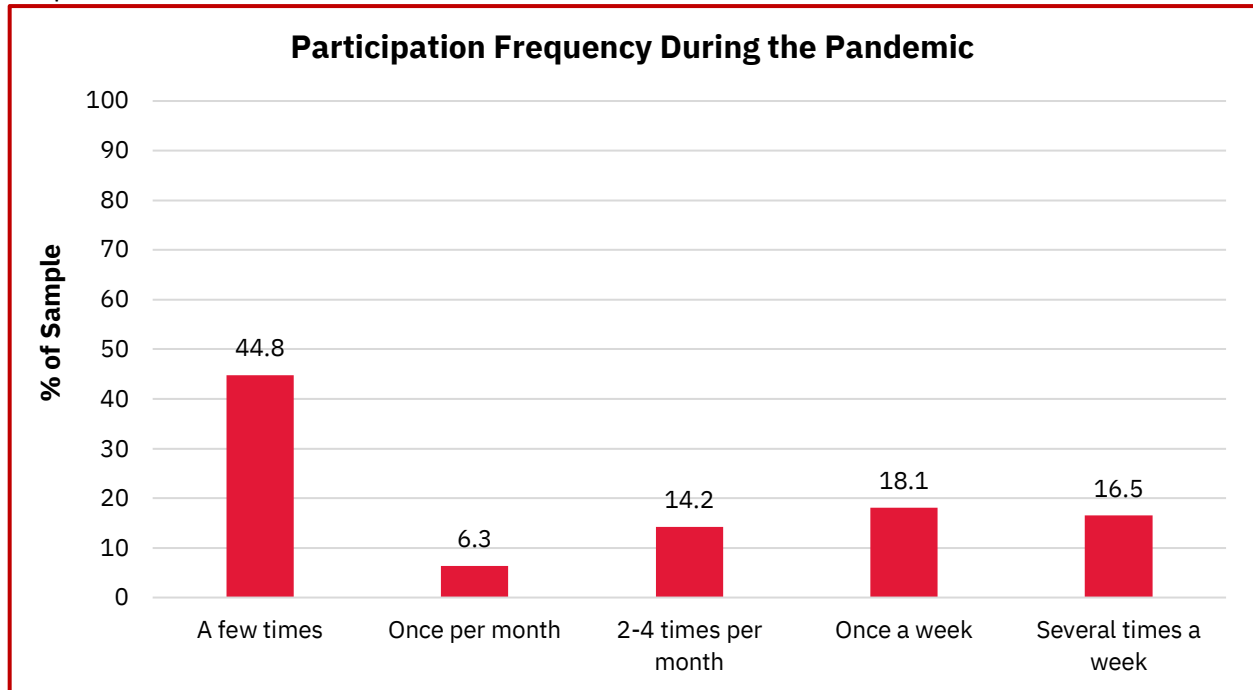
About 58% of the sample was involved in Special Olympics (in-person or online) since the start of the pandemic. Of those who were involved during the pandemic, about 59% of caregivers reported that athletes have been involved in Special Olympics a lot less since the start of the pandemic. As seen in **Figure 3**, most athletes (85%) participated in Special Olympics once to several times a week compared to about 45% participating only a few times during the pandemic (**Figure 4**).

Figure 3. Percentage of athletes' caregiver-reported frequency of participation in Special Olympics before the pandemic.



Note. 16 cases missing; frequency for the total sample

Figure 4. Percentage of athletes' caregiver-reported frequency of participation in Special Olympics during the pandemic.



Note. 2 cases missing. The frequency of participation of athletes who were involved in Special Olympics during the pandemic (58% of total sample)

Some of the commonly reported ways that caregivers and athletes have stayed involved with Special Olympics over the course of the pandemic include participating in-person with restrictions, participating in online programs and events (e.g., PEAK virtual program, live workouts on Facebook, Zoom dance program, Zoom socials, leadership program), staying connected through e-mail, and staying socially connected with fellow athletes through texting and messaging.

Involvement After the Pandemic

About 92% of caregivers reported they would feel comfortable being involved in Special Olympics in-person when public health guidelines say that it is okay to do so.

Why Families Feel Comfortable

- Vaccinations
- Safety procedures
- Outdoor sports
- Special Olympics is supportive
- The need for physical activity and social connection is higher than the risk of COVID

Why Families **Do Not** Feel Comfortable

- Being in crowds
- Masks cannot be worn for all sports
- Athlete is high risk
- Worries of improper implementation of safety procedures

Caregivers have clear ideas of what they need for a successful return:

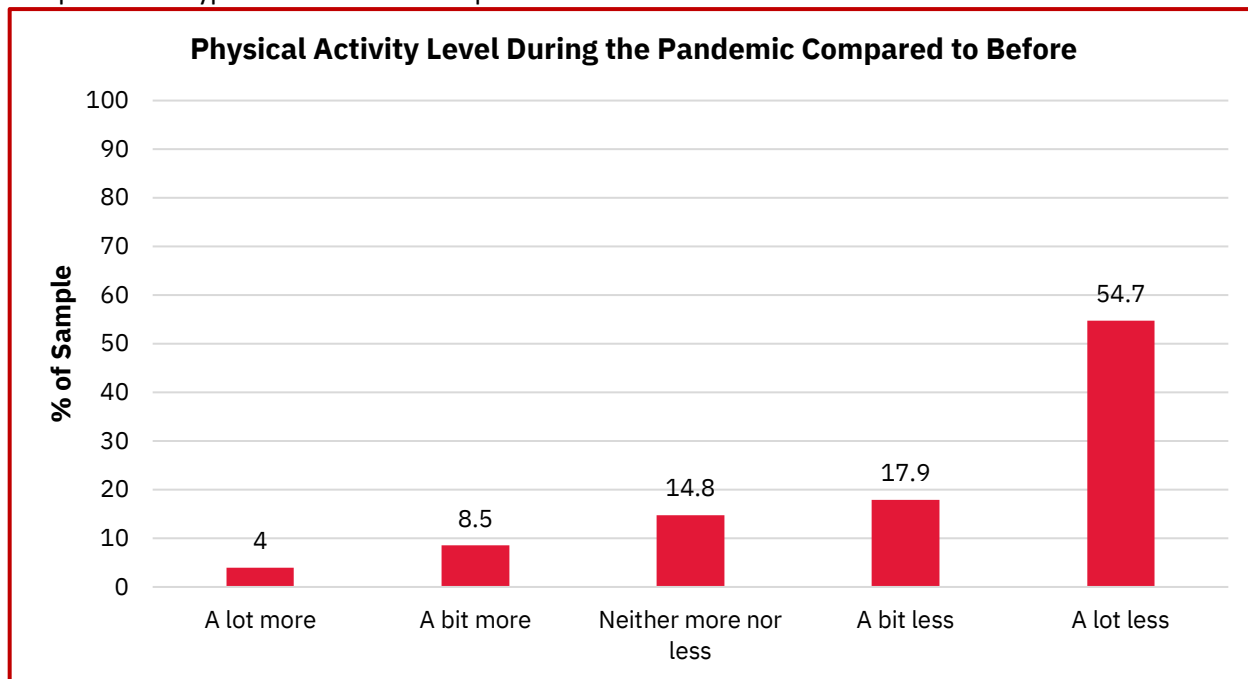
- Adherence of public health guidelines (e.g., masking, distancing, sanitization)
- An adequate number of volunteers to offer support and ensuring participants follow restrictions and regulations
- Good communication and contact tracing
- Smaller groups for sports where it is harder to distance (e.g., swimming)
- Vaccine mandate for all athletes and staff
 - 79% of caregivers reported that it is very or extremely important that everyone who attends Special Olympics is vaccinated

Impact of the Pandemic for Athletes and Families

Athlete Physical Activity Level

Almost all caregivers (92%) reported that participating in physical activities and/or sports is very or extremely important for the athlete, however, as seen in **Figure 5**, the majority of athletes have had less physical activity during the pandemic compared to a typical week before the pandemic.

Figure 5. Percentage of athletes' caregiver-reported frequency physical activity during the pandemic compared to a typical week before the pandemic.

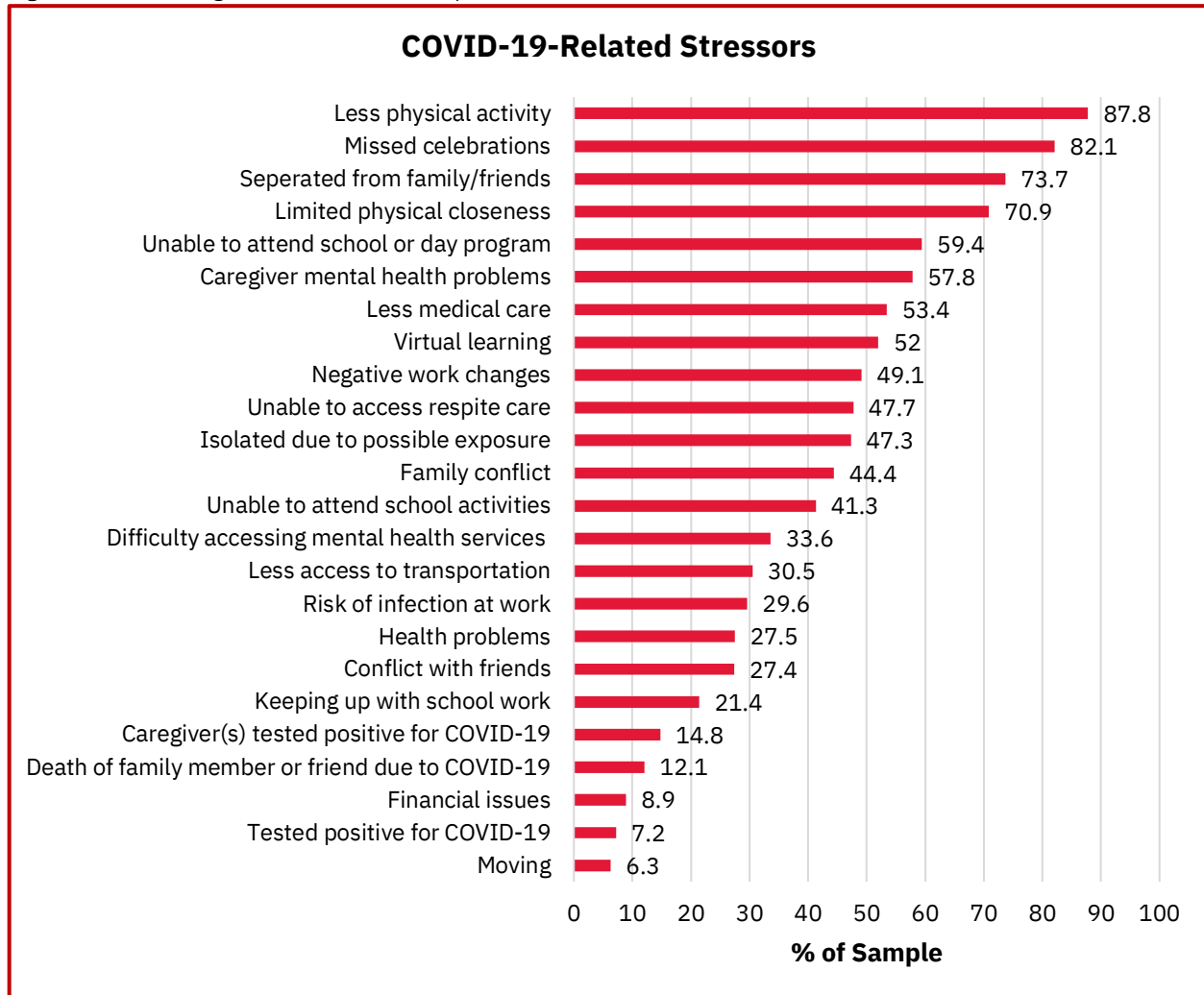


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Athletes' Experience of COVID-19-Related Stressors

Athletes experienced many challenges related to the pandemic. As show in **Figure 6**, commonly reported COVID-19-related stressors experienced by athletes included less physical activity, missing celebrations, stressors related to social isolation, and being unable to attend their school or day program.

Figure 6. Percentage of athletes who experienced COVID-19-related stressors.



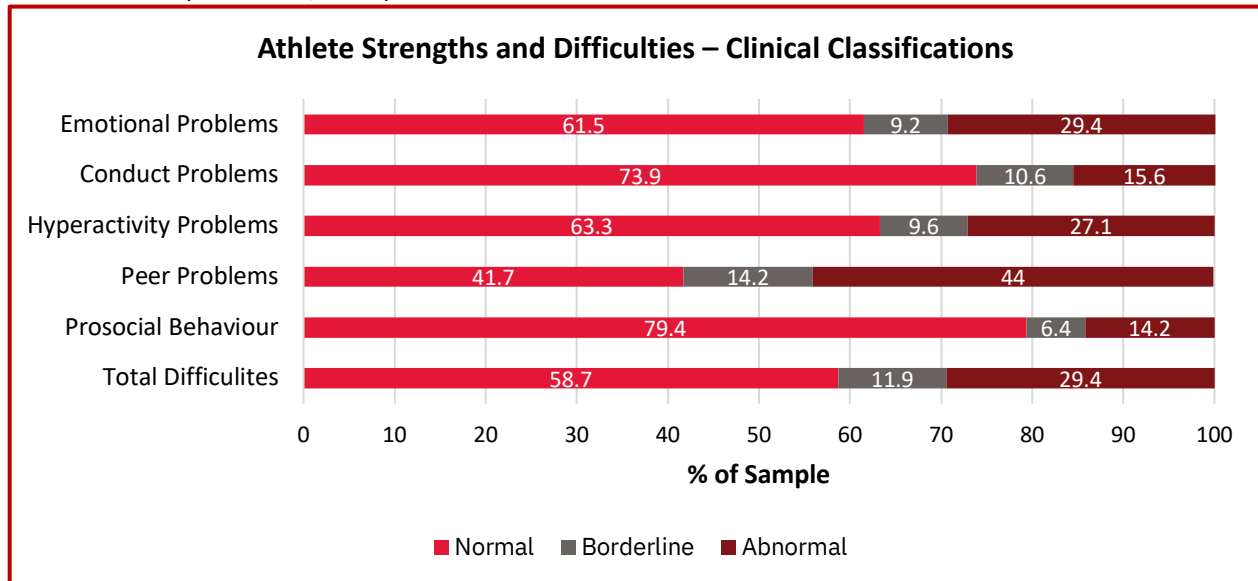
How Special Olympics has Helped Athletes and Caregivers Cope

Of the families who stayed involved in Special Olympics during the pandemic, about 49% reported that Special Olympics helped the athlete cope with COVID-19 related stressors. Respondents noted that Special Olympics had helped the athlete cope with COVID-19-related stressors by providing opportunities for physical activity and connection with others. The online activities that involved mindfulness sessions and relaxation breathing were also reported to be helpful. Caregivers also reported that participating in Special Olympics during the pandemic allowed the athlete to have something in their schedule to look forward to and Special Olympics was always there to answer any of their questions.

Athletes' Mental Health

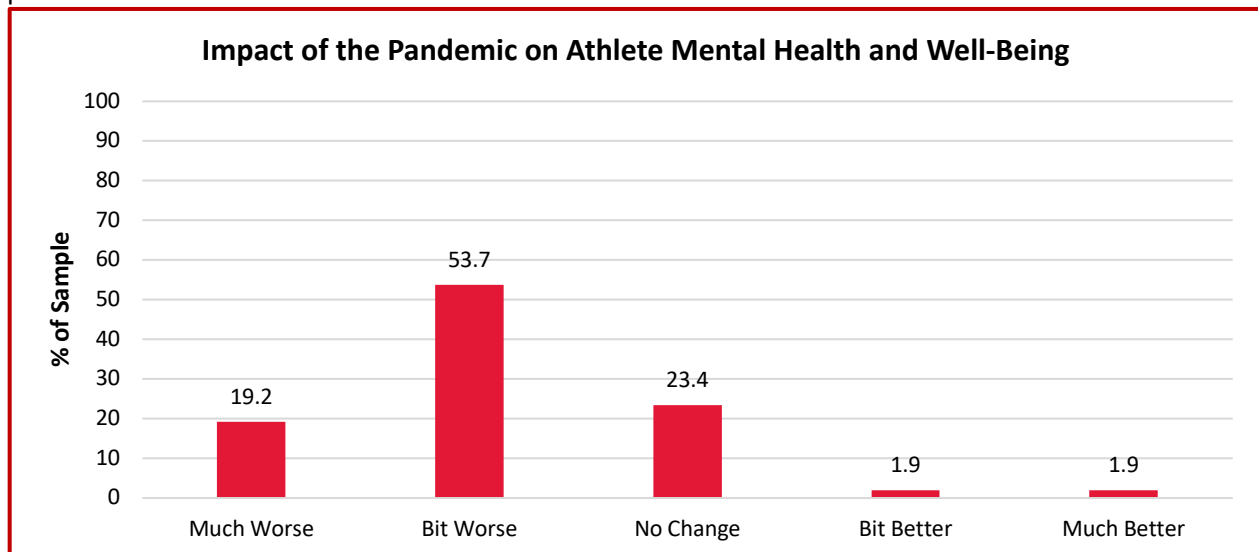
Caregivers reported on the athletes' strengths and difficulties during the pandemic in terms of emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity problems, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour. As shown in **Figure 7**, the greatest degree of clinically significant difficulties for athletes was experienced in the peer problems domain. For the majority of athletes (73%), their overall mental health and well-being was reported by caregivers to have gotten a bit worse or much worse during the pandemic (**Figure 8**).

Figure 7. Percentage of athletes in each clinical classification category on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997).



Note. 7 cases missing

Figure 8. Caregivers' reports of how athletes' mental health and well-being has changed during the pandemic



Note. 11 cases missing

Caregivers reported a variety of **concerns** regarding the impact of the pandemic on athletes' physical and mental health. Some of the commonly reported concerns included:

- Increased level of anxiety, fear, sadness, loneliness, behaviour issues, and frustration
- The athlete becoming introverted and wanting to stay isolated
- Decreases in energy, physical fitness, independence, self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and focus
- Regression in their skills in and out of sport
- Lack of understanding of COVID-19 and safety measures

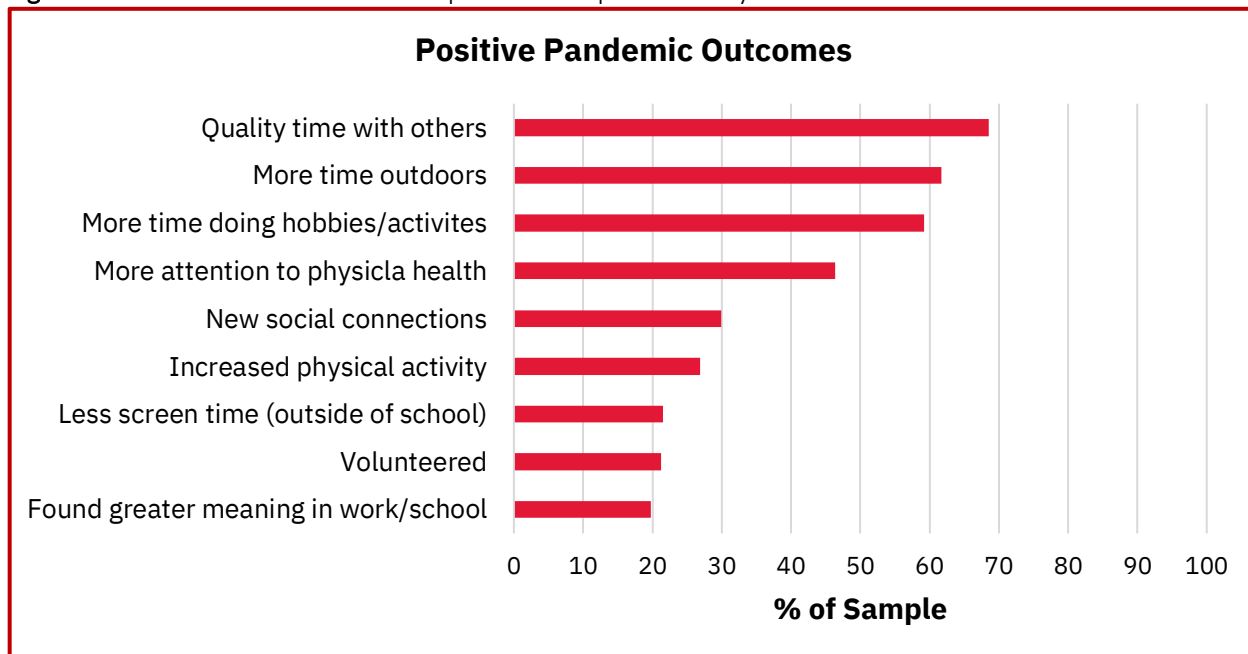
Caregivers also reported on what they think would **help** the athlete during this time, which included:

- Social connection with friends
- Greater access to day programming and support workers
- Opportunities for activities and outings in the community
- Physical activity and Special Olympics
- Resuming or obtaining a job or volunteer position
- Greater access to mental health support

Positive Impact of the Pandemic on Athletes

Although the pandemic has negatively impacted people with intellectual disability in Canada, caregivers in the current study did report that there were some positive outcomes from the pandemic that athletes experienced. As shown in **Figure 9**, the most reported positive outcomes for athletes were quality time with others, more time spent outdoors, and more time doing hobbies/activities.

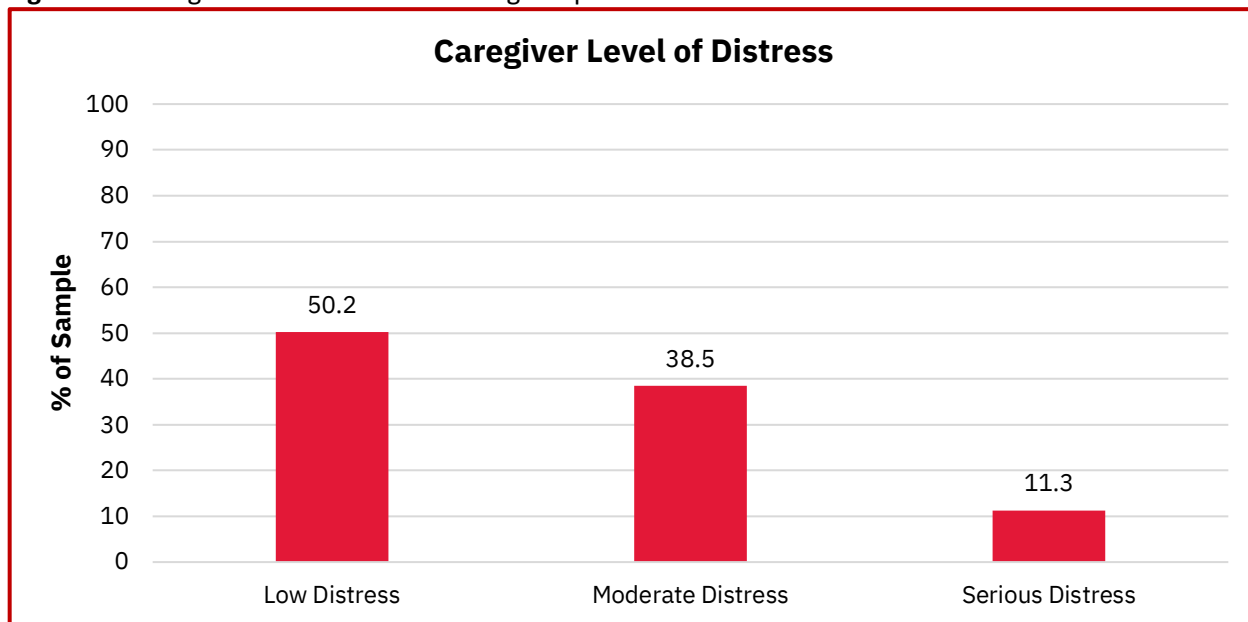
Figure 9. Positive outcomes from the pandemic experienced by athletes.



Caregiver Mental Health

As seen in **Figure 10**, caregivers tend to be faring well during the pandemic in terms of their distress levels. Overall, this sample also indorsed a lot of family hardiness or resilience during stressful events, which may have been helpful when dealing with the many stressors presented to families during the pandemic.

Figure 10. Caregivers' distress levels during the pandemic



Note. 4 cases missing

CONCLUSIONS

This survey explored the experiences of athletes and their families during the pandemic to help inform how best to program for athlete and family support during and following the pandemic, including how to promote retention and re-engagement.

The results of the current study suggest that athletes have experienced considerable challenges related to COVID, including a reduction in participating in Special Olympics and greater distress. At the same time, families are keen to resume activities, and it is clear what they need to feel comfortable doing so: adherence to public health guidelines, vaccine mandates, and adequate number of volunteers to offer support and ensuring participants follow restrictions and regulations, good communication, contact tracing, and smaller groups some sports. Our findings also suggest that families are resilient and have clear ideas of what can help their athletes. This includes social connection, greater access to day programming and support workers, opportunities for activities, physical activity and Special Olympics, resuming or obtaining a job or volunteer position, and a greater access to mental health support.



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