



Disability Network Northern Michigan: Supporting Successful Youth Transition to Adulthood

By Nicole Miller

For youth with disabilities to successfully transition to adulthood it is important they feel good about who they are in the world, self-advocate, and have the skills to lead a self-directed life. At Disability Network Northern Michigan, we want all youth to have opportunities to grow towards realizing their hopes and dreams. The youth services and peer support opportunities at Disability Network work to help our youth with disabilities gain skills to be more comfortable and confident making their own decisions. Our work with families as they learn to support this journey is best captured by our emphasis on self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy is understanding your strengths and needs, identifying your personal goals, knowing your legal rights and responsibilities, and communicating these to others. Being a good self-advocate helps you obtain what you need, make your own choices, and express disagreement respectfully. Disability Network embraces

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self-determination in our thinking and drives this philosophy in all our work providing independent living plan support. We can help coordinate the many different supports people need to live as independently as possible.

Self-advocacy includes taking responsibility for communicating your needs and desires in a straightforward manner to others. It is a set of skills that includes speaking up for yourself; communicating your strengths, needs, and wishes; and being able to listen to the opinions of others even when their opinion differs from yours. Having a sense of self-respect, knowing your rights, and taking responsibility for yourself are important attributes for good self-advocacy. It is powerful to know where to get help or who to go to with a question from your circle of support.

It is never too early to start teaching youth how to advocate for one's self. Self-advocacy is a critical tool needed to set and achieve goals, increase self-sufficiency, and become a successful adult. It is a lifelong process that begins with a child learning by watching parents and caregivers be good examples. Encouraging children and youth to participate in meetings and activities helps build skills.

It is important to practice these life skills by:

- Learning about one's own disability.
- Gaining an understanding of one's own strengths and needs.
- Developing an ability to speak up for one's self.
- Learning how to ask for and accept help from others.
- Practicing goal setting or participating in a process of resolving differences.

Increasing participation in meetings helps youths become more comfortable in self-advocacy. Options to increase participation can include activities like writing down ideas, questions, and concerns before a meeting. To increase comfort with contributing in a meeting, rehearse or practice what you would like to say in the meeting. Taking the lead in the meeting and supporting introductions, along with talking about one's interests, strengths, and desires for the future, show a strong sense of self and ability to explain one's vision. Engaging in opportunities for self-advocacy builds self-confidence and self-respect.

The challenge for some youth with disabilities is a feeling of not fitting in, feeling different or being left out. Self-advocacy skills—understanding one's disability and needs, along with being able to ask for explanation or assistance when needed—lead to lifelong community inclusion.

Inclusion is all about who gets to participate and play in life. At Disability Network we want everyone to play—no one is left out.

Disability Network Northern Michigan is the first stop for people with disabilities and their families in northern Michigan. Our mission is to promote personal



IMPACTFUL
EMPOWERING
INDEPENDENCE
POSSIBILITIES
CONNECTIONS

Zoom Meeting
June 24, 7:00 pm
Register online at
disabilitynetwork.org

empowerment and positive social change for people with disabilities. We have the tools to support you during this challenging time. Please visit www.disabilitynetwork.org for up-to-date information on our community's response to COVID-19 and our weekly virtual online events.

Nicole Miller is a Community Resource Specialist for Disability Network of Northern Michigan in Traverse City. She is dedicated to family supports and assisting individuals, families, caregivers, and providers to create opportunities allowing individuals to live their best life. Visit Disability Network's Family Supports' website for additional resources and details on how to participate in Parent Network program offerings.