

Youth Empowerment Groups

What is a Youth Empowerment Group?

An empowerment group is defined as a group that addresses particular issues (for example, eliminating discrimination in the workplace or creating safer neighborhoods for families), to affect change and gain greater control over a situation. An empowerment group requires ongoing group participation, they are developed with a specific purpose in mind, and they are designed to remove barriers. Whatever the issue, a group is formed when individuals see the need to make a change and take greater command over issues that are affecting their lives. By affecting change, an empowerment group allows participants to realize their own potential by working toward mutually agreed upon goals. They can also provide individuals with peer support and opportunities for social interaction that promote a strong sense of community.

In the context of transition-aged youth, empowerment groups should afford opportunities to conceptualize, make decisions about, implement, and evaluate their individual goals. They are a means of supporting youth in taking a lead role in identifying their needs and engaging productively in their own transition planning processes. Empowerment groups also allow youth the opportunity to recognize and understand their power as decision makers over their own lives by using the skills acquired in the group to increase self-awareness and self-knowledge and promote progress toward greater autonomy and living independently.

The following is a step-by-step description of how to design and implement a youth empowerment group. You will notice that the examples shown are acquired from the study, *Centers for Independent Living and Transition Aged Youth: Empowerment and Self-Determination* (Wehmeyer and Gragoudas, 2002), in which the investigators, (RRTC-ILM staff), Center for Independent Living staff, and secondary school personnel created a youth empowerment program named *Friends for Life*. The purpose of this group was to promote the self-determination skills of transition-aged youth. The examples of the *Friends for Life* group are provided to you to illustrate portions of the empowerment group content and processes.

The curriculum utilized in the *Friends for Life* empowerment group sessions were drawn primarily from training materials on advocacy issues, independent living issues, and consumer rights and responsibilities. In addition, the facilitators used *Whose Future Is It Anyway?*, a student directed transition planning workbook for transition-aged youth with disabilities. The workbook, published by The ARC of

the United States, consists of 36 sessions and introduces students to the concept of planning their own transition.

Designing the Group

The first step in developing a youth empowerment group will be to convene a planning meeting with staff such as, the educational advocate or peer counseling specialist, parents, and any other personnel you feel support youth in making transition decisions. Designing the empowerment group should be a collaborative effort with school personnel such as the transition specialist and Center for Independent Living staff in order to create a joint vision for supporting the youth. Ideally, you would want Center for Independent Living staff and the transition specialist attending the group meetings, 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 six to eight individuals. The group should be large enough to generate discussion and small enough for everyone to be actively involved.

The agenda for this first meeting should include a discussion of the function of the empowerment group. What do you want this group to accomplish? Typically, individuals in the group would create their own goals; however, you do want to establish broad topic areas and structural guidelines for the meetings. The function of the group we set up focused upon increasing self-determination skills in transition planning. Since increased self-determination is associated with more positive adult outcomes and is also considered a best practice in providing transition services to youth, we felt this was appropriate.

Once the function of the group has been established, it will be helpful to lay out a general curriculum for a series of sessions. One meeting might be devoted to explaining the concept of self-determination while another might be having youth identify their skills and interests. At least one meeting might be devoted to the function and structure of a Center for Independent Living. This may be many students first encounter with a Center for Independent Living so it is an ideal opportunity to educate youth about community resources.

Our empowerment group used transition related materials on independent living, employment, goal setting, and self-advocacy. Meetings were held once a week for an hour, over the course of eight weeks. A list of topics was generated during the initial planning meetings to cover approximately three sessions then we were able to gather relevant resources and create the curriculum prior to initiating the group.

The process by which the group goals will be accomplished should be established. Once you have obtained or gathered curriculum materials, you must decide how the information will be presented to the youth. For the *Friends for Life*

group, the objective was student-directed learning around transition-related issues. This meant that students took the lead in their own learning experiences.

The number of personnel you will need to facilitate meetings will depend on the size of the group. Ideally, you would have one staff person working with every two or three youth. Facilitators for empowerment groups are responsible for instructing activities, and both facilitators and staff are responsible for structuring the group meetings, and maintaining the organization of weekly meetings. They serve as a source of support and act as resources for the youth. If one person is facilitating, one or two other staff are available to support youth as needed. Facilitators can instruct as a team or individually depending on the content of the activity. For example, if the activity is based upon Center for Independent Living's services, it is probably best to have the Center for Independent Living staff person facilitate that particular session.

Consider when and how often the group will meet. In developing the *Friends for Life* group, we were influenced by the school calendar and when the school day ended. You should think about what might affect the meeting times, for example, participation in after school activities, hours of local transportation, and distance to the location. Also, if the meetings are scheduled for the evening hours, consider the safety issues such as traveling alone at night.

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 you need a projector, stage, desks or writing surfaces? You also want to take into account meeting spaces with which the youth are familiar such as a school room or library. Transportation to and from the meetings should also be considered if the location is not within walking distance. It might be possible to arrange for the district bussing since school district personnel are involved. Another option is public transportation if it is safe, affordable, and accessible for the youth.

You have several options for recruiting youth for the empowerment group. For example, school personnel can hang up or pass out flyers in class and other areas where youth congregate, announcements can be made at the school or phone calls could be made directly to youth. When recruiting youth for the empowerment group, have the planning team discuss and choose individuals you believe would benefit from the experience. Input from individual group members is essential as each person has specific knowledge of youth that might influence who is recruited.

Establish some basic guidelines or rules that you believe are important for group members to follow. Some examples are: (1) Leave the room neat and clean, (2) Turn off the lights (3) Make sure doors are locked. Allow youth the opportunity to develop the more specific group rules (discussed in Second Meeting).

Points to Remember:

It is critical that youth take ownership of the group, their ideas, and the concept of self-determined transition planning.

Although the empowerment group is a collaborative process where Center for Independent Living staff and school are jointly involved in supporting youth goals, the empowerment group should be separate and distinct from a school group. The meetings should be located in a comfortable setting where youth feel free to express their personal thoughts on life goals and ideas about their future. It is important to recognize that some youth have never had the opportunity to set, implement, and evaluate their own goals, and may need individual assistance in acquiring the skills necessary for promoting self-determination.

How Do I Implement A Youth Empowerment Group?

The following material contains a session-by-session description of *Friends for Life* empowerment group. While the content of your group may be different, depending upon your focus and curriculum, you may find some helpful suggestions for your group regardless of the curriculum used.

First Meeting: This is the introductory session. Allow the group appropriate time to get to know one another by asking each youth to give a brief introduction. You might suggest that each youth give their name and tell everyone their favorite pastime or recreational activity. After introductions, conduct an icebreaker activity. Icebreaker activities are a way for youth to begin to feel comfortable meeting people and talking within the group. An example of an icebreaker activity is:

Example: My Hero

Have youth write down one of their heroes on a note card and find one other person in the room to interview. Youth will ask the other person (1) his or her name (2) where he or she is from, and (3) the reason why he or she chose the hero. After both youth have interviewed each other, they will introduce one another to the rest of the group.

After introductions and icebreaker activities, facilitators should review the purpose and goals of the group sessions with the youth. The concept of self-determination and student-directed learning should be clearly explained so that youth may gain an understanding of their critical roles within the group. For

example, the facilitator may explain to youth that a self-determined person is one who takes control over making the decisions in his or her life. This person knows how to adjust to and modify behaviors and actions to fit life circumstances. She or he can evaluate her or his own needs, set goals, and make decisions about what is needed to achieve those goals. Self-determined people do not always know what to do or have to be independent in every behavior, but they do take the lead in finding answers to reach their goals.

After the explanation, the facilitator should ask youth if they could give examples of what it means to be self-determined in order to determine the level of understanding. Allot time for youth to ask questions and gain clarification if needed.

Example:

Each week in the Friends for Life group, facilitators and Center for Independent Living counselors asked the youth, "What can we do to improve this experience?" Changes were made according to youth responses. Facilitators and Center for Independent Living counselors also emphasized the importance of the youth self-directing and taking ownership of the group.

Second Meeting: This is the time to allow youth the opportunity to take ownership of the group. They can decide the (1) name of the group, (2) rules for the group, and (3) food and drink preferences.

Friends for Life

- **Group Rules**
- **Be considerate of others.**
- **Don't speak while others are speaking.**
- **Whatever is discussed in the group stays in the group.**

Some rules that youth choose might include: (1) Respecting your peers: arriving on time and being prepared, (2) giving constructive feedback to peers, (3) working hard, (4) refraining from name calling, racial slurs, or derogatory comments, (5) and respecting others' property.

There may be other aspects of the group for which the youth can assume responsibility. If they can assume as much control as possible over aspects of the group, they will gain a better understanding of the empowerment that occurs with being self-determined.

Third and Fourth Meetings: This activity provides youth with the opportunity to describe themselves and their goals for the future. Youth should use the third and fourth meetings to identify their future ambitions from a broad or general perspective. Youth will need time and support to think, talk, and write about themselves and what they want for themselves in the future. Their futures can include anything such as future employment, where they would like to go to college, or a community group they would like to join. The purpose is for youth to reflect on who they are and where they want to go.

If youth cannot think of goals, (which can happen) ask youth guided questions such as What do you like to do?, What are you good at doing?, and What are some skills you like to use at home? At school? Once a youth begins answering these questions, you will have a better idea of how to best support him or her in choosing a goal. The facilitators and staff working with the youth are responsible for inspiring ideas but they are not responsible for deciding what goal the youth will choose.

Youth may present their future goals to each other through various formats such as a poem, collage, skit, song, or a drawing. This can be a fun activity. Facilitators should have sample material to help youth decide how best to present their future goals.

Divide the youth into smaller groups (2 or 3 youth depending on group size) so that they may dialogue with each other. As some students have not had the chance to actually think about or make decisions about what they want, facilitators should allow ample time for them to reflect on and design their presentation ideas. Once youth have completed their presentations within their smaller group, have them present their materials to the rest of their peers.

Fifth and Sixth Meetings: The next two sessions should be used to develop a plan to achieve the goal identified in sessions three and four. The *Friends for Life* group used a **DO IT!** form to work through this process. **DO IT!** is a choicemaking, decision-making and problem-solving activity contained in the *Whose Future Is It Anyway?* workbook.

Have youth further develop their broad goals (or transition outcomes areas) based on the future they created for themselves in the previous session. Emphasize that the goals should be those that can be included in their Individualized Education Plans (for example, educational, independent living, employment or recreational goals) and that school personnel can also support them in reaching the goals. This activity may be difficult for youth, as many have

not learned or practiced goal-setting skills. It is important that the staff work with them to support them through the process. Supporting youth might entail guiding youth through questions such as the ones used in identifying goals. For example, “What kinds of activities do you like to do?” “What are you good at doing?” “What is it that makes you feel you’re good at it?” “What are some skills you like to use at home?” “What are some skills you like to use at school. The purpose of asking these basic questions is to elicit answers that might lead youth to choosing a goal.

DO IT! is a form that can assist youth in creating goals. (Wehmeyer and Kelchner, 1997) It involves using a decision-making process that supports individuals in creating goals based on their individual needs, identifying options for the goals, and identifying potential outcomes. The activity allows individuals to self-monitor progress while they are working toward their goals. Youth work through this model with assistance from a staff person. Specifically, the model enables staff to support youth in:

Defining or identifying problems or needs.

Outlining options that address the need.

Identifying potential outcomes of each option.

Taking action.

The facilitator may want to include a short activity on setting goals as a way of introducing the **DO IT!** form. Ask youth, “What is a goal?” Allow them time to formulate answers and respond to the question. Explain that a goal is something that a person wants to achieve or an outcome a person wants to happen such as getting up on time, eating healthier foods, or passing a mathematics course. Whatever the goal may be, a person must set up a plan of action in order to reach that goal.

Staff may also support youth as they work through the **DO IT!** activity sheet by reading statements aloud, clarifying statements, or re-wording statements. For example, after a facilitator reads the statement, define the problem it would be followed by That means what is it you want to do? or What is it that needs to change?

The following is an example of using the **DO IT!** form to develop a goal. The problem to define is, “How can I obtain more spending money?”

DO IT!

Define the Problem: I would like to have more spending money.

Outline your options:	What makes this option attractive
1. I can ask my parents for spending money.	I could get the money immediately.
2. I can get a part-time job.	I would have control over the money.

Identify the outcome of each option:

Option	Pros of this option
1. They can tell me no.	None
2. They can give me the money but I would have to do more chores around the house.	None
3. I will feel more independent.	I can be proud of myself.
4. I will have extra money to either spend or save how I like.	I can be proud of myself.

Take action: Pick the outcome of the option that is best for you.

! I choose Option Number 2, because *I want to become more independent.*

We'll explore the **DO IT!** example:

Define the problem: The problem is I would like to have more spending money.

Outline your options: I can either ask my parents for the extra money or I can get a part-time job and earn the money myself.

What makes this option attractive at this time? If I ask my parents for money, I would get the money immediately. If I get a part-time job I would have control over the money I earn.

Identify the outcome of each option: If I ask my parents for spending money they could tell me no. If I got a part-time job, I would feel more independent.

The pros of this option: I can't think of anything positive if they did not give me the money but if I felt more independent, I know I would feel better about myself.

The cons of this option: If they say no then I still do not have any spending money.

Take action: I choose option number two getting a part-time job, because I want to have control over the money I am earning.

Seventh Meeting: This meeting is considered an informational session. The purpose of this activity is to provide youth with information that they can use that will support them in living more independently. Many of the youth might be unaware of the opportunities and services that your Center for Independent Living provides so facilitators may utilize sessions to provide youth with information about types of services, such as advocacy, youth leadership, employment skills, support with independent living, peer mentoring, using public transportation, volunteering in the community, building social networks, locating community resources, or using the internet.

Eighth Meeting: The final activity is the student choice activity. It is designed to allow youth to choose some activity that they would like to do together. In order to practice some of the decision-making skills learned in the previous activities, allow youth to plan all aspects of the final activity by implementing the skills practiced in the **DO IT!** activity. The steps include having youth (1) list the potential activity choices on a white board or flip chart, (2) decide upon the activity, (3) vote on and choose one idea to explore, (4) list actions needed to

complete the idea that was chosen, (5) specify potential barriers to achieving actions, (6) identify possible solutions to the barriers, (7) choose the best solution and, (8) implement the activity.

For example, youth will individually brainstorm all of the activities in which they would like to participate (e.g., rollerblading, skate boarding, watching a movie, or bowling). Explain to the group that the activities do not have to be recreational; they could be service-oriented in nature, such as, a community clean up or volunteering at a food bank. One of the facilitators will quickly write all of the ideas down either on a board or flip chart for all of the youth to see. Next, youth must vote on the activity they like the best, the one they want to participate in as a group. Once youth have voted on the top activity, they need to work out all of the detail they would need to take care of in order to participate in that activity. If they choose to go to a movie, for example, they would have to:

- outline how they will all choose what movie to watch,
- pick a date to see the movie,
- choose a time that the movie is playing,
- the cost of the movie (and snacks),
- identify accessibility requirements of the group,
- determine if the theater is accessible,
- and how they will get to the movie theater

Example: The *Friends for Life* group chose to go bowling and had to plan all aspects of the activity such as, the date, time and transportation they were going to use. At the end of the session, the group had planned an evening of bowling and pizza. The youth in the group expressed that they were satisfied with the skills they had learned in the empowerment group as well as planning the event.

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

Self-Directed Learning Materials

Bolding, N., Wehmeyer, M.L., and Lawrence, M. (1999) *It's my future! Planning for what I want in my life*. Silver Spring, MD: The Arc of the United States.

Wehmeyer, M.L. and Kelchner, K. (1997). *Whose future is it anyway? A studentdirected transition-planning program*. Silver Spring, MD: The Arc of the United States.

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/XJandsdn=k6educatorsandzu=http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson131.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>

Self-Determination Materials and Information

Beach Center on Disability. (2004). Self-determination. Retrieved Feb1, 2004 from:

<http://www.beachcenter.org/default.asp?strResource=allandSubmit=GoandsubmitFlag=trueandid=10andact=viewandtype=topic>

Transitionlink. (2004). Retrieved February 10, 2004 from:

<http://www.transitionlink.com/>