**Accept your Child’s Disability and Help Them Overcome it**

**Source: Mukta Narain Thind, National Director – Organisation Development – Special Olympics Bharat**

Every child has a right to play and nothing should stop children from manifesting their full potential, irrespective of their physical or intellectual disabilities. This is my personal belief.I work with young children through a programme called the Special Olympics Youth Athletes, which aims to bring inclusive sport play to children with and without intellectual disabilities, ages two to seven years.

I have directly been involved with the programme and the children and I have learnt that it is never too late to turn the lives of these children around. I have seen hope in the eyes of parents when their child is able to perform the simplest of activities, like throwing a ball in the net. It also makes them happy when these children are able to walk without support.

Our aim had been to focus on holistic development and training that goes beyond classrooms into the playing fields, cultural and community centres, to motivate children with disabilities to join and remain in school and create role models who will inspire children and also motivate parents into sending their children to school and to participate in sports and other extra-curricular activities.Personally, the programme has also given me an understanding of grassroots challenges and the dividing and unifying elements. An administrative unit can be divided by castes but communities can be unified and brought together though the smallest activities of these young athletes. When a schoolteacher or youth in a village becomes a leader to lead these activities in communities, we have witnessed a transformation.

In my 13 years of association with Special Bharat Olympics, I have grown and learnt much from these children. There have been instances when I feel that these children have impacted my life in a big way. One particular incident stands out for me. An international corporate group runs an eyewitness programme where a select few employees visited, interacting with children with intellectual disabilities. For this, we do family visits to different parts of India and have done four trips in the past two years. In this particular case, we travelled with a group of 20 foreigners to a district called Birbhum in West Bengal to meet a 10-year-old boy who lived in the slums.

His father abandoned him at an early age and he had a milestone delay, which left him with an intellectual disability. None of the children in the village wanted to play with him. That day, he was given new shoes and clothes and we started playing with him. Suddenly, we noticed the whole village was witnessing what was happening. When this group of 20 visited his dwelling, the entire village gathered and all the children got excited seeing them. Once they interacted with this young boy, it broke the ice between him and the children of the village who played with him for the first time. This gave him an inclusion opportunity.

We ran another eyewitness programme in 2018 where 20 people from Taiwan travelled to Sonipat. We generally take feedback from the group on the impact this has had on them. During one such interaction, when we were taking their thoughts on the programme, one woman started crying profusely, saying she realised the smallest things can have the biggest impact. She herself was not a good student at school and realised the challenges one faces with intellectual disability. It was an emotional moment for me as well and I just hugged her.

Globally, 2018 proved to be a big year for us at Special Bharat Olympics as the Special Olympics Youth Athletes programme saw close to 441,000 participants, a 43 per cent increase since 2017. India saw the largest growth with roughly 80,000 new Young Athletes, thanks to support from the IKEA Foundation.

My advice to parents is to please not hide the challenges of your child. Once you accept his or her requirements, doors of opportunities will open up as you start your journey together. Indulge them in activities to keep them fit, help them learn through activities. If a child is not responding well at school, there could be a milestone delay. Through our intervention, we can improve their social and motor skills. I would like to tell parents whose children have been diagnosed with an intellectual disability or whose children have special needs that you should never lose hope and never be defeated.