

Youth Leadership Groups

What is a Youth Leadership Group?

A youth leadership group for youth with disabilities is defined as a group that allows youth the opportunity to empower themselves by advancing their leadership skills within their community (Edelman, Gill, Comerford, Larson & Hare, 2004). Youth leadership programs afford youth the opportunity to engage in leadership opportunities, activities, and issues that affect their lives. Leadership groups are important to transition-aged youth because they often use a holistic, strength-based approach to involving youth in the community. Youth leadership groups offer a structured environment where youth can enhance their problem-solving and decision-making skills, develop self-reliance, create personal short- and long-term goals, and improve self-esteem. These characteristics are essential in promoting leadership skills for youth with and without disabilities (O’Leary and Méndez, 2001).

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (2004), youth leadership programs may differ in specific foci from region to region, but should center on components that “instill an active awareness of community development and healthy respect for civic ideals.” Some leadership groups are led by national Youth Leadership Forums (YLF) while others may be led by community based organizations, schools, or other local service agencies. Some youth leadership programs may structure themselves as a weekly group meeting while others, such as the Kansas YLF (motivational forum), last only one week a year.

What are the key components of youth leadership?

According to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET, n.d.), youth leadership activities and opportunities include but are not limited to some of the following components:

1. Contributing to and being involved in promoting the well being of the community,
2. Developing and using a positive attitude within leadership activities,
3. Developing strong, trustworthy relationships with responsible adults and peers,
4. Interacting and collaborating with individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds,
5. Participating in a wide array of career exploration activities,
6. Maintaining a commitment to academic and lifelong learning, and
7. Maintaining and demonstrating a healthy lifestyle.

The central purpose of a youth leadership group is to support youth in taking the initiative to engage in civic and community activities in order to build on their strengths and self-esteem and to work together as a team in building leadership skills. Youth leadership groups are similar to other youth development groups in that they are structured to offer youth educational, interesting material and resources that address current youth issues. Youth leadership groups are run by the youth themselves, but facilitated by a staff person in your program. Because the groups are self-directed by youth, the facilitator should serve as a support and guide for youth development.

The following is a step-by step description of how to design and implement a Youth leadership group. This material has been structured for a group that meets on a frequent basis, such as once a week. Remember that you can also create a group based on meeting once or twice a year. Examples are provided for many types of activities. In other youth groups, facilitators (adult supports or coaches) or staff come together to decide the group components before recruiting youth. Due to the nature of a youth-directed group, however, youth should be recruited early to form the group and be key decision makers for creating the group, choosing activities, and deciding what they will be learning.

Designing and Implementing the Group

Convene a planning meeting. The first step in developing a youth leadership group will be to convene a planning meeting with staff such as the educational advocate or

peer counselling specialist, parents, and any other community personnel you feel support youth in making leadership decisions. Designing the basic structure (not content) of the youth leadership group should be a collaborative effort with school personnel such as the transition specialist and CIL staff in order to create a joint vision for supporting youth. Ideally, you want all interested parties involved in supporting the group; however, you also want to be mindful of having too many or too few staff, depending on the size of the group.

Determine the size of the group you want to establish. Group size is typically eight to twelve individuals, but your numbers could vary. The group should be large enough to generate discussion and small enough for everyone to be actively involved. Group size should also depend upon your purpose and goals. For example, if you want to meet on a regular basis and engage in service learning opportunities in the community (collaborating with the community by combining both experiential activities and classroom learning objectives that address and resolve some community problem) (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.), then a smaller group (ten youth as opposed to 30) might be more practical. However, if youth are learning how to be delegates at an advocacy conference, larger groups are appropriate for this goal.

Determine the number of personnel. The number of personnel you will need to facilitate meetings will depend on the size of the group. Ideally, you would have one or two facilitators working with a group of youth. The facilitators are responsible for guiding group meetings, supporting planning and organization, and ensuring group success. For example, youth can be in charge of identifying potential service learning sites but facilitators may need to be the contact person for service learning projects. Facilitators serve as a source of support and act as resources for the youth. This may include: creating and maintaining relationships with community contacts, connecting with the local or state Youth Leadership Forum, carrying out duties that youth can not perform, building local capacity for youth, and generally serving as coaches and/or mentors to youth.

There are several options for recruiting youth for the group. For example, school personnel can post or pass out flyers in classes and other areas where youth congregate, announcements can be made at the school or phone calls could be made directly to youth or facilitators can give presentations at other youth organizations. Facilitators can initially enlist the support of a few youth who can help you with these tasks. They can also determine the type of enrollment requirements and selection criteria. Selection criteria should reflect the overall goals of your program. That is, if one of the leadership goals is to serve on the board of directors for agencies serving individuals with disabilities, potential members should share this as a mutual goal. Facilitators can create an application for potential members as this might help the youth select potential members.

Example Application Questions

- 1. Why are you interested in joining a youth leadership group?**
- 2. What activities would you like to participate or learn about from this group?**
 employment higher education law or policy
 political campaigning consumer issues advocacy
 health & wellness violence prevention
- 3. What other groups have you participated in the past?**
- 4. If you could make any contribution to your community, what would it be?**

Once youth have been recruited, the schedule for the first few meetings should include an orientation and discussion of the function and purpose of the group. You can also offer an informational component for youth that describes what a youth leadership group is, what types of activities a group can perform, and the skills and knowledge that they can learn from being a member of the group. The facilitator can lead a discussion on

what leadership means, why youth would want to join, and what youth can get out of the group. Ask the youth what kind of group do they want to be? Do they want to participate in service learning or volunteer experiences across the community? Do they want training in advocacy that may culminate in an experience in the state or nation's capital? In other words, do the youth want to engage in a series of smaller leadership experiences or train for one larger experience? Have youth brainstorm ideas and discuss the pros and cons of each one. Guide youth in thinking about what types of experiences they want, which skills they would like to build, and the resources for each idea. Next, the facilitator can assist youth in voting on the purpose of the group.

Conduct an orientation session. Ask each individual to give a brief introduction and tell the others why they joined the group. An alternate to this might be to suggest that each person give their name and tell everyone their favorite pastime or recreational activity. After introductions, conduct an "ice breaker" activity. Icebreaker activities are short, guided activities that allow youth to more comfortably meet each other and become comfortable talking within the group. Depending on the total number of youth you have in your group, introductions and icebreaker activities should take about 35-45 minutes. You want the activity long enough so that the youth can learn a little bit about each other but short enough that youth do not lose interest in the assignment. An example of an icebreaker activity is:

Example Icebreaker Activities

Have youth say 3 things about themselves- two true and one false. Have the other youth guess what the lie is for each person.

Determine what this group should accomplish. Youth in this group will be able to establish their own goals; however, you do want to suggest broad topic areas and structural guidelines for the meetings. The facilitator can lead the discussion by giving suggestions as to what the youth need to decide such as (a) how the group will function (e.g., group organization, who will lead meetings), (b) review purpose and goals of the

group, (c) group guidelines, and (d) meeting logistics (e.g., where and when the meetings will take place, meeting location, and transportation issues).

Determine how the group will function. The process by which the group goals will be accomplished should be established. Will the group vote on one youth (such as a group president) to lead each meeting for a determined period of time, or will the youth rotate and share the responsibility? Present choices to youth so that they may decide their own organizational structure. If the youth choose to vote on a president, you might consider suggesting that they also vote on vice president, treasurer, and secretary as well.

The group should define program goals that are specific and clear. The goals they choose should reflect the purpose of the leadership group and goals need to be realistic so that youth can achieve them. For example, if the purpose of the youth leadership group is to build leadership skills through a series of service learning activities that improve the quality of life in the community, youth could choose goals such as, volunteering at a food bank, serving on a youth council, serving on a board of directors for an organization, or attending and participating in neighborhood meetings. The goals youth choose should also be measurable so that they are able to evaluate individual and group progress. For goal number one, think about how one would measure “volunteer at a food bank.” Is it volunteering for a specific time frame, or working directly with individuals who receive donations? You might assist youth in establishing particular objectives that they feel best represent what they want to learn. This might include “works at least 5 hours per week,” or “conducts food waste prevention programs in schools.” Whatever goal they choose, they must make sure that they can measure whether or not the goal was accomplished. As the facilitator, you should always consider whether a goal is too large in the timeframe permitted and if it needs to be broken into smaller, more manageable goals so that the goal is under youth control. For example, youth may set a goal of conducting one waste prevention presentation per week but time, transportation or financial constraints might prevent them from doing so. Focusing on one presentation per month might be a more feasible goal. Both the

facilitator and group members need to be flexible in creating, establishing, and evaluating their goals.

What are the group's rules and guidelines? This is the time to allow youth the opportunity to take ownership of the group and create their own rules and guidelines. Discuss with them what rules mean and why a group might need them. You might suggest to them that rules not only allow for a degree of structure that can eliminate a variety of conflict situations, but they also let youth know the standard of behavior. Rules are expectations that can include how the members will treat each other, guidelines for behavior, and attendance procedures.

Example of Group Rules

1. **Be considerate of others.**
2. **Don't speak while others are speaking.**
3. **Whatever is discussed in the group stays in the group.**
4. **Support each others ideas**
5. **No cursing**
6. **No disrespecting another**
7. **No more than two tardies per person**
8. **No more than two absences per person.**

Some additional rules that youth choose might include:

- (1) Respect your peers: arrive on time and be prepared,**
- (2) Give constructive feedback to your peers,**
- (3) Work hard,**
- (4) No name calling, racial slurs, or derogatory comments,**
- (5) Respect others' property.**

Youth should also devise a plan for enforcing group rules and guidelines. The facilitator may need to offer additional support in helping youth determine how to implement consequences for major infractions, as this is never easy to execute. Youth should collectively agree on consequences and members should sign a contract or make a commitment to follow the rules.

In addition to group rules, youth should decide the name of the group, and food and drink preferences.

Consider when and how often the group will meet. The youth will need to determine the number of meetings that they would like to have each month. You should help youth think about the issues that might affect the meeting times. For example, the size of goals, participation in after school activities, hours of local transportation, and distance to the location might all effect how often the group meets. If the meetings are scheduled for the evening hours, consider the safety issues such as travelling alone at night. If youth plan to establish multiple subcommittees (e.g., food, newsletter, networking & outreach, policy etc), they will need to consider the need for additional meeting times as well. See the "Committee's" section for more information.

Establish a meeting location. The location where the meetings are held should be a comfortable, accessible, and safe setting so that the youth are encouraged to participate in the group. The space should be large enough for the size of the group. The type of activities conducted by the group will also influence spatial needs. Do they need a projector, stage, desks or writing surfaces? Will they benefit from the use of a computer or printer? Will they need use of a telephone to contact other members of the community? You will want to take into account other meeting spaces with which the youth are familiar such as a schoolroom or library or community recreation center.

Consider transportation issues. Transportation to and from the meetings should also be considered if the location is not within walking distance from the school. It might be possible to arrange transportation by the school district buses since school district

personnel are involved. Another option is public transportation if it is safe, affordable, and accessible for the youth.

Youth leadership groups can be a powerful tool for engaging youth in their communities, building leadership skills through applied experiences, building a sense of identity and developing civic awareness. Youth leadership groups can support youth in developing their voices by offering youth the opportunities to seriously reflect on solving problems in their communities and thinking critically about their own lives and future. The following is a list of some of the potential activities available to youth. For a more extensive list, see the “resources” section for web links.

Sample Activities:
<p>Youth Leadership Forum (YLF): The YLF is a nationally recognized group that meets annually to educate and provide youth with resources that develop leadership skills. Youth learn from and interact with older YLF alumni with disabilities and engage in a week long adventure filled with leadership, advocacy and goal-setting activities. There are 27 national state forums to date. Check your state website to see if your state participates in the forum or go to the http://www.dol.gov/odep/programs/yif.htm for more information on national youth leadership events.</p>
<p>Youth Docent Programs: Youth Docent Programs offer youth the opportunity to lead guided tours in many different areas (e.g., museums, historical buildings or land sites, and landscaped parks). The best place to inquire about these programs is through your local Parks and Recreation Services and your city or county museums. Local school districts might also have information on after school docent programs.</p>
<p>Monthly Newsletter: A newsletter can be geared toward any issues in which youth are interested (e.g., advocacy, independent living, and disability policy to name a few). Youth can focus on serving the community at large or make newsletters for a smaller group. Individual members can write informational articles or stories or they can interview people within the community. There is also an opportunity for members to take</p>

photographs for the newsletter and collect ads from local businesses to support and fund the newsletter. Costs for this activity will vary due to paper, ink, and copying costs.

Members will need access to a computer, printer, and copy machine.

Community Restoration Programs: Group members can participate in restoring historical buildings or sites. Youth may learn about community history and the value of restoration and preservation societies. Community restoration can also include developing impoverished communities. Examples are neighborhood beautification programs, social and low income services and home construction to name a few.

Advocacy Groups: Members receive practical educational and training opportunities that they, in turn, generate publicity (e.g., through debates, conferences, rallies) to the larger community. It includes issues such as: disability awareness, health awareness, chronic illness, drug prevention, violence prevention, peace and freedom, and current policy issues. Once youth have chosen the type of activity in which to participate they should be educated and trained in the issue (however the facilitator may see fit) and provided opportunities to learn public speaking skills.

Establishing Committees

Establishing smaller committees within the larger group are great ways to enhance leadership skills for individual members as well as maintain steady group involvement. The additional responsibility for individuals helps the overall group by allowing the meetings to run more smoothly (Oregon Institute on Disability & Development, 2001). Here are some examples of committees that the youth might want to incorporate into their group:

Volunteer Committee: these members are responsible for locating perspective community volunteer programs. They are responsible for initiating calls, gathering information and requirements, following up with sites, and presenting the information to the group.

Food Committee: these members are responsible for insuring that there is food at each of the meetings or wherever the group meets for a function.

Higher Education Committee: these members are responsible for gathering information that will assist youth in preparing for college or a vocational technology school. Duties might include gathering information for campus visits, testing requirements, locating services for students with disabilities, and compiling scholarship opportunities.

Career Committee: these members are responsible for contacting perspective employers and arranging site tours, informational interviews, and job shadowing experiences.

Fund Raising Committee: these members are responsible for creating activities that will help raise money for leadership and recreational activities. For example, if the group has decided to participate in a national rally, they will need to raise funds for plane fare, hotel, and food.

Member Support Committee: these members are responsible for contacting the group about various meetings and activities, keeping the group updated on phone lists and member information and assisting those youth who have transportation needs

Points to Remember

- **Group members need to be flexible and realistic in creating and striving for goals. Goal progress should be periodically assessed so that all group members have an idea of their progress.**
- **Have youth create an agenda for the meetings so that they have something to follow for each meeting. The first few agendas may be written by the facilitator until the youth are accustomed to running the meetings on their own.**
- **Youth will need guidance in solving conflicts or problems that arise. According to O’Leary and Méndez (2001), facilitators can assist youth in handling group problems by (a) remind members of existing group rules that relate to the problem, (b) engage youth in solving the problem and (c) structure their options and let them decide the way it should be handled (p. 33).**
- **Being a leader does not necessarily mean acting alone all of the time. Youth should be encouraged to work as a team when creating and performing group activities. For example, youth who are learning debate skills can rely heavily on each other for feedback on how they are progressing.**
- **Frequently reward youth with verbal praise to acknowledge the work that they are doing. When possible, offer tangible rewards like supplemental recreational outings.**

Example Orientation Meeting

According to O’Leary and Méndez (2001), the orientation consists of six steps:

- 1. Welcoming and thanking members for joining. Members can receive a welcome packet that contains information on relevant group phone numbers, relevant resources in the community, permission or release forms group materials such as newsletters, t-shirts,**
- 2. Introductions are important to make each member feel they are part of a group. For example, getting to know each other, icebreakers, discovering common interests and discussing why each member joined the group.**
- 3. Explain what you envision the group to be like. How often the group will meet, types of activities and what youth will gain by being in the group.**
- 4. Allow time for questions.**
- 5. Start shaping the group together- what is the group name, decide on meeting times and design membership cards.**
- 6. Take care of any essential business such as passing out or collecting permission forms or contracts.**

Please be aware that the number of group meetings and the content of those meetings are not meant to be prescriptive in nature. The youth may design a group as they see fit. As they design the group, be sure to have content clearly identified and defined so you can design ongoing activities around their distinct goals.

Resources

The following is a collection of written resources and web-based materials that might provide you with additional information or suggestions for the youth leadership group.

“Ice Breaker” Activities

Education World. First day of school icebreakers help students and teachers warm up. (1999). Retrieved January 15, 2004, from:
<http://clk.about.com/?zi=1/XJ&sdn=k6educators&zu=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.education%252Dworld.com%2Fa%255Flesson%2Flesson131.shtml>

Ice breakers and games. (n.d.) Retrieved January 15, 2004 from:
http://www.ccinfoline.8k.com/ice_breakers.htm

Young, Jennifer. Games (n.d.). Retrieved January 15, 2004 from:
<http://plaza.ufl.edu/youngjen/Paper2.html>

Youth Leadership Links

Advocates For Youth
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/>

America’s Promise
<http://www.americaspromise.org/>

American Youth Policy Forum
<http://www.aypf.org/>

Corporation for National Community Service
<http://www.learnandserve.org/>

Global Youth Service Day
<http://www.gysd.net/home/index.html?width=1024>

Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development
<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/>

Leadership Online
<http://www.leadershiponlinewkcf.org/>

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability

http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&Publications/hot_Topics/youth_Development/policy.shtml#question3policy

National Service Learning Clearinghouse

<http://www.servicelearning.org/>

National Youth Development Information Center

<http://www.nydic.org/nydic/>

National Youth Leadership Council

<http://www.nylc.org/>

National Youth Leadership Forum

<http://www.nylf.org/>

National Youth Leadership Network

<http://www.nyln.org/about/index.html>

MTV's Staying Alive Campaign

<http://www.staying-alive.org/>

State Education Agencies Service Learning Network

<http://www.seanetonline.org/pages/1/index.htm>

The United Nations Children's Fund

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/>

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy

Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities Questions and Answers.

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/programs/ylf.htm>

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- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (n.d.). Youth development and leadership. Retrieved May 8, 2004 from: <http://www.ncset.org/topics/leadership/default.asp?topic=31>
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse (n.d.). Service learning is.... Retrieved October 2, 2004 from: <http://www.servicelearning.org/article/archive/35/>.
- National Youth Leadership Network (2003).
- O'Leary, T.O. & Méndez, M.T. (2001). How to start a youth leadership group: A step by step guide. Center on Self-Determination, Oregon Institute on Disability and Development, Child Development and Rehabilitation Center. Retrieved February 23, 2004 from: <http://www.selfdeterminationohsu.org/education/moving/documents/youthlead-guide.pdf>