
What Youth with Disabilities Say is Important for Building a Successful Adult Life

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other key legislation have provided unprecedented opportunities for young people with disabilities to establish successful adult lives. Increasing numbers of youth with disabilities are realizing their dreams; however, many young people continue to face barriers and lag behind their peers without disabilities. For example, research suggests that somewhere between 41% and 69% of young adults with disabilities are unemployed (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996, N.O.D./Harris, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). Young people with disabilities also attend higher education and graduate at lower rates than those without disabilities (Horn & Berkold, 1999; N.O.D./Harris, 2001).

Survey of Youth with Disabilities

The Office of Special Education Programs has funded several hundred projects focusing on the transition of youth with disabilities from high school to adult life. These projects have identified practices that improve outcomes for youth with disabilities. This brief describes a survey that asked young people with disabilities how much they have participated in these experiences and how important youth believe the experiences are for building a successful adult life. The Youth Leadership Council of the National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) conducted the survey. The NYLN is comprised of approximately 300 young leaders with disabilities, ages 16 to 28, from across the United States. The NYLN is dedicated to advancing policies and practices toward youth with disabilities and to promoting the next generation of disability leaders.

Survey Participants

The survey was completed by 202 young people with disabilities from 34 states and the District of Columbia. Most of the youth attended high school or college (75%) and lived with their families (61%). Twenty-four percent of the youth reported that they used a personal assistant to help them with daily activities. Most of the youth reported they had a regular doctor (88%) and health insurance (83%).

Youth-Directed Survey Method

The survey was developed by the Research Committee of the Youth Leadership Council, with support provided by researchers from Oregon Health and

Survey Participants at a Glance

Mean Age:	20.28	55% Female	45% Male
Ethnicity:	13% African American 71% Caucasian	7% Hispanic 2% Native American	2% Asian 5% Other
Disability:	37% Mobility 8% Emotional 5% Health	18% Learning 5% Hearing 5% Other Conditions	17% Cognitive 5% Visual
Employment:	46% Employed	54% Unemployed	

Science University and representatives of Federal agencies that sponsor the NYLN. The survey items included 18 practices that research and model demonstration projects have shown to be important for promoting the transition of young people from school to adult life. Two additional items were identified as important and added by Youth Leadership Council members (“Learn about laws like the ADA and IDEA”, “Learn about supports for young people with disabilities.”). The 17 members of the Youth Leadership Council recruited young people with disabilities, ages 16 – 24, from their personal networks and from high schools, colleges, and community organizations. Council members were provided with face-to-face training to prepare them to administer the survey and they participated in 4 teleconferences to discuss research strategies while they collected the data. The Research Committee developed a Frequently Asked Questions guide to assist youth researchers. Oregon Health & Science University performed data entry and analysis activities, with guidance from the Research Committee.

Key Findings

Experiences Most Important to Youth with Disabilities

	<u>Mean</u>
Have my family’s encouragement and help	2.74
Learn how to set goals and stick up for myself	2.71
Have family members that expect me to be a successful adult	2.67
Learn how to stay healthy	2.64
Get health insurance	2.62
Figure out what accommodations I need and how to ask for them	2.59
Get reliable transportation in the community	2.57
Take the lead in planning my education and future goals in school	2.56
Learn about laws like the ADA and IDEA	2.50

0 = not important, 1 = sort of important, 2 = quite important, 3 = very important

Youth rated how much they participated in each experience and how important each is for transitioning to a successful adult life. As expected, youth rated all of the experiences in the “quite important” to “very important” range with one exception, “Get career counseling” (mean rating = 1.90). In contrast, youth rated their level of participation in every experience as lower than its importance. With one exception, “Attend classes with my peers who don’t have disabilities”, there was a significant difference between the level that youth said they participated in each activity and their rating of its importance.

Least Opportunity for Youth to Participate	
	<u>Mean</u>
Work in paid job in the career area of my choice	1.08
Learn about supports available to youth with disabilities	1.21
Get services from Vocational Rehabilitation, Centers for Independent Living, other community agencies	1.21
Learn about laws like the ADA and IDEA	1.40
Get work experience during high school	1.44
Get career counseling	1.45
Take college or vocational school classes	1.47
Get involved in community service	1.48
Get reliable transportation in the community	1.63
Get health insurance	1.66
Get a good doctor who treats adults	1.67
Take the lead in planning my education and future goals in school	1.82
Figure out what accommodations I need and how to ask for them	1.89
0 = not much, 1 = a little, 2 = quite a bit, 3 = a lot	

Implications

The findings suggest that youth with disabilities lack opportunities to do many of the activities that they and professionals agree are important for building a successful adult life. For example, youth reported having the least opportunity to work in paid jobs in the career areas of their choice. Many young people with disabilities continue to find their options limited to low pay, easy-to-find jobs rather than jobs that are on their career track.

It is important to note that this survey has methodological limitations; however, its unique, youth-directed design provides important information about youth experiences and what young people with disabilities believe is important for building a successful adult life. We hope it stimulates increased attention to partnering with youth leaders in conducting research and model programs, as well as in seeking input directly from youth with disabilities, whom are ultimately the ones making lives for themselves.

NYLN

National Youth Leadership Network

Supported By:

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