

PRESS RELEASE

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Early Childhood Initiatives Center and Special Olympics Arkansas Launch Sport and Play Preschool Program

Program to help young children in preschools across the region develop motor, social and cognitive skills

The Early Childhood Initiatives Center has partnered with Special Olympics Arkansas to bring the *Young Athletes* program to early childhood centers in Northwest Arkansas. *Young Athletes*, a curriculum developed by Special Olympics, introduces children with and without intellectual disabilities to basic sport skills, like running, kicking and throwing. *Young Athletes* offers families, teachers, caregivers and people from the community the chance to share the joy of sports with all children.

Young Athletes provides children with activities and games that meet their individual skill and ability levels, while allowing them to play together in a fun and inclusive environment. Children of all abilities take part, and they all benefit. Children learn how to play with others and develop important skills for learning. Children also learn to share, take turns and follow directions. These skills help children in family, community and school activities. *Young Athletes* is a fun way for children to get fit. It is important to teach children healthy habits while they are young. This can set the stage for a life of physical activity, friendships and learning.

Early Childhood Initiatives Center and Special Olympics Arkansas have created a *Young Athletes* Train-the-Trainer program so early childhood center directors can train their toddler and preschool teams year after year and implement *Young Athletes* in conjunction with their outdoor playtimes.

"This program is not just about laying a strong foundation for children in motor, social and cognitive skills at school. We take it a step further by providing skill cards to their parents each week so children can practice the physical activities at home as well," said Michelle Barnes, Executive Director of the Early Childhood Initiatives Center.





The training was held on July 12, 2017 at Northwest Arkansas Community College Center for Health Professionals. Participants received free curriculum guides and equipment.

Participating early childhood center directors will train their toddler and preschool staff on *Young Athletes*, implement the full curriculum, which includes 8 weeks of lessons, and do pre-and post assessments. To extend the experience, the ECIC will follow centers closely throughout the implementation process.

“Special Olympics is a grassroots organization that relies heavily on volunteers and educators to implement our initiatives and resources within their schools,” said Camie Powell, Director of Marketing and Corporate Relations, Special Olympics Arkansas. “In addition to

providing pure sport training and competitions we are committed to improving the health and wellness of children through Special Olympics Young Athletes. We are thankful to have partners like the Early Childhood Initiative Center helping us propel our movement forward.”

Upon completion of the project, the ECIC will develop a *Young Athletes* sustainability toolkit for all early childhood programs across the nation, complete with curriculum, tools, marketing materials, as well as information on how to find volunteers and funding.

For more information, contact Sunny Lane or Kristen Herbert at (479) 273-3552 or visit ecicnwa.org.

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About the Early Childhood Initiatives Center

The ECIC collaborates with the nearly 500 early childhood programs in Northwest Arkansas, to ensure that every child, infant through pre-k, has access to the highest quality of early childhood education and care. High-quality early childhood education benefits the child, workforce and society through increased graduation rates, parental earnings and employee retention, and ensures a talent rich pipeline, leading to a \$9.21 return on investment for every dollar spent in early education. We rely on the generosity of volunteers, advocates and donors in our community. Visit ecicnwa.org to learn more.

About Special Olympics Arkansas

Special Olympics Arkansas is an organization that unleashes the human spirit through the transformative power and joy of sport, everyday around the state. Through programming in sports, health, education and community building, Special Olympics Arkansas is changing the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, solving the global injustice, isolation, intolerance and inactivity they face. Special Olympics Arkansas is providing opportunities for more than 15,000 athletes and 5,000 volunteers in all counties across the State of Arkansas. Specialolympicsarkansas.org