

Evidence Brief

10 Promising Practices for Creating a Curriculum for Youth Living with Learning Disabilities

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "youth," "learning disabilities," "curriculum," "best practices," "employment," and "youth programs."

Definitions of Key Terms

For the purposes of this evidence brief, we use the following working description of learning disabilities from the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada:

Learning Disabilities (LDs) are specific neurological disorders that affect the way a person stores, understands, retrieves, and/or communicates information.

People with learning disabilities are intelligent and have abilities to learn despite difficulties in processing information and a pattern of uneven abilities.

LDs are invisible and lifelong.

LDs can occur with other disorders (ADHD, etc.) and may run in families.

LDs are NOT the same as intellectual disability, autism, deafness, blindness, behavioural disorders or laziness.

LDs are not the result of economic disadvantage, environmental factors or cultural differences.

Living with a learning disability can have an ongoing impact on friendships, school, work, self-esteem, and daily life.

People with LDs can succeed when solid coping skills and strategies are developed.

Learning disabilities may affect one's ability to gain employment (particularly meaningful employment) and may also affect one's social development (Timmons et al., 2010). Youth living with a learning disability often require additional supports, as compared to their peers. Those with learning disabilities may have difficulty in one or more of the areas listed below (Timmons et al., 2010, p. 1):

- attention span and impulsivity
- memory and recall
- following directions
- discriminating between/among letters, numerals or sounds
- reading comprehension and/or writing
- spelling and decoding
- eye-hand coordination or motor skills
- sequencing
- mathematical concepts and calculations
- expressive language processing
- receptive language processing
- organization
- social judgment and social interaction

Three Key Findings

1. Curriculum designed for youth with learning disabilities must consider the heterogeneity of this group. **People living with learning disabilities will have unique experiences that require unique solutions.** However, research has proven some **common principles and practices that have helped to support this group** (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). This evidence brief will outline some of these practicable strategies, as well as suggestions for creating a curriculum for youth who are living with learning disabilities.
2. **Education and support programs play a crucial role in helping youth living with learning disabilities to reach their full potential** (Weiss & Riosa, 2015). Prevocational program engagement increases the chances of employment for these youth (United Nations Youth, n.d.; Centre for Youth & Society, n.d.). The resources we reviewed suggest that programs for youth to enhance their skills and prepare them to transition from school to work are an essential component that will determine whether youth later become engaged in meaningful employment (Centre for Youth & Society, n.d.; Weiss & Riosa, 2015; Kramer et al., 2018; Fabian, 2007; Shandra & Hogan, 2008). Along with teaching youth practical skills, these programs have the ability to instill a sense of hope in youth, which can go a long way in promoting mental health (Centre for Youth & Society, n.d.).

3. Programs working with youth living with learning disabilities often take an approach that focuses on their challenges (Weiss & Riosa, 2015), which can leave little room to praise youth for their successes and positive attributes. **Employing a strength-based approach** is more useful, as it helps youth build confidence and self-esteem, crucial components of mental health and a meaningful life (Weiss & Riosa, 2015; Kramer et al., 2018; Shandra & Hogan, 2008). A curriculum that takes a strength-based approach is one that would start with finding positive attributes.

Summary of Evidence: 10 Promising Practices

We identified 10 promising practices/strategies for creating a curriculum for youth living with learning disabilities, as well as for working directly with these youth.

1. Plan your learning strategy.

Learning strategies should include a **sequence of events**, and youth should be continually reminded of which stage they are at while participating in the program (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). Swanson & Deshler (2003, p. 129) outline a sequence of stages that can be followed:

- a) Clearly state the learning objectives.
- b) Explain the skills needed.
- c) Give information and examples.
- d) Question students for level of understanding.
- e) Provide an opportunity for youth to practice new skills.
- f) Assess performance and provide feedback (positive feedback should be given first, and areas of improvement should be carefully worded to avoid using unintentionally hurtful words or phrases).

2. Assess each young person's needs.

In order to create a learning plan that is tailored to each young person's needs, it is crucial that each youth is assessed to determine their strengths, areas of improvement, and interests (Bryant & Bryant, 1998; Kramer et al., 2018).

3. Incorporate technology.

Most youth are familiar with using technology, which can provide fun and engaging tools for working with youth who may be hesitant, or find it difficult, to learn through more traditional methods (Centre for Youth & Society, n.d.; Timmons et al., 2012; Kramer et al., 2018; Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

4. Break down bigger tasks into smaller ones.

Ensure that youth do not become overwhelmed with tasks that may seem daunting (Swanson & Deshler, 2003; Field, 1996). For example, the task of creating a resume could be broken down into a number of smaller tasks, beginning with developing a list of skills and interests.

5. Inform youth what they will be learning in advance.

Communicating with youth about what they will be learning during each program session will help to create structure and keep youth on track. Creating a hard copy outline, or one that is accessible online, will allow youth to follow along with session topics. This outline should be adhered to whenever possible (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

6. Ensure time is allocated for hands-on practice.

When learning a new skill, youth should be given sufficient time to practice that skill (Swanson & Deshler, 2003; Kramer et al., 2018; Bryant & Bryant, 1998).

7. Make time for one-to-one instruction.

One-to-one time with program facilitators is especially beneficial for youth living with learning disabilities (Swanson & Deshler, 2003), allowing staff to build trust with youth and to develop learning strategies that are individually tailored and paced (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

8. Incorporate a problem-solving component.

Many youth with learning disabilities face barriers to participation in a number of contexts (Kramer et al., 2018), so it is important to equip these youth with the skills needed to identify these barriers and come up with solutions to overcome them (Kramer et al., 2018).

9. Create opportunities for youth to meet and collaborate with employers.

It can be difficult for youth with learning disabilities to find and reach out to employers on their own (MaRS Solutions Lab, 2013). Programs should build this element into their curriculum, and this should be communicated to youth who will be participating so that they are aware of the tangible benefits they will gain by attending.

10. Support meaningful employment and careers.

Seek to support youth in finding meaningful employment opportunities that align with their skills and interests, rather than focusing on what could be precarious job opportunities (MaRS Solutions Lab, 2013; Centre for Youth & Society, n.d.; Shandra & Hogan, 2008).

Useful Links

In addition to the References at the end of this evidence brief, the following links may be useful:

1. Ability First Coalition

<http://abilityfirst.ca>

2. *Putting Employment First for Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: A Resource for Community Leaders*

(Canadian Association of Community Living, 2012)

<http://readywillingable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Youth-transitions-to-employment-guide-Final1.pdf>

3. Transitioning Youth with Disabilities and Employment – TYDE

(Centre for Inclusion and Citizenship, University of British Columbia)

<https://cic.arts.ubc.ca/transitioning-youth-with-disabilities-and-employment-tyde>

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