**Title**: Let’s Play Together: Engaging Families and Young Children with IDD in Inclusive Play Using Technology

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**Introduction**: Special Olympics Young Athletes (YA) is an inclusive early childhood program that delivers direct support to children ages 2 to 7 through a series of structured, play-based developmental skill activities that support social, cognitive, and physical development of young children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Evaluations of YA have demonstrated positive impacts on motor and adaptive behavior skill development for young children with IDD in both U.S. and international contexts (Favazza, Siperstein, Zeisel, Odom & Moskowitz, 2013; Smith et al., 2024). To build on the success of traditional in-person YA programming, Special Olympics developed a mobile application to support YA implementation at home. As part of the profile development when registering for the YA app, parents/caregivers complete a developmental survey for their child. Answers to this survey provide personalized activity recommendations in cognitive, language, social-emotional, and motor skill domains so that families can support their child’s development through structured play at home. The purpose of this study is to describe results from a pilot evaluation that sought to understand parents’ perceptions of how the YA app supports parent-child interactions and their child’s acquisition of new skills important for child development.

**Method**: Special Olympics engaged four state and country level SO Programs (US-Ohio, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Malta) to participate in this pilot evaluation. A pre-survey was developed and distributed to families within each participating SO Program and included parent and child demographic information and questions related to child developmental skills, including communication, motor, and socialization skills. Parents received a post-survey eight weeks following the pre-survey that asked the same developmental skill questions and additional questions related to use of the YA app, including frequency of use, time spent on the app, and perceived impact of the app. Parent focus groups were also conducted to gain a more in depth understanding of app use and impact. Across all SO Programs, a total of 311 families (Ohio=138; Kenya=63; Zimbabwe=53; Malta=57) registered in the app as part of the evaluation.

**Results**: Across all respondents, the majority were mothers with high school completion or above. Parents indicated that children were, on average, five years of age with 82% having a diagnosis of IDD, 85% receiving special educational services or early intervention, and 73% receiving additional therapies (e.g. OT, PT, and SLT). The most common diagnoses were ASD, Down syndrome, and general developmental delay or IDD. Preliminary analysis of the post-survey data from Ohio (n=91) indicated that 65% of parents were using the app once a week or more, 100% of parents felt that the activities in the app helped them think of new ways to play with their child at home, and 85% reported an increase in the amount of time they played with their child at home. Parents reported a positive impact of the app for their child, with 88% indicating that the app helped them understand their child’s strengths, and 67% indicated that their child learned new skills.

Qualitative data from the focus groups are largely consistent with the preliminary quantitative results as families expressed that the activities were the most valuable component of the app. Families in Kenya and Zimbabwe shared that the app helped them recognize skills and strengths of their child and facilitated engagement within the family unit such as encouraging siblings to play alongside their sibling with IDD, which was not happening previously. Finally, parents reported that the visuals alongside the activities helped make play more accessible – especially for families who experience more challenges with literacy. For these families, the visuals helped provide ideas and allowed for easier implementation at home.

Quantitative data analysis of the post-survey from other participating SO Programs, and pre-post data analysis is underway and will be presented at the conference.

**Discussion:** Preliminary results indicate that the YA app has a positive impact on parent-child interactions with parents learning new ways to play with their children at home to support the development of new skills. In particular, the personalized nature of the app helps parents understand their child’s strengths, allowing them to scaffold the development of other skills through the tailored activities provided through the app. This is especially important for empowering parents and caregivers by giving them the tools to support development at home, when many families are waiting for services or navigating the challenges of obtaining services. Differences across countries and cultures will also be discussed.

**References:**

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