

Promising Practices for Working With Youth With Disabilities¹

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Introduction

The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) report that 15% of individuals aged 3–21 are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This means that 15% of youth are diagnosed with a disability that has the potential to affect their success academically and in the workforce. As a youth development organization, 4-H programs should anticipate at least 15% of their population, if not more, to have a diagnosed disability. As youth development professionals, we are tasked with meeting the needs of youth with disabilities through proactive (planning before the program or activity) and reactive (addressing needs after the program or activity) planning strategies. This also includes professionals being flexible, accommodating, and ready to foster Positive Youth Development best practices.

Positive Youth Development (PYD), the youth development framework 4-H follows, is a comprehensive approach to encourage learning and development in youth. The 4-H Thriving Model is the theory of change that aligns and supports positive youth development in 4-H (Noble et al.,

2021). The Youth Program Quality Principles (Gootman & Eccles, 2002) outline eight critical standards to ensure 4-H programs are planned and led with integrity and also support PYD and the Thrive Model. This publication utilizes those principles to support best practices in working with youth with disabilities.

Practices are commonly utilized methods to achieve results, while programs are sets of practices (Reinhard et al., 2020). According to Reinhardt et al. (2020),

Promising programs and practices are labelled as *promising* because they have not been rigorously evaluated, but they demonstrate a benefit to a local population (e.g., a school, district, or community). They may lack rigorous evaluation because they were not designed in a way that enables credible evaluation, were not resourced to be evaluated, or need further development. (p. 5)

We call these guidelines promising practices since they are rooted in research principles and practices that professionals and experts in the field of youth with disabilities have documented. Each promising practice in this publication is

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documented by research in the field of youth development that supports the need for the practice, implementation strategies with resources to generate ideas, and one or more of the eight Youth Program Quality Principles with which it correlates.

The Eight Youth Program Quality Principles (YPQP)

1. **Physical and Psychological Safety:** Youth need to feel safe in 4-H programs and to be able to interact positively with others.
2. **Appropriate Structure:** Whether a club meeting or leadership camp, 4-H programs must have clear and consistent rules and expectations, with clear boundaries and age-appropriate monitoring.
3. **Supportive Relationships:** All youth need to feel warmth from and closeness to others in 4-H. Youth need to feel others care about them and support them. They also need to receive clear guidance and communication from 4-H volunteers and staff.
4. **Opportunities to Belong:** All youth need to feel included in a meaningful way in 4-H. Youth should have opportunities to share with others and to forge a positive identity.
5. **Positive Social Norms:** Youth should experience clear rules and expectations for participating in 4-H, including the values, morals, and ethical expectations of being a 4-H member.
6. **Support for Efficacy and Mattering:** Youth in 4-H should be taken seriously and respected for their ideas and contributions. Youth should be given opportunities to develop responsibility and be challenged to set and achieve goals.
7. **Opportunities for Skill Building:** Youth need to develop physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, and social skills as they grow and develop. 4-H provides opportunities for youth to develop these skills, which support a young person into adulthood and the workplace.
8. **Integration of Family, School, and Community:** Youth in 4-H do best when there is a connection to their 4-H experience with their family, school, and community. This is why 4-H programs begin at the local level, in the community where youth can practice their emerging leadership skills as they grow and develop.

Promising Practices Aligned with Research, Implementation, and Youth Principles

The following are practices proposed to ensure opportunity for youth of all abilities:

- Create accessible policies.
- Design accessible programs and materials.
- Increase disability familiarity.
- Increase the skill set of adult and youth volunteers.
- Communicate clear expectations and program details.
- Make events (competitive and non-competitive) suitable for all youth.
- Promote life skill development.
- Promote a sense of belonging.
- Create opportunities to support caregivers and the community.
- Promote peer mentorship opportunities.

Create accessible policies.

The purpose of providing accommodations is to make experiences possible for everyone, including those with disabilities. All policies should encourage intentional integration for all youth and look toward removing barriers that may exist.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Barriers to participation for youth with disabilities related to out-of-school time programming is commonly cited among caregivers within the research (Bedell et al., 2013; Coussens et al., 2020; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2013; Schleien et al., 2014). These barriers include the child's individual characteristics, requirements of the activity (such as duration or frequency), the physical and social environment, and the services available (Bedell et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2022; Schleien et al., 2014; Tint et al., 2017). Further participation barriers include a lack of time, accommodations, staff knowledge, and familiarity of public and free opportunities in which to participate as a family (Columna et al., 2011).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1 and 2)

- Confer with your organization's ADA Compliance Department to learn about available resources.
- Include accommodation request statements (such as ADA and Equal Opportunity statements and how to

request accommodations) on marketing and registration materials.

- Evaluate the space for programming and make any necessary changes (increase aiseways and take stock of restrooms, elevators, and uneven terrain, etc.). (See the facility checklist under Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources](#).)
- Make sure all educational materials follow Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Refer to the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) for more information on [UDL](#).
- Make an accommodation plan (as shown by the Ohio 4-H Defiance Co [blog](#)) or request form (as provided on the Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources webpage](#)) available to all participants before and during participation in the program.
- Create an [accommodation flowchart](#), like one from the [US Department of the Interior](#), to assist in making decisions about accommodations.
- Create accommodation resources (as shown by the toolkit from Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources](#)) to assist youth who attend programs.
- Utilize an [accommodation toolkit](#), such as one from the [National Center on Educational Outcomes](#), to help identify possible solutions to barriers.
- Intentionally consider how having a disability may impact someone's ability to meet expectations and adjust accordingly.
- Create an alternative format for participation, allowing choices and flexibility.
- Waive policies and requirements that may not be developmentally appropriate.

Design accessible programs and materials.

Meeting spaces, activities, and materials should be designed intentionally to be accessible and welcoming to youth with disabilities.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Implementing integrative programming within youth development organizations requires intentional planning, making and providing accommodations, helping staff build an appropriate skill set, and ensuring access for all (Perry, 2021). Integrative programs require flexibility to accommodate the needs of participants with disabilities. Programs should be designed to be adaptable, should offer individualized support, and should provide ongoing evaluation

(Harris & Smith, 2016). Youth development programs for individuals with disabilities can incorporate flexibility by offering individualized support, adaptable activities, and a focus on building social skills and self-esteem (Cole & Meyer, 2010).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1 and 3)

- Utilize the [World Wide Web Consortium, W3C](#), website to access digital accessibility standards and best practices.
- Follow the [ADA facility standards](#) to ensure all meeting spaces are accessible and welcoming to youth with disabilities.
- Implement plain writing standards in all program materials to enhance understanding and participation among all youth. (Review the [USDA plain writing standards](#) for examples.)

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 2 and 4)

- Confer with your organization's ADA Compliance Department to learn about resources available, including assistance in design and accessibility. Address features such as closed-captions, font, color contrast, and so forth.
- Adhere to Section 508 guidelines to create digital products that are accessible and user-friendly for youth with disabilities.
- Utilize video tutorials and practical how-to guides from sites, such as [UF's Accessibility department](#), to educate staff on creating content and programming.
- Incorporate reasonable accommodations tailored to individual youth needs, according to Creighton's (2021) presentation, "Reasonable Accommodations and Accessibility for Individuals with Disabilities."

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 6, 7, and 8)

- Draw on the experiences of peers within the field to continuously cultivate a sense of belonging.
- Gather feedback from youth participants and their families to adapt programs effectively and foster a sense of belonging.

Increase disability familiarity.

Disseminate educational products and resources to encourage and highlight the impact and strategies of working with all audiences, specifically those with disabilities.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

The lack of familiarity with disability, necessary accommodations, and skill sets of providers can be barriers to participation for people with disabilities in programming (Taylor-Winney et al., 2018). Studies have found that

opportunities supporting disability familiarity can encourage positivity towards persons with disabilities amongst youth populations (Anderson et al., 2021; Moore & Netelbeck, 2013).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 8)

- Incorporate disability familiarity and belonging activities into programming. (For example, see Minnesota 4-H curriculum for youth of all abilities.)
- Do a community scan to identify potential audiences.
- Share resources with program adult and youth volunteers to help them support youth with disabilities.
 - National Mentoring Resource Center: “[Mentoring for Youth With Disabilities](#)”
 - Video on strategies for recruitment, programming, materials, resources, and support: “[Reaching ALL Texans...](#)”
 - Wisconsin 4-H: “[Paths to Inclusion](#)”
- Support community service and service-learning projects around the disability population.
- Encourage adults who have disabilities to volunteer or present to audiences to reduce the stigma around having a “disability.” Shandra (2019) defines this: “Integrative volunteering—that which explicitly provides opportunities for people with disabilities within voluntary agencies.”
- Recognize all members, including those with disabilities, throughout the year through social media, awards, member highlights, social events, and so forth.

Increase the skill set of adult and youth volunteers.

Provide adult and youth volunteers with an opportunity to increase their skill set in working with people with disabilities.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

The skill set of providers can be a barrier to youth with disabilities participating in programming (Taylor-Winney et al., 2018).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1 and 3)

- Include an opportunity to assist volunteers in working with people with disabilities effectively. Suggested topics include understanding terminology and definitions associated with disability, learning about accommodations for working with youth with disabilities, and behavior management techniques.

- Wisconsin 4-H, [Disability Awareness Training for Adults](#)
- Minnesota 4-H, Annual Volunteer Training Library: [4-H for All Abilities](#)
- Minnesota 4-H, [Understanding Youth Behaviors for Staff and Volunteers](#)
- Minnesota 4-H, [Understanding Youth Behaviors—Club Scenarios](#)
- Utilize university and community resources/experts to bring a skill set in working with people with disabilities to others (e.g., disability resource center, university services, service providers, etc.).
- Share resources with adult and youth volunteers to help them support youth with disabilities.
- Implement a committee or work team to encourage accessibility and gather resources in a central location for people to access.

Communicate clear expectations and program details.

To support a positive experience, caregivers and families should be familiar with what the program offers and be able to plan accordingly for their family’s needs.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Effective communication of expectations enhances participation and retention among youth, particularly those with disabilities, who may require more explicit guidance (Gootman & Eccles, 2002). Engaging caregivers in the program process helps ensure that expectations are understood, fostering a supportive environment for youth with disabilities (Epstein & Sheldon, 2022).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 2, 3, and 5)

- Utilize proactive strategies (such as those listed in previous practices) that support caregivers and families before they choose to enroll in the program.
- Provide orientation or documentation of expectations and program details. Include timelines and deadlines for materials.
- Encourage caregivers and members to communicate with program staff and ask questions.

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 4 and 6)

- Offer regular updates through newsletters or digital platforms to reinforce expectations and provide ongoing support for youth and caregivers.

- Utilize feedback loops where youth and families can voice their experiences and expectations, allowing for necessary adjustments in communication.

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1 and 8)

- Create visual aids or charts that clearly outline expectations and timelines, making them accessible for all youth, including those who may struggle with verbal communication.
- Host Q&A sessions for caregivers and youth to discuss program details and expectations, ensuring everyone feels informed and included.

Make events (competitive and non-competitive) suitable for all youth.

Youth with disabilities may require additional accommodations or modifications (to events, rules, activities, etc.) to engage in events. Youth with disabilities should feel welcome to engage in competitive event experiences.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Every member should be recognized and applauded for participating in an event. It does not matter what the praise is for; it is vital that every member feels they are an important part of the 4-H program, are accepted by the group, and have something valuable to offer (Tatman, 2015). It is important to remember that the goal of making competitive judging event accommodations is not to create an “unfair advantage” for anyone but rather to provide an opportunity for all to participate to the best of their ability (Cole, 2024). Livestock show ring participation can be challenging but also very rewarding for youth with disabilities (Godwin, 2022).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1, 2, 4, and 7)

- Adapt event experiences to be developmentally appropriate vs. age appropriate. For example, if a 4-H member’s age chronologically is 10 years old, but developmentally they are more in line with a 5-year-old, use the developmental standards for the 5-year-old when the member is participating. (See PennState Extension’s article, “[Exploring Developmentally Appropriate Practice](#).”)
- Communicate the relevance of accommodations when necessary. Minnesota 4-H offers some considerations on the subject via their [accessibility resources webpage](#).
- Share tips with judges. (Minnesota 4-H provides examples of how to judge events involving youth with disabilities on their [accessibility resources webpage](#).)

- Offer a buddy show or something similar that pairs youth with and without disabilities to show together. The following are examples:

- Central Florida Fair, [Fair Buddies](#)
- Florida State Fair, [Show Pals Livestock Show](#)
- Limestone Fair, [Heart of a Champion Livestock Show](#)

Promote life skill development.

4-H supports life skill development by targeting skills that will help youth mature into productive citizens. Examples of life skills include responsibility, teamwork, empathy, decision-making, and resiliency.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Skill development is one commonly cited goal by parents of a child with a disability who enroll their children in out-of-school-time activities (Agran et al., 2017; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2013; Echelle & Raval, 2016). Caregivers also seek programs to help promote autonomy for their children with disabilities (Doren et al., 2012; Duff et al., 2019). While fully inclusive programs may be desired by caregivers, they also recognize that they are not always warranted, and specialized programming can ease some of the safety concerns caregivers may have for their children (Schleien et al., 2014).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 5, 6, and 7)

- Provide opportunities to [target life skills](#) that promote independent living, such as independence, responsibility, and organization. This can be done by encouraging opportunities for all, making accommodations, and adapting programs where applicable.
- UF/IFAS Extension, Ask IFAS publication, “[Targeting Life Skills in 4-H](#)”
- Purdue University Extension, [4-H Impact: Targeting Life Skills](#)
- Presume competence of youth participants, as explained by the University of Minnesota Extension in “[Ensuring Spaces for All Abilities](#).”
- Create programs that are disability-specific when appropriate. (See the US Soccer Foundation discuss how Florida 4-H ran a Soccer for Success [program for children with Down syndrome](#).)
- Modify, eliminate, or use different age division record sheets or other program-specific forms to build life skills at a developmentally appropriate level.
- Have conversations with youth with disabilities or their caregivers, when appropriate, to determine what skills

they would like to gain through 4-H and help identify how 4-H can help in the development of these. For guidance on engaging in conversations with caregivers, visit Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources](#).

- Incorporate recreation into programs to promote unstructured socialization. See Ohio online publication [4H-37](#) for an example.

Promote a sense of belonging.

Belonging is one of the four Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development. Promoting belonging is an intentional act that fosters integration for participants. Belonging includes feeling welcomed, accepted, and supported, as well as having friends and being recognized (Carter et al., 2016).

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Children with developmental disabilities have expressed they want to feel included, to belong, and to be able to develop competencies (Coussens et al., 2020). Elements of fun, belonging, and social engagement paired with the time investment and ease of participation dictate what youth with disabilities choose to participate in (King et al., 2014). Caregivers are looking for their children to feel that they are accepted and that they belong in the community (Bedell et al., 2011; Correia & Seabra-Santos, 2023; Mactavish & Schleien, 1998; Schleien et al., 2014).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1, 3, 4, and 6)

- Provide appropriate marketing materials, such as statements and pictures, that are representative of the population. Statements include opportunity for all and all ability programming.
- Include accommodation request wording on enrollment and competitive events registration materials.
- Utilize forms of disability etiquette when working with disability populations. (See general and specific tips on disability etiquette from the Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources webpage](#).)
- Consider ways to communicate effectively with families. For guidance on engaging in conversations with caregivers, visit Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources](#)
- Make accommodation resources available at all events and activities. (See the accommodation tool kits under Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources](#).)
- Make the effort to encourage youth to get to know one another. This can include activities and other forms of engagement that encourage youth to learn about one another. The following are some examples:

- Minnesota 4-H, [One-page strength description activity](#)
- Wisconsin 4-H, [Icebreakers](#)
- Ohio 4-H, [Team-building activities](#)
- Consider having a buddy or mentorship program, as shown by the relevant guide under Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources](#).

Create opportunities to support caregivers and the community.

Caregivers are parents or guardians who take care of the needs of a child. They are responsible for enrolling and supporting a child's participation in activities. Caregivers need to feel that their child not only belongs but also is safe and supported. Caregivers want a sense of belonging not only for their child but for themselves.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Caregivers acknowledge they have felt judged by others in public settings due to their child's behavior in relation to their disability (Broady et al., 2017; Hepperlen et al., 2021). Oftentimes, parents participate by taking the initiative to start and maintain an activity or club so their child can participate (Fisher et al., 2022). Parents of children with disabilities can benefit from opportunities that foster a sense of belonging for not only their child but also themselves to stave off feelings of isolation from their community (Darcy et al., 2020).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 8)

- Start an integrative club geared toward youth with disabilities. The club should invite all youth to participate but can focus and market toward youth with disabilities and their families.
- Consider ways to communicate effectively with families.
- Provide opportunities for caregivers to feel that they are important and part of the program by asking questions about their child(ren) and encouraging the caregiver to participate.
- Implement a family mentorship or caregiver-to-caregiver mentorship program. (Refer to the mentorship guide on the Minnesota 4-H [accessibility resources webpage](#).)

Promote peer mentorship opportunities.

Youth and adult mentors can serve as role models for youth living with a disability. These relationships can foster positive educational experiences by providing support and promoting a sense of belonging.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Studies show peer mentoring can be a less threatening environment than if adults are promoting socialization and skill building (Zaman et al., 2019). Additionally, peers are more knowledgeable about how youth socialize (Lee, 2015), and peers provide opportunities to model behaviors, interventions, and a place to practice new skills (Chang and Locke, 2016). Research suggests that using one or more interventions, such as exposure to persons with disabilities, can increase the change in attitudes for adolescents toward persons with disabilities (Woodgate et al., 2020).

Implementation Strategies (YPQP 1 and 3)

- Encourage peer mentoring or Teens as Teachers programming models. (Shop [the 4-H program curriculum](#).)
- Utilize existing curricula to support youth/peer mentoring:
 - [Special Olympics Unified Sports Program](#)
 - [PATH, Kids as Self Advocates](#)
 - [National Consortium on Leadership and Disability for Youth](#)
 - [National Youth Leadership Network, Youth Leader Blog](#)
 - Partners for Youth with Disabilities, [Career Readiness Curriculum](#)—Its goal is to help young people with disabilities meet their full potential for personal development and independence by matching them with a caring adult mentor.
- Develop buddy programs (such as those with animals at livestock shows) that allow youth to peer mentor another project member.

Conclusion

Remember to always be flexible in your planning. Flexibility is the ability to adapt and make accommodations before, during, or after the program. Some tips to be flexible include

- having a backup plan in case things do not go as planned or need to change.
- thinking about being adaptable in the moment based on the needs and participation of youth.
- asking questions ahead of time and during the program when you are not sure or may need help.
- being observant and making changes where needed.
- looking for strategies that can assist you, such as those suggested from the DO-IT Center for [working with people with disabilities](#).

Working with youth is not always predictable, but being able to make changes will help to create positive environments for all participants and support the Eight Youth Program Quality Principles.

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