

Independence and Our Youth

By Katy Fisher

At Disability Network Northern Michigan, we teach youth with disabilities that independence is different for everyone based on individual needs, abilities, and desires. Becoming as independent as possible requires practice in self-advocacy, and for the youth we work with, a better understanding of their disability and how it affects them.

One barrier that independent youth with disabilities face is having others define what independence may look like for them, and not provide opportunities for them to realize their fullest potential. While it may be uncomfortable for parents or caregivers of vulnerable youth to encourage their children to be independent and to learn the skills required to successfully transition into adulthood, we also understand how important this step is to supporting growth towards self-sufficiency and self-directed living.

One of the many programs we offer to youth with disabilities is the opportunity to learn independence through the Community L.I.F.E. (Learning Independence from Experience) program. Community L.I.F.E. is community-based, hands-on learning to practice self-advocacy skills. Some of those experiences include safely navigating downtown both on foot and using public transportation, volunteering at local organizations to mimic employment, learning employer expectations, working with coworkers, and visiting housing facilities within the community to understand what it takes to live independently. Additionally, students in the Community L.I.F.E. program gain skills budgeting, dining at local restaurants, and shopping at stores to practice money management, as well as communication and social and safety skills. Throughout the day, instructors take the time to review and discuss the details and nuances of each community experience to ensure that there are relevant learning opportunities to teach youth the skills to advocate for themselves and to navigate similar situations in the future.

When the program ends, parents and youth are pleasantly surprised at the growth they see—whether it is their ability to utilize public transportation, to stay within a budget for a shopping or restaurant outing, to identify their strengths and skills for future employment, or see a boost in confidence and independence.

Here's how parents can help children become empowered every day:

- Give your youth a list of household tasks at home.
- Let your kids help you make meals and set the table.
- Have your youth find items at the grocery store and assist with scanning items at self-checkout.
- Talk to your youth as you walk through your community about safety, streetlights, and crosswalks.
- Use public transport, if available, and let your youth take the lead.
- Practice managing money and the difference between wants and needs when budgeting.
- Allow your youth to order their own meal at a

Community Spotlight

restaurant and stay within a set budget.

- Encourage young people to attend meetings that are relevant to them and to express their needs.
- Talk to your youth about their disability, what it means to them, and the effects it has.

Raising children with disabilities can be challenging and intimidating. At Disability Network Northern Michigan we encourage you to reach out to us for support and guidance. Please find more information on our youth, peer, and parent support programs on our website www.disabilitynetwork.org.

Disability Network Northern Michigan is the first step for people with disabilities and their families in northern Michigan. Our mission is to promote personal empowerment and positive social change for people with disabilities.

Katy Fisher received her Bachelor of Science in Therapeutic Recreation from Grand Valley State University. She has worked with persons with disabilities for more than fifteen years with the last five years as an Independent Living Program Specialist at Disability Network Northern Michigan. She enjoys working with people of all ages, but especially helping young people with disabilities to live a happy, full, and independent life.



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Zoom Fitness Class**
Fridays, 11:00 am to 12:00 pm
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Register online at
disabilitynetwork.org