



## Youth Development and Youth Leadership in Programs

### What are Youth Development and Youth Leadership & Why are They Important?

Research supports the premise that both youth development and youth leadership programs positively shape the growth of young people with and without disabilities. Youth leadership programs build on solid youth development principles, with an emphasis on those development and program components that support youth leadership.

Often, and mistakenly, the terms "youth development" and "youth leadership" are used interchangeably. 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 have the self-esteem to carry them out.

Youth development experiences are connected to positive outcomes in youth, including decreases in negative behaviors (such as alcohol and tobacco use and violence) and increases in positive attitudes and behaviors (such

*This brief describes how administrators and policymakers can use the concepts of youth development and youth leadership in developing and administering programs that serve all youth and activities specifically geared toward youth with disabilities. The brief is based on a longer paper, Youth Development and Youth Leadership, A Background Paper, published by The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. The full paper is available online at <http://www.ncwd-youth.info>.*

as motivation, academic performance, self-esteem, problem-solving, positive health decisions, and interpersonal skills). Participation in leadership development experiences is linked to increased self-efficacy and the development of skills relevant to success in adulthood and the workplace such as decision-making and working well with others. Building self-advocacy and self-determination skills, an important aspect of leadership development for youth with disabilities, correlates with making a successful transition to adulthood.

### Youth Development in Workforce Development

The youth provisions of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 fused youth development principles with traditional workforce development. WIA, the cornerstone of the publicly funded workforce development system,

provides workforce investment services and activities through local One-Stop Career Centers and youth-serving programs. The presence of youth development principles in WIA reflected the growing consensus that the most effective youth initiatives are the ones that focus on a wide range of developmental needs. One of the 10 program elements required under WIA is leadership development. Research shows that effective youth initiatives give young people opportunities for new roles and responsibilities in the program and the community. Because leadership development and youth development are needed by all youth, and because they have such a prominent role in WIA, NCWD/Youth identified essential areas of development and program components for youth leadership and youth development programs.

### The Five Areas of Development

Some common competencies and desirable outcomes emerge from a review of youth development and youth leadership research. The competencies and outcomes are best articulated in a framework created by the Forum for Youth Investment that organizes the range of youth

development outcomes into five developmental areas:

- working,
- learning,
- thriving,
- connecting, and
- leading.

Youth development programs strive to



provide supports, services, and opportunities that help youth, including youth with disabilities, achieve positive outcomes in all five of these areas. While youth leadership programs also help youth achieve positive outcomes in all five areas, they place more emphasis on developing competencies in the areas of leading and connecting. Using the Forum for Youth Investment's framework, NCWD/Youth has outlined intended outcomes and examples of program activities for each of the five areas.

**Working** refers to the development of positive attitudes, skills, and behaviors around occupational and career direction. Positive outcomes that fall under this area include demonstrated work-readiness skills and involvement in meaningful work that offers advancement, satisfaction, and self-sufficiency. Activities such as career interest assessments and summer internships help youth achieve these outcomes.

**Learning** refers to the development of positive basic and applied academic attitudes, skills, and behaviors. Beneficial outcomes that fall under this area include rational problem solving and critical thinking. Activities such as group problem-solving games and contextualized learning using academic skills to complete a project help youth achieve these outcomes.

**Thriving** refers to the development of attitudes, skills, and behaviors that are demonstrated by maintaining optimal physical and emotional well-being. Beneficial outcomes that fall under this area include knowledge and practice of good nutrition and hygiene and the capacity to identify risky conditions. Activities such as workshops on nutrition and hygiene and role-playing adverse situations help youth achieve these outcomes.

**Connecting** refers to the development of positive social behaviors, skills, and attitudes. Positive outcomes that fall under this area include quality relationships, the ability to build trust, and effective communication. Activities such as adult mentoring, positive peer interactions, and team-building exercises help youth achieve these outcomes.

**Leading** refers to the development of positive skills, attitudes, and behaviors around civic involvement and personal goal-setting. Beneficial outcomes that fall under this area include a sense of responsibility to oneself and others and the ability to articulate one's personal values. Activities such as the opportunity to take a leadership role and participation in community service projects help youth achieve these outcomes.

The chart "Five Areas of Development with Related Outcomes and Activities" provides intended outcomes and suggested activities for each of the five areas of development. The chart includes youth leadership program-specific outcomes and activities for the "connecting" and "leading" areas.

**Organizational and Program Components**

Youth development and youth leadership programs for all youth, including those with disabilities, consist of the same basic components necessary to build on each youth's capabilities and strengths and address a full range of developmental needs. Youth leadership programs place an additional emphasis on certain components central to leadership development. The key components of youth development and youth leadership programs can be divided into

**organizational components** – practices and characteristics of the organization as a whole that are necessary for effective youth programs – and **programmatic components** – the practices and characteristics of a specific program that make it effective for young people. In addition, there are some components that comprise a disability focus that programs should include in order to meet the needs of youth with disabilities.

**Organizational Components**

Both youth development and youth leadership programs need to be supported by an organization that has all of the following characteristics: clear goals related to the development of young people; youth development-friendly staff; connections to the community; and youth involvement. Youth leadership programs must emphasize the importance of involving youth in every facet of the organization, including serving on the Board of Directors, strategic planning, and other administrative decision-making processes.

**Programmatic Components**

Youth development and youth leadership programs should do all of the following: provide varied hands-on and experiential activities; provide opportunities for youth to succeed and to take on various roles in the program; encourage youth involvement in developing and implementing program activities; establish high expectations for youth, and allow them to experience the consequences of their



### CHART: Five Areas of Development with Related Outcomes and Activities

|                 | <u>Intended Youth Outcomes</u>   | <u>Suggested Activities</u>  |
|-----------------|--|--|
| <b>Working</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaningful engagement in own career development process</li> <li>• Demonstrated skill in work readiness</li> <li>• Awareness of options for future employment, careers, and professional development</li> <li>• Completion of educational requirements or involvement in training that culminates in a specific vocation or opportunity for career advancement</li> <li>• Established involvement in meaningful work that offers advancement, satisfaction, and self-sufficiency</li> <li>• Positive attitude about one's ability and future in working in a particular industry or the opportunities to grow into another</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career exploration activities including career interest assessment, job shadowing, job and career fairs, and workplace visits and tours</li> <li>• Internships</li> <li>• Work experience, including summer employment</li> <li>• Information on entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Networking activities</li> <li>• Mock interviews</li> <li>• Work readiness workshops</li> <li>• Visits from representatives of specific industries to speak to youth about the employment opportunities and details of working within their industry</li> <li>• Mock job searches, including locating positions online and in the newspaper, "cold-calling," preparing résumés, and writing cover letters and thank-you letters</li> <li>• Visits to education or training programs</li> <li>• Career goal setting and planning</li> <li>• Job coaching or mentoring</li> <li>• Learning activities using computers and other current workplace technology</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Learning</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic aptitude in math and reading</li> <li>• Rational problem solving</li> <li>• Ability to think critically toward a positive outcome</li> <li>• Logical reasoning based on personal experience</li> <li>• Ability to determine one's own skills and areas of academic weakness or need for further education and training</li> <li>• Sense of creativity</li> <li>• Appreciation of and the foundation for lifelong learning, including a desire for further training and education, the knowledge of needed resources for said training, and willingness for further planning</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial and ongoing skills assessment, both formal and informal</li> <li>• Initial and ongoing career and vocational assessment, both formal and informal</li> <li>• Identification of one's learning styles, strengths, and challenges</li> <li>• Creation of a personal development plan</li> <li>• Contextualized learning activities such as service-learning projects in which youth apply academic skills to community needs</li> <li>• Monitoring of and accountability for one's own grades, and creation of a continuous improvement plan based on grades and goals</li> <li>• Showcase of work that highlights one's learning experience (such as an essay, a painting, an algebra exam, etc.)</li> <li>• Development of a formal learning plan that includes long- and short-term goals and action steps</li> <li>• Group problem-solving activities</li> <li>• Preparation classes for GED, ACT, SAT, or other standardized tests</li> <li>• Peer tutoring activities that enhance the skills of the tutor and the student</li> </ul> |



**CHART: Five Areas of Development with Related Outcomes and Activities** *(continued)*

|                   | <u>Intended Youth Outcomes</u>   | <u>Suggested Activities</u>   |
|-------------------|--|---|
| <b>Thriving</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of growth and development as both an objective and a personal indicator of physical and emotional maturation</li> <li>• Knowledge and practice of good nutrition and hygiene</li> <li>• Developmentally appropriate exercise (will vary depending on age, maturity, and range of physical abilities)</li> <li>• Ability to identify situations of safety and make safe choices on a daily basis</li> <li>• Ability to assess situations and environments independently</li> <li>• Capacity to identify and avoid unduly risky conditions and activities</li> <li>• Ability to learn from adverse situations and avoid them in the future</li> <li>• Confidence and sense of self-worth in relation to their own physical and mental status</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops on benefits and consequences of various health, hygiene, and human development issues, including physical, sexual, and emotional development</li> <li>• Role playing adverse situations and how to resolve them</li> <li>• Personal and peer counseling</li> <li>• Training in conflict management and resolution concerning family, peer, and workplace relationships</li> <li>• Community mapping to create a directory of resources related to physical and mental health</li> <li>• Meal planning and preparation activities</li> <li>• Social activities that offer opportunities to practice skills in communication, negotiation, and personal presentation</li> <li>• Sports and recreational activities</li> <li>• Training in life skills</li> </ul> |
| <b>Connecting</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality relationships with adults and peers</li> <li>• Interpersonal skills, such as ability to build trust, handle conflict, value differences, listen actively, and communicate effectively</li> <li>• Sense of belonging and membership (such as valuing and being valued by others, being a part of a group or greater whole)</li> <li>• Ability to empathize with others</li> <li>• Sense of one's own identity both apart from and in relation to others</li> <li>• Knowledge of and ability to seek out resources in the community</li> <li>• Ability to network to develop personal and professional relationships</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring activities that connect youth to adult mentors</li> <li>• Tutoring activities that engage youth as tutors or in being tutored</li> <li>• Research activities identifying resources in the community to allow youth to practice conversational and investigation skills</li> <li>• Letter writing to friends, family members, and pen pals</li> <li>• Job and trade fairs to begin building a network of contacts in one's career field of interest</li> <li>• Role plays of interview and other workplace scenarios</li> <li>• Positive peer and group activities that build camaraderie, teamwork, and belonging</li> <li>• Cultural activities that promote understanding and tolerance</li> </ul>   |
|                   | <p><b>Youth Leadership Program-Specific:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to communicate to get a point across</li> <li>• Ability to influence others</li> <li>• Ability to motivate others</li> <li>• Ability to seek out role models who have been leaders</li> <li>• Ability to be a role model for others</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops in public speaking</li> <li>• Research on historical or current leaders</li> <li>• Contact with local leaders</li> <li>• Strategic planning to change something in the community or within the youth program</li> </ul>  |



**CHART: Five Areas of Development with Related Outcomes and Activities** *(continued)*

|                | <u>Intended Youth Outcomes</u>   | <u>Suggested Activities</u>   |
|----------------|--|---|
| <b>Leading</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to articulate personal values</li> <li>• Awareness of how personal actions impact the larger communities</li> <li>• Ability to engage in the community in a positive manner</li> <li>• Respect and caring for oneself and others</li> <li>• Sense of responsibility to self and others</li> <li>• Integrity</li> <li>• Awareness of cultural differences among peers and the larger community</li> <li>• High expectations for self and community</li> <li>• Sense of purpose in goals and activities</li> <li>• Ability to follow the lead of others when appropriate</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal plan development with goals, action steps, and deadlines</li> <li>• Resource mapping activities in which youth take the lead in planning and carrying out a search of community resources for youth</li> <li>• Voter registration and voting in local, state, and federal elections</li> <li>• Participation in town hall meetings</li> <li>• Community volunteerism, such as organizing a park clean-up or building a playground</li> <li>• Participation in a debate on a local social issue</li> <li>• Training to be a peer mediator</li> <li>• Participation in a letter-writing campaign</li> <li>• Opportunities to meet with local and state officials and legislators</li> <li>• Participation in a youth advisory committee of the city, school board, training center, or other relevant organization</li> <li>• Learning activities or courses about leadership principles and styles</li> <li>• Group activities that promote collaboration and team work</li> <li>• Mentoring relationships with positive role models</li> <li>• Opportunities to serve in leadership roles such as club officer, board member, team captain, or coach</li> </ul> |
|                | <p><b>Youth Leadership Program-Specific:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to motivate others</li> <li>• Ability to share power and distribute tasks</li> <li>• Ability to work with a team</li> <li>• Ability to resolve conflicts</li> <li>• Ability to create and communicate a vision</li> <li>• Ability to manage change and value continuous improvement</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mediation and conflict resolution training</li> <li>• Training in team dynamics</li> <li>• Training in project management</li> </ul>   |



### CHART: Organization and Program Components

| <u>ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL</u>  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Components of Youth Development Programs   | Additional Components of Youth Leadership Programs   | Additional Components for Disability Focus   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear mission and goals</li> <li>• Staff are trained, professional, supportive, committed, and youth-friendly</li> <li>• Safe and structured environment</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth involvement at all levels, including administration and the Board of Directors</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physically and programmatically accessible</li> <li>• Staff are aware, willing, prepared, and supported to make accommodations</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections to community and other youth-serving organizations</li> </ul>   |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of resources (national and community-specific) for youth with disabilities</li> <li>• Partnerships and collaboration with other agencies serving or assisting youth with disabilities</li> </ul>                            |
| <u>PROGRAMMATIC LEVEL</u>  |  |  |
| Components of Youth Development Programs   | Additional Components of Youth Leadership Programs   | Additional Components for Disability Focus   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on each young person's individual needs, assets, and interests</li> </ul>   |  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hands-on experiential and varied activities</li> <li>• Youth involvement in developing and implementing activities</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hands-on involvement at all programmatic levels such as planning, budgeting, implementing, and evaluating programs</li> </ul>   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for success</li> <li>• Opportunities to try new roles</li> <li>• Youth leadership</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills</li> <li>• Varied, progressive leadership roles for youth: small group, large group, event, program</li> </ul> |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring and role models</li> </ul>  |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure peer and adult role models and mentors include people with disabilities</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal responsibility</li> </ul>  |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-advocacy skills building</li> <li>• Independent living information and assessment (career, employment, training, education, transportation, recreation, community resources, life skill financial, benefits planning)</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family involvement and support</li> </ul>   |  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for youth to develop self-awareness, identity, and values</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education on community and program values and history</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability history, law, culture, policies, and practices</li> </ul>  |



choices and decisions; involve family members when possible; and provide the opportunity to interact with a mentor or role model. Youth leadership programs place a particular emphasis on involving youth in every aspect of program delivery. Practically, this means that youth have multiple opportunities to observe, practice, and develop leadership skills; experience progressive roles of leadership ranging from leading a small group to planning an event; receive education on the values and history of the organization; and learn to assess their own strengths and set goals for personal development.

The chart "Organizational and Program Components" provides an overview of all the organizational and programmatic components relevant to youth development and youth leadership programs, including those relevant to serving youth with disabilities effectively.

**Disability Focus**

The outcomes in all five areas of youth development are relevant for all youth, including youth with disabilities. Youth with disabilities can and should be included as participants in youth development and youth leadership programs along with peers without disabilities. There are some additional components that programs should include in order to meet the needs of youth with disabilities fully. On the organizational level, it is important for organizations and programs to have physical and programmatic accessibility; willing, prepared, and well supported staff with knowledge of how to accommodate youth with disabilities; national and community resources for youth with disabilities; and partnerships and collaborations with other agencies that serve youth

with disabilities. On the programmatic level, the additional components for meeting the needs of youth with disabilities include involving peers and adults with disabilities as mentors in order to give

youth with disabilities as well as those without disabilities the option of selecting these individuals as their mentors; providing self-advocacy skill-building activities for all youth in programs focused on developing leadership skills (self-advocacy skills are especially important for youth with disabilities as they transition into adulthood and employment); providing opportunities to learn about the history and culture of individuals with disabilities, including disabilities laws, policies and practices; and providing independent living information and assessment for youth with disabilities and those without disabilities (while important for all youth, initial and ongoing assessments for independent living that center on careers and employment, training and education, transportation, recreation and leisure, community resources, life skills, and financial independence and planning are especially critical in programming for youth with disabilities).

**Conclusion**

Few programs for youth include all of the youth development, youth leadership, and disability-related components necessary for youth to participate fully in all aspects of their lives and society. In order to serve all youth effectively, practitioners should connect to national resources as well as other youth-serving organizations in their own community to incorporate these components. The increasing recognition of the importance of youth development and youth leadership for all youth holds both promise and challenge. To meet the challenge of

ensuring that all youth, including youth with disabilities, have access to high quality programs focused on youth development and youth leadership, NCWD/Youth is seeking to work with stakeholders at all levels of the workforce development, youth development, and disability fields to develop needed resources and materials for program practitioners and administrators, federal and state legislators, and youth and their families. The challenge is great, but the promise of better outcomes for youth is greater.

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