

Introduction

One goal of the Natural Supports Project is finding and sharing new ways to encourage leadership opportunities for youth with disabilities. During the summer of 2009, the Natural Supports Project staff interviewed 32 young adult leaders with disabilities ages 18–30 to gather their perspectives on what makes someone a leader and to ask their advice on how to best support leadership development in youth with disabilities. This guide was developed to share their advice and strategies with families, school staff, other adults who work with youth, and with youth with disabilities who want to develop their leadership skills.

According to young adults, leadership is:

- wanting to make a difference
- having an open mind
- effecting change
- thinking outside the box
- mobilizing others
- being a role model
- working well with others
- setting a good example
- being an active person
- volunteering
- getting involved
- spreading what you learn to others
- being trustworthy
- being accepting of other people
- living life to the fullest potential
- being assertive
- putting others first
- being there when someone needs help
- knowing yourself
- advocating for others
- being a strong self-advocate
- overcoming stigma
- having good communication skills
- sticking to your principles
- knowing when to listen and when to talk
- having a sense of humor
- willing to put forth 110 percent
- having a vision
- thinking on your feet and solving problems
- being enthusiastic
- having a good support network
- holding yourself and others accountable
- viewing the “cup half full”

Tips for Youth

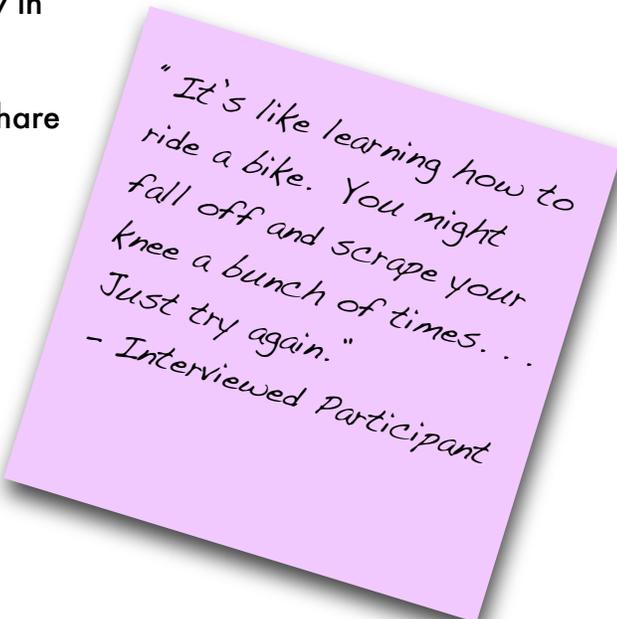
to develop leadership skills

1. Believe that you can accomplish anything. Set goals for what you want to do and make a plan to achieve those goals.
2. Connect with the faculty and staff (e.g. teachers, guidance counselors, support staff, case managers) and draw on them as resources for leadership and volunteer opportunities.
3. Find a mentor. Seek out someone you can completely confide in who will support you in the development of your leadership skills.
4. Be a mentor to younger students with disabilities. Help them to develop their leadership skills by sharing your experiences and connecting them with available opportunities.
5. Participate in youth leadership conferences. Take advantage of leadership workshops that involve both youth and parents, since parents can be a valuable resource for supporting leadership skills. Help organize conferences and other youth leadership projects.
6. Create a peer support network. Connect with other youth leaders with disabilities, including those in different communities. You can share experiences (what you did, what worked for you, etc.) and learn from one another. Form a council of older youth with disabilities to serve as a resource for younger youth with disabilities.
7. Get involved and take every opportunity possible. Join after-school activities such as clubs or sports. Find an area or skill (e.g., band) you'd like to develop where you can gain confidence. Have organizations you are involved in partner with other organizations when developing youth leadership activities.
8. Get involved in leadership activities early in your educational career. Start small. Start at your school (e.g., joining a committee or an extracurricular club) and then branch out to other networks.
9. Attend summer camps. Camps often build leadership and team-building into their activities and objectives. Attending camps also allows you to get away from home and develop independence in a structured environment. Most camps provide great opportunities to enhance your leadership skills.

*"It's the attitude, the courage to change whatever needs to be changed...don't be afraid to talk about anything."
-Interviewed Participant*

More tips for Youth:

10. Take challenging classes in high school and college. Do not limit your academic opportunities. Request the modifications and supports necessary to succeed in these classes.
11. Become active in the local disability community and connect with other leaders. Go to your neighborhood center for leadership opportunities and share these with other youth.
12. Take advantage of speaking on panels or in front of large groups at school. These are good opportunities to practice communication and public speaking skills.
13. Take initiative to be independent. For example, sit at a different lunch table to meet new people or call your friends to do something instead of waiting for them to call you.
14. Be assertive. Make sure people know what accommodations you need and what you don't need. Help parents and adults understand your needs, and be patient when they don't understand. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
15. Assume responsibility for taking the steps needed to achieve your goals to become a leader.
16. Being a leader does not mean doing all of the work or being in the limelight, but rather working together on a team to accomplish a shared goal.
17. Participate in and lead your own IEP meeting. This is a great way to practice many different types of leadership skills (e.g., communication, self-advocacy, decision-making).
18. Know what situations you are getting into and what the expectations are. For example, if you are going to take a new class, obtain the syllabus or meet with the teacher prior to beginning the class.
19. Be a self-advocate. Speak up for yourself, what you believe in, and what you need to participate fully in school and the community.
20. Be yourself and love yourself for who you are. Share your disability with others.
21. Be creative. Do not let other people define what you can or cannot do. Being a leader and working with/around your disability sometimes involves thinking outside of the box.



*"It's like learning how to ride a bike. You might fall off and scrape your knee a bunch of times... Just try again."
- Interviewed Participant*

General Tips for Adults

to promote youth leadership

1. Listen to us, particularly regarding our goals and dreams. Believe that we can achieve our goals (e.g., becoming a teacher) and support us in the process of attaining our goals, especially in the face of challenges.
2. Encourage us to take risks, get involved, and try new activities to develop leadership skills.
3. Let us know about available leadership opportunities, such as after-school activities (sports or clubs). Supply us with an application for a job or volunteer position.
4. Provide opportunities for us to socialize (e.g., pizza dinner, bowling, meetings).
5. Teach us how to disclose our disability and when to do so. Empower us by supporting us in playing an active role in our IEP meeting and sharing our experiences so we can help other youth with disabilities develop leadership skills.
6. Become active in the local disability community. Do research to find out what leadership opportunities or supports are available and share them with us. One resource may be the neighborhood community center.
7. When a new challenge or situation arises, help us prepare for the new experience. For example, if we are starting college, connect us to someone at the school who can provide guidance and strategies that can help us better understand the expectations of college.
8. Give both positive feedback and constructive criticism to us. Point out the progress we have made, such as how much we are learning or how we have changed. Be honest with us if something is not working and help us find an avenue that will work. This will encourage us to continue developing our leadership skills despite challenging situations that arise.
9. Be patient. Certain skills may take longer and require more practice for us to acquire. Give us the time and space to try something on our own before you assist us. Allow us to make mistakes. We will be able to learn important lifelong lessons when we experience our own mistakes.
10. Don't ignore the disability (or us)—but instead, talk to us and see what you can do to help us.

*"The more youth with disabilities that can become leaders, the better the community will be."
- Interviewed Participant*

More general tips for adults:

11. Instill leadership early on. Ask young children what they want to be when they grow up. Exploring children's passions when young helps them to define the type of person and leader they will become, as well as explore a range of career options for the future.
12. Be available for us to come to you for advice; give advice when needed.
13. Encourage us to attend summer camps. Camps often build leadership and team-building into their activities and objectives. Attending camps also allows us to get away from home and develop independence in a structured environment. Most camps provide great opportunities to enhance our leadership skills.
14. Give us choices, such as allowing us to choose from a variety of extra-curricular activities or classes to take. Developing choice-making skills is one way to promote self-determination.
15. Share insight gained from meetings attended, such as IEP meetings, with us. Helping us learn more about the IEP process will help us when we begin to participate in/run our own IEP meetings.
16. Give us the self-advocacy tools and confidence needed to secure the necessary accommodations in school, at home, or in the workplace. Be an advocate for us and lead by example.
17. Find our strong points—hone in on our strengths to find ways to address our weaknesses. For example, if one of us has fine motor difficulties but excels in communication skills, allow him/her to complete an assignment verbally.
18. Teach skills that will foster independent living and responsibility, such as cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and money management.

Tips for Communities to promote youth leadership

1. Develop newsletters or fact sheets for young adults with disabilities. Young adults with disabilities can provide ideas and advice about their success to current students with disabilities.
2. Elevate community expectations about youth with disabilities.
3. Look for ways that youth with disabilities can be featured/included in the media (e.g. newspaper and radio stories, models who have disabilities in local ads).

Tips for Teachers & School Staff to promote youth leadership

1. Look for strategies that can allow students to succeed in the classroom. For example, provide students with extra time on exams or pair them with another student to complete an assignment.
2. Go to professional development workshops and get training on how to promote youth leadership at your school.
3. Connect students with a mentor. Mentors instill values in youth with disabilities and can have a significant impact on them. Mentors can provide resources for youth transitioning to elementary school, middle school, high school, or college. Resources could contain tips about who to talk to in the school or where to go if a problem occurs. A care package could list the top ten experiences to take advantage of or clubs to join in school.
4. Encourage diversity and inclusion in schools by educating students without disabilities. Have an "expert panel" of youth with disabilities share their experiences and answer questions at an all-school assembly. This will foster respect early on for people with disabilities and discourage stereotypes by keeping communication open.
5. Teach self-advocacy skills. Incorporate this into the classroom early on. Go to www.imdetermined.org for lesson plans on promoting self-advocacy skills.
6. Give youth opportunities to lead/facilitate a classroom game or activity.
7. Get to know students with disabilities on a one-to-one basis; develop meaningful, positive relationships with youth.
8. To the extent appropriate, have similar expectations for students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Expect and encourage full participation in classroom games and activities. Provide accommodations if needed.
9. Teach skills that will be useful in college, such as mnemonic aids for studying, budgeting, and time management/organizational skills.
10. Provide the support that is needed in the classroom, but also ensure that youth have opportunities to socialize and interact with peers through collaboration on assignments or during free time.

"Think big. . .
because if you
don't dream it, you
can't accomplish
it."

- Interviewed
Participant

Tips for Families *to promote youth leadership*

1. Provide or arrange transportation so youth can participate in leadership and social activities.
2. Listen to youth if they say they need help or something is going wrong at school. It is important for them to know they can rely on you for support.
3. Foster your youth's self-advocacy skills. Facilitate communication with health care providers, such as doing a three-way call between parent, youth, and provider to set up an appointment or schedule a medical transport ride. Begin doing this as soon as it is appropriate.
4. Have structure and expectations in the home, such as weekly chores and homework time. Having high expectations in a supportive environment at home will prepare youth for the expectations they will later encounter in school or in the workplace.
5. Don't be overprotective. Give youth room to grow and learn from their own experiences and mistakes.
6. Encourage youth to persevere when facing challenges. Provide them with the support they need to solve the problems they face.

Tips for Employers *to promote youth leadership*

1. Encourage diversity and inclusion in the workplace by hiring individuals with disabilities and educating employees without disabilities. One way to do this is to have a panel of youth with disabilities share their experiences and answer your employees' questions. This will foster respect for employees with disabilities by keeping communication open.
2. Partner with other organizations to develop leadership programming for youth employees with disabilities.
3. Go to workshops and get training on how to support youth with disabilities in the workplace.

Tips for Organizations

to promote youth leadership

1. Disseminate information about leadership opportunities using technology and internet sites youth commonly use, such as Facebook or MySpace. This will help to inform youth about leadership opportunities.
2. Use simple language and avoid jargon when communicating with families. This will ensure that the maximum number of people possible will be able to benefit from the information.
3. Come into the schools and connect with youth to help them with skills such as understanding why they have a disability or helping them to use innovative technologies.
4. Continue to give youth opportunities to interact with others who have similar disabilities and provide them with specific guidance on how to best develop their individual leadership skills.
5. Provide leadership opportunities at a time and place suitable for youth. This includes wheelchair accessibility, having transportation available for youth who need it, and/or using a location on a bus line. Participation should be free of charge or there should be scholarships available for youth. Have youth themselves help organize projects and make sure they are involved from the very beginning.
6. Continue to partner with other local and statewide youth leadership councils and organizations when developing leadership opportunities. The Youth Leadership Forum is a resource that may be available in your state. Go to <http://www.montanaylf.org> for more information and a list of states who currently hold a YLF.
7. Have young adults speak at youth leadership events. They may be able to better relate to youth since they have recently gone through similar experiences.
8. Have some leadership conferences geared toward youth and parents, and some geared toward youth only. Parents are often a huge source of support for youth with disabilities and can play a prominent role in helping them develop leadership skills.

"I would say that what makes up a youth leader definitely is their perseverance. Especially for a student with a disability, you have to have that, that willingness to get past your limitations and to persevere, despite everybody's expectations of you."

- Interviewed Participant

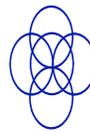
A Guide for Promoting Leadership Skills in Youth with Disabilities

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Waisman Center
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University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

The mission of the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities is to support the full inclusion and self-determination of people with developmental disabilities and their families. The Center accomplishes this mission through its preservice training programs, clinical and intervention services, continuing education programs and technical assistance and consultation services.



The goal of the Natural Supports Project is to discover, support and disseminate creative and promising approaches that support families, children and youth with disabilities to participate more fully and naturally in their family life, in the community, and at school.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at:

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