

Evidence Brief

Six Promising Practices for Engaging Youth with Learning Disabilities in Legal Education and Outreach

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and online academic databases using the following key terms: "legal education," "engagement strategies," and "youth with learning disabilities."

Summary of Evidence

1) Providing Youth with Legal Information

There is limited literature, research, and resources related to providing legal information and education to Canadian youth who have learning disabilities. Many legal organizations or legal aid clinics overlook young people as clients, and lawyers are typically not trained in specific skills for working with youth (Hoegger Alexandre & Schwartz, n.d.). As of 2015, no Canadian bar associations or law societies had formal guidelines for lawyers representing children and youth (Lovinsky & Gagne, 2015); this represents an area for future research and best practice guidelines within the Canadian legal field.

2) Engaging Youth with Learning Disabilities

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.

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

Six Promising Practices for Engaging Youth with Learning Disabilities in Legal Education and Outreach

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 and 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. 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.

3. 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).

4. 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).

5. 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).

6. Incorporate a problem-solving component.

Many young people 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).

References

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