

Information Brief

Youth Development and Leadership

What is Youth Development and Leadership?

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “Character building begins in our infancy, and continues until death.” To be a youth is to be on the pathway to adulthood; building character through experiences, relationships, and activities along the way. **Youth development** and **Youth Leadership** are two important pieces of this pathway. Although they are closely related, Youth Development and Youth Leadership are terms that do not mean the same thing, although they are closely related. **Youth Development** is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Youth leadership is an important part of the youth development process. **Youth leadership** is both an internal and an external process leading to (1) the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence their opinion and behavior, and show the way by going in advance; and (2) the ability to analyze one’s own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and develop the self-esteem to carry them out.

It is no longer adequate to gauge a young person’s potential for success by looking at the negative indicators in their lives. Instead, the National Consortium on Leadership and Disability for Youth (NCLD-Youth) wants to take a positive youth development perspective and see what are the supports, activities, and outcomes that young people need in order to be positively engaged in their communities.

“The more effort spent on making sure young people are not just out of the red in each developmental area (e.g. not pregnant, not illiterate, not unemployed) but fully prepared and fully engaged in each area the better young people and society will fare (Youth Transition Funders Group, 2001).”

To be a young leader means to be on the road towards the “black,” starting to become prepared, informed, and engaged. To be a youth leader is to have found ways to be involved as change agents by looking at the supports and activities that have been identified as items that work toward their healthy development. It is not enough to simply wipe clean the stubborn dilemma faced by young people today and assume that this will promote more youth leaders.

Why is it important for Youth with Disabilities?

Less than 3% of young people with disabilities are actively engaged in youth development programs (NLTS2). These are often the same activities that help all people learn the necessary skills to be successful in life, such as problem solving, team building, identification of learning styles, mentoring activities, and activities that promote tolerance, just to name a few. Keeping youth with disabilities out of these sorts of programs, or including them only to a certain degree, impedes their development for the long-term, as well as keeps them isolated from opportunities to interact with peers without disabilities.

To be a young person with a disability means to not only be dealing with stigma and issues related to being young, but to include the additional stigma and issues related to having a disability. Society views people with disabilities through different lenses; sometimes as brave and courageous, sometimes as shameful or to be looked down upon. Society tends to lend an “inspirational” halo to people with disabilities; this defines them as “the other,” “the abnormal.” To be a young person with a disability is to be discriminated against in a variety of venues, whether being physically unable to go to a movie because the theatre is inaccessible or to be subjected to teasing on the schoolyard for having a speech impediment. “First, intolerance is often subtle, as the nation’s laws have reduced the manifestation of outright bigotry. Second, intolerance is often embedded within the structures and interpersonal relationships of institutions.” (Camino, 1995)

What types of programs are available to youth with disabilities?

Programs that are both inclusion based (youth with disabilities interacting and working alongside youth without disabilities) and disability specific are important for youth with disabilities. Whereas inclusion based programs promote opportunities to engage with youth without disabilities, this is not to gloss-over the benefits that youth gain from interacting with other youth with disabilities. Disability specific programs provide safe spaces to have frank and candid conversations about disability related issues, and opportunities to learn disability rights history, engage in activities that foster disability culture, connect with others in the disability community, and learn to advocate for their rights and responsibilities. Short summaries of some well-recognized programs are below.

National Youth Leadership Network

<http://www.nyln.org>

The National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) is dedicated to advancing the next generation of disability leaders through promoting leadership development, education, employment, independent living, and health and wellness among young leaders representing the diversity of race, ethnicity and disability in the United States.

Kids As Self Advocates (KASA)

<http://www.fvkasa.org>

Kids As Self Advocates (KASA) is an organization created by youth with disabilities for youth to educate society about issues concerning youth with a wide spectrum of disabilities and special healthcare needs on topics such as health care transition issues, education, employment, and others.

TA Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health

<http://www.tapartnership.org>

The mission of the TA Partnership is to support communities in their efforts to successfully develop and implement local systems of care. They assist with developing a broad array of community-based, strength-based services to improve outcomes for children with serious emotional disturbance through Resource Specialists, Regional Technical Assistance Coordinators , Consultant Pool , Team Learning Centers , Meetings, Learning Opportunities, and Web site.

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