

It is important that people feel a sense of belonging and feel like they are a part of their bigger community. Many studies have shown that having a sense of belonging helps to bring meaning to their lives. But what exactly is belonging? And what does it mean in the world of sport?

What is belonging?

Belonging has been described as something that people feel inside. When a person feels like they belong it means that the group or community that they are a part of accepts them for who they are. A person with a strong sense of belonging will feel connected to their community and feel they have a role within it. Importantly, belonging extends to all members of our community regardless of race, gender or disability status.

With this information in mind, in 2019 a group of researchers, young adults with intellectual disabilities, and staff from organizations supporting youths with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and students led by Rebecca Renwick created a Framework of Belonging, This framework was specifically for youths with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It has four main ideas:

1. Engaging in social relationship by having people to talk to and do things with
2. Interacting with people who also had similar life experiences, interests and disabilities
3. Being a part of and contributing to the community
4. Finding a good fit between what a person wants for themselves and what others expect of them

Importantly, the researchers recognized that this sense of belonging could be applied in many areas of one's life and could be fostered in many different communities, including sporting communities.

What does belonging means in sport?

“Sport has a unique power to attract, mobilize and inspire. By its very nature, sport is about participation. It is about inclusion and citizenship.”

The United Nations On Sport for Development and Peace

Sport has a unique way of bringing together people whether they are active members on a sports team or watching from the stands, many people are able to enjoy and feel like they are a part of sport.

This is especially true in an organization like Special Olympics who prides itself on creating a community of athletes and providing a safe and inclusive space to enjoy sport together.

What it means to Victoria McDonald to belong in Special Olympics:

I do not feel alone. I know there is a whole family of Special Olympic athletes and their families who treat me as a human being with respect as well as they understand me as an athlete with special limitations that I was born with. I look forward to participating in sports to stay healthy and fit in a safe and inclusive setting; attending galas so I can go to the salon to do my hair and make-up, pick out my gown with matching shoes; and, Motionball events to meet up with friends and meet new friends doing the same things I love to do - sports. I love to travel doing these sports - not only in my neighborhood but to Toronto, Guelph, Antigonish and many other towns and cities! I also enjoy the fashion as an athlete receives uniforms for competitions, such as the

one I am wearing in this photograph. I also like the swag we get when we attend the Motionball events. I was featured on Sportsnet's Top of Her Game and the whole experience was good for me as I am a shy person and I had to talk with the production team for an entire day.

- Victoria

Therefore, it is essential to help all individuals foster feelings of belonging in their everyday lives. This can be done in communities through many ways, such as through safe and inclusive sport activities which allow athletes to make new friends, develop their own interests, and participate in fun events. It is important to ensure that all people can have the opportunity to build belonging through sport. But more research is still needed to find out *from athletes themselves how belonging happens through sport*.