

Section 4: Disabilities and the Mentoring Relationship

Individuals with disabilities are not a homogenous group. There is no “one size fits all.” Many myths exist concerning disabilities and the extent to which a person with a disability may need accommodations or modifications to succeed in the workplace. Negative and erroneous stereotypes and attitudinal barriers continue to be difficult barriers to overcome when working to ensure the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the fabric of our society.

People with disabilities are like everyone else—the only way to truly understand their skills and abilities is by getting to know them. Young people with disabilities need practice in social and communication skills in order to succeed in school, work, and community life. Developing these self-determination skills are a benefit of the e-mentoring relationship.

Some students with disabilities learn behaviors that discourage them from maximizing their capabilities. Students with disabilities, who comprise a large portion of the “at risk” population, tend to be more susceptible than their peers to:

- Low self-expectations
- Expecting others to do what they can do for themselves
- Coping strategies that place responsibility with the system (school) rather than with the person (student)

To take charge of their lives and develop a positive self-image, youth with disabilities need to:

- Be emotionally accepted where they are at as a starting point for growth (this is where the friendship of a mentor can be very helpful)
- Be challenged to move beyond their current skill level by someone who cares and yet can see the youth’s greater potential and encourage its pursuit
- Build on their strengths, including academic, personal, creative, and social skills and talents
- Ask for what they need and want in a specific, concrete way
- Tell others what accommodations they may need in order to succeed

Disclosure of Disability-Related Information

What should teachers tell mentors and employers about students’ disabilities? The amount of information disclosed to mentors about students’ disabilities is an issue that should be handled with care. We recommend that teachers consider each case individually. Consider what would be best for each student. Be sensitive to students’ rights to privacy. Teachers should discuss with mentors prior to the start of email exchanges some basic information about the class and its students. This may include a general statement about the severity of disabilities among students, the kinds of problems students struggle with, the degree of difficulty with learning, writing skills levels, behavioral considerations, etc.

Important considerations regarding disclosure of disability-related information:

- Parental consent should be obtained prior to the release of any information related to a disability.
- Students may be at various stages in adjusting to a disability. Some students may not be ready to discuss a disability publicly. On the other hand, some students may be very open

about their disability. Students should be given the option of keeping disability-related information private.

- If releasing some disability-related information appears appropriate, release only information that helps the mentor better relate to their mentee.

Challenges and Strategies for Working with Youth with Disabilities

Many youth will be receptive and excited about the opportunity to participate in e-mentoring. Others may be reluctant. Some of the reluctance may come from negative previous experiences in the community. Youth may have previously experienced abandonment, alienation, and isolation in their relationships with adults. Some youth may be isolated from their community through educational, social, economic, and developmental barriers.

- A student may test the mentor's intentions and trustworthiness by initially not engaging in the relationship; understand that this may be a self-protection mechanism. Consistent, reliable communication will help address disengagement. Maintaining an attitude of being an equal with the student, rather than an authority figure, will help the student develop trust.
- Students are sensitive to mentor absences. If you are unable to email at the expected time, be sure to notify teacher and student of your schedule, noting when you will be away and when you will return. As much as possible, maintain your commitment to exchange emails weekly during the academic year.
- Mentors, teachers, and employers should expect and encourage engagement in the mentoring relationship from students. Communicating openly and being reliable will help you overcome trust issues with your mentee. Despite any difficulties that may exist in the mentee's life, know that you can help foster specific talents and abilities the mentee possesses through the mentoring relationship.
- Practice active listening. When a mentee expresses an interest in something, ask about it. If the timing seems right, ask for further information. Talk about baseball, prom, music, or whatever creates an opening for communication to develop.
- Understand that some students, especially those with disabilities, may have had negative experiences in school. They may dislike school because they have received continuous negative feedback and perceive themselves as academic or social failures. Remember to focus on the student's strengths, whether these are academic, athletic, social, or artistic. Identifying strengths will encourage positive self-esteem and lead to personal growth. Be supportive and reassuring wherever you can.
- Support youth in exploring the options in a situation and provide positive feedback to help them make the best choice.
- Within program parameters, be sensitive to what students want to discuss and where they seem to be reluctant. Some youth may try to shock you with information and others may resist sharing. Either case will take discernment and may require the counsel of the teacher.
- What may seem like a small gain to you may be major for the student. Hold high expectations, but also be realistic and respect the interest and ability of the youth you are mentoring.

Resources

Disability Organizations

This list of organizations includes a sampling of national organizations with state and/or local chapters. To use this listing, contact the national organization to find out how to contact state or local affiliates.

American Council of the Blind (ACB)

1155 15th Street, NW, Ste. 1004
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 467-5081 (office)
(202) 467-5085 (fax)
<http://www.acb.org>

American Diabetes Association (ADA)

1701 North Beauregard Street
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 299-5519 (office)
(703) 549-8748 (fax)
<http://www.diabetes.org/>

Autism Society of America (ASA)

7910 Woodmont Avenue, #300
Bethesda, MD 20814-3015
(301) 657-0881 (office)
(301) 657-0869 (fax)
<http://www.autism-society.org>

Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA)

8201 Greensboro Drive, Suite 611
McLean, VA 22102
(703) 761-0750 (office)
(703) 761-0755 (fax)
<http://www.biausa.org/>

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

8181 Professional Place, Ste. 150
Landover, MD 20785
(301) 306-7070 (office)
(301) 306-7090 (fax)
<http://www.chadd.org>

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

1110 North Glebe Road, Ste. 300
Arlington, VA 22201
(703) 264-9406 (office)
(703) 243-0410 (fax)
<http://www.cec.sped.org>

Learning Disabilities Association of America

4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349
(412) 341-1515
<http://www.ldanatl.org>

Easter Seals (ES)

700 13th Street, NW, Ste. 200
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 347-3066 (office)
(202) 737-7914 (fax)
<http://www.easterseals.com/>

Epilepsy Foundation (EF)

4351 Garden City Drive
Landover, MD 20785-2267
(301) 459-3700 (office)
(301) 577-2684 (fax)
<http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org>

National Alliance on Mental Illness

3803 N. Fairfax Drive, Ste. 100
Arlington, Va 22203
(703) 524-7600
<http://www.nami.org/>

National Council on Independent Living

1916 Wilson Boulevard, Ste. 209
Arlington, VA 22201
(877) 525-3400 (V/TTY)
(703) 525-3406 (office)
(703) 525-4153 (TTY)
(703) 525-3409 (fax)
ncil@ncil.org (e-mail)
<http://www.ncil.org/>

National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS)

8650 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(800) 743-5657 (office)

(301) 563-6896 (fax)
<http://www.ndss.org/>

**National Federation of Families for
Children's Mental Health (FFCMH)**

1101 King Street, Suite 420
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-7710 (office)
(703) 836-1040 (fax)
<http://www.ffcmh.org>

Spina Bifida Association of America (SBAA)

4590 McArthur Boulevard, NW, Ste. 250
Washington, DC 20007
(202) 944-3285 (office)
(202) 944-3295 (fax)
<http://www.spinabifidaassociation.org/>

Tourette Syndrome Association, Inc. (TSA)

1301 K Street, NW, #600 East

Washington, DC 20005
(202) 408-6443 (office)
(202) 408-3260 (fax)
<http://www.tsa-usa.org>

The Arc of the United States

1010 Wayne Avenue, Ste. 650
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(301) 565-3842 (office)
(301) 565-3843 (fax)
<http://thearc.org>

UCP National (United Cerebral Palsy)

1660 L Street, NW, Ste. 700, Washington, DC
20036
(800) 872-5827 (office)
(202) 776-0406 (office)
(202) 973-7197 (TTY)
(202) 776-0414 (fax)
<http://ucp.org>