


Volunteering With **KEEN** Chicago

Helpful Tips and Tricks





KEEN CHICAGOS MISSION



MISSION: Empower youth with disabilities and impact volunteer coaches through participation in free, non-competitive, one-on-one programs of physical activity and fun, supporting the overall health and well-being of all participants.

VISION: To create communities in which individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities for recreation, fitness, and friendship; provide families with respite and a supportive network; and foster a lifelong commitment to positive change for volunteers through their engagement with KEEN athletes.



History and Goals

History

KEEN (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now) began in Oxford, England, and expanded to the U.S. in 1992. KEEN Chicago, the first local affiliate, launched in 2004 and celebrated 20 years of service in 2024. What began as a grassroots effort has grown into a strong nonprofit offering inclusive recreational programs for youth with disabilities across Chicagoland.

Goals




- Eliminate barriers to physical activity for youth with disabilities and support their development,
- Promote inclusion
- Build a culture of disability awareness through volunteer engagement.





WHO KEEN SERVES...



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- Growing community of 200+ youth\young adults with disabilities each year
 - Inclusive disability group: ALL disabilities welcome. Most common are autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome but other disability types are represented too (e.g. medical diagnoses, learning disabilities)
 - Athletes represent a variety of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, often having intersectional minority identities.
 - 2024 Athlete Demographics: 38% Hispanic/Latino, 23% African American, 25% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 4% Biracial, 2% Other
 - Many come from low income, bilingual, and/or immigrant households
 - Programs are Always free, removing financial barriers to participation
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WHAT WE DO

KEEN CHICAGO'S PROGRAMMING

- Wide range of ongoing adaptive programs: Swimming, trampoline, basketball, bowling, soccer, dance, biking
- Special events: Kayaking, rock climbing, art, sailing—introducing new experiences & building confidence
- New in 2024: KEEN Plus-- Programs for young adults (18+), filling a critical gap in inclusive recreation

KEEN CHICAGO'S APPROACH

Trauma-informed, healing-centered, choice-based, unstructured and non-competitive

KEEN CHICAGO'S IMPACT

- 96% of parents say KEEN makes sports more accessible
- 93% report improved mental health for their child
- Programs support physical health, emotional well-being & community connection

Why Volunteer at KEEN


- Experience will be fun, rewarding, and impactful
- Work one-on-one with an athlete in adaptive, non-competitive activities
- No experience needed—just bring energy and enthusiasm!
- Help create a safe, inclusive space where athletes of all abilities and backgrounds can thrive
- Be part of a welcoming community that supports confidence, connection, and joy
- Learn about the disability community and become an advocate for inclusion



What to Expect: Session Example



This session outline is based on a sample day at KEEN Sports – UIC. The timing and activities of the session may vary based on session type, but this should give you an idea!

- 10:30am Quick check-in, setup & orientation with staff (30 minutes prior to start time)
 - 11:00am – Session I begins! Meet your athlete & warm up together
 - 11:10–11:45am Rotate through adaptive activities like basketball, obstacle courses, scooters & free play
 - 11:45–11:50am End with a joyful group parachute activity
 - 11:50am–12:00pm volunteer break
 - 12:00–12:50pm REPEAT for session two!
 - 12:50–1:00pm session cleanup/debrief
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No special skills needed—just patience, positivity & openness



You can expect a full 2 hours of fun, movement & connection!



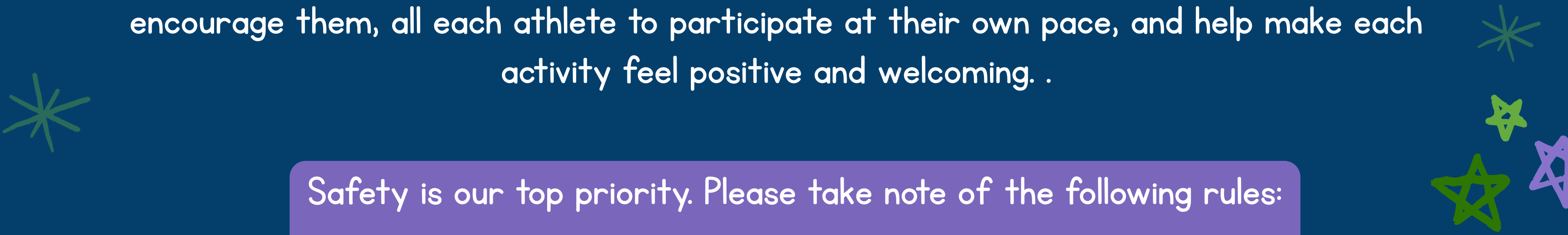
Session Photos





Volunteer Rules

At KEEN Chicago, volunteers play a vital role in creating a safe, inclusive, and fun space for our athletes. As a volunteer, your job is to support your athlete throughout the session, encourage them, and help each athlete to participate at their own pace, and help make each activity feel positive and welcoming. .



Safety is our top priority. Please take note of the following rules:

- 1) Volunteers should NEVER be alone with an athlete. If an athlete needs to use the restroom or take a break, please alert a staff member or have a parent or guardian assist them. If for some reason that is not possible, you must bring a second volunteer with you.
 - 2) We ask that you **stay off your phone** during sessions, **speak positively and respectfully**, and always **follow the athlete's lead** when it comes to participation.
 - 3) Make **staff aware of any challenges you are having**. We are there to support you!
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Meeting Athlete Needs

KEEN Athletes may present with: communication challenges, difficulty with impulse control, inability to self-regulate, and trouble understanding physical boundaries. Many KEEN athletes use non-traditional forms of communication—and all of them are capable of connecting with you! Be open, patient, and responsive. If you're having any challenges at all (e.g. aggression, medical issue) grab a staff member or session leader to help ASAP.

Helpful Approaches:

- Use “First, then” language (“First we stretch, then we play basketball.”)
- Stimming is okay! Stimming = self-soothing or regulating movements (e.g., flapping, rocking)
- Families can help! Siblings or parents may help interpret communication needs
- Use age-appropriate language. Speak in a tone that matches the athlete's age
- Communication can look different: Technology (iPads, speech devices), Sign language, Picture systems (PECS)

Tip: Trust that every athlete is communicating in their own way—your job is to listen, observe, and respond with kindness and curiosity.



Understanding Disability



What is Disability?

- An umbrella term that includes impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions
- The only minority group anyone can join—or leave—at any time

Inclusive Language Matters

- Avoid jargon like “differently abled”
- Use people-first language (e.g., “person with a disability”)
- Ability-first language (e.g., “autistic person”) is also OK when preferred by the individual



Models of Disability

- Medical Model: Focuses on “fixing” the individual
- Social Model: Focuses on removing barriers in society
- → At KEEN, we follow the social model—believing the environment should adapt to support everyone’s inclusion

Access & Inclusion

- 81% of people with disabilities don’t feel welcome in fitness spaces (Lakeshore Foundation)
- KEEN aims to change that by creating spaces where everyone belongs






Other Ways To Help

There are many ways to support KEEN Chicago and help us grow our inclusive community.



Spread the Word

- Follow us on social media! @keenchicago on FB and IG. Also on LinkedIn!
 - Share about KEEN Chicago and our mission on social media
 - Repost stories, tag us, and amplify our athletes' voices
 - Talk about KEEN in your classroom, workplace, or community
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Bring Others In

- Invite a friend to volunteer
- Encourage your network to attend a session or event

Support Our Mission

- Join a fundraising event
- Serve on a volunteer committee (e.g. Coaches Committee)



Every action helps us create more joyful, inclusive spaces for youth with disabilities.





Thank You!



Thank you for joining us at KEEN Chicago! We're so glad to have you as part of our community. Your time, energy, and enthusiasm mean the world to our athletes and families.

Contact us with any questions:

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FOLLOW US! Click the links below to our social media pages:

Instagram: [keenchicago](#)

Linkedin: [Kids Enjoy Exercise Now – KEEN Chicago](#)

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