



# Strategies for Developing Youth Leadership

Youth leadership development happens through shared experiences in which young people learn by doing. Unfortunately, youth with disabilities often are left out of youth leadership opportunities because of misconceptions about their disability, segregation in school and community settings, and lack of opportunities to share their experiences and feelings.

Here are some suggestions to create opportunities and encourage leadership in youth with and without disabilities:

- Encourage participation in community service starting in middle school. Service learning can be part of a class curriculum for academic credit. Or, staff or students can start an extra-curricular service club. Service experiences are more likely to be successful if the opportunity matches student interests.
  - Provide a leadership training program for course credit. Schools can develop a course focusing on leadership styles, traits and strategies, or leadership content can be built into an existing business course.
  - Set up a peer mentoring/peer partner program pairing students with and without disabilities. Consider shaking up the traditional mentor experience: students with disabilities mentor younger students with or without disabilities or students with disabilities mentor same-age peers related to an interest area or talent. Or, encourage students with disabilities to identify a mentor, perhaps an adult with disabilities in their community.
  - Teach all students about the history and legal rights of disability advocacy as part of any curriculum focusing on diversity, multiculturalism and social justice. Disability can be part of a social studies course examining civil rights or American history.
  - Start a chapter of Kids as Self Advocates ([fvkasa.org](http://fvkasa.org)) or LEAD (Learning and Education about Disabilities.)
  - Make school extra-curricular activities physically accessible and emotionally welcoming to students with disabilities, starting in elementary school. Students with disabilities should be part of music, art, drama, clubs, student council and sports. Consider having as many events as possible during school time, at lunch or directly after school so that transportation barriers are reduced.
-

- ❑ Help youth with disabilities explore interests and abilities and set personal goals. Incorporate leadership goals into the IEP, beginning in middle school. School opportunities could include a journaling experience in a class, enrollment in a careers or marketing course, or use of person-centered planning tools as part of annual assessment (PATH, MAPS, 4 Easy Questions, etc).
- ❑ Involve youth with disabilities in the same career exploration options as other youth: job fairs, job shadowing, interest/aptitude surveys, internships and volunteering.
- ❑ Alert youth to opportunities for leadership especially aimed at students with disabilities in their state, including KASA, youth advisory board, Youth Leadership Forum, Gathering of Youth and other leadership opportunities specifically for students with disabilities.
- ❑ Encourage and support attendance at policy-making meetings: school student council, statewide youth boards, city council, school board, etc. that allow youth to see leadership in action and understand that their voice and experiences are valued.
- ❑ Incorporate team-building experiences into curriculum and clubs, starting in elementary school. Team-building activities demonstrate concretely how all perspectives and abilities are important to creative problem-solving and effective communication.
- ❑ Help youth identify community resources. Identifying and mapping resources like job centers, health clubs, parks, libraries, grocery and video stores and specialty shops will increase the likelihood that youth will check them out. Offer to go with a young person the first time.
- ❑ Develop public speaking comfort in youth with disabilities, starting in elementary school. Incorporate public speaking and presentation goals into speech and written language goals in the IEP. Involve youth with disabilities in group projects and presentations, even if they have speech and language challenges. Consider assistive technology options to give youth the opportunities for presentations and participation that their peers have.

### **Natural Supports Project**

Waisman Center, A107  
 1500 Highland Avenue  
 Madison, WI 53705  
 (608) 890-1687 *telephone*  
 (608) 265-3441 *fax*  
<http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/>



Waisman Center  
 University of Wisconsin–Madison



Funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, CFDA No. 93.768. Wisconsin Department of Health Services/Pathways to Independence