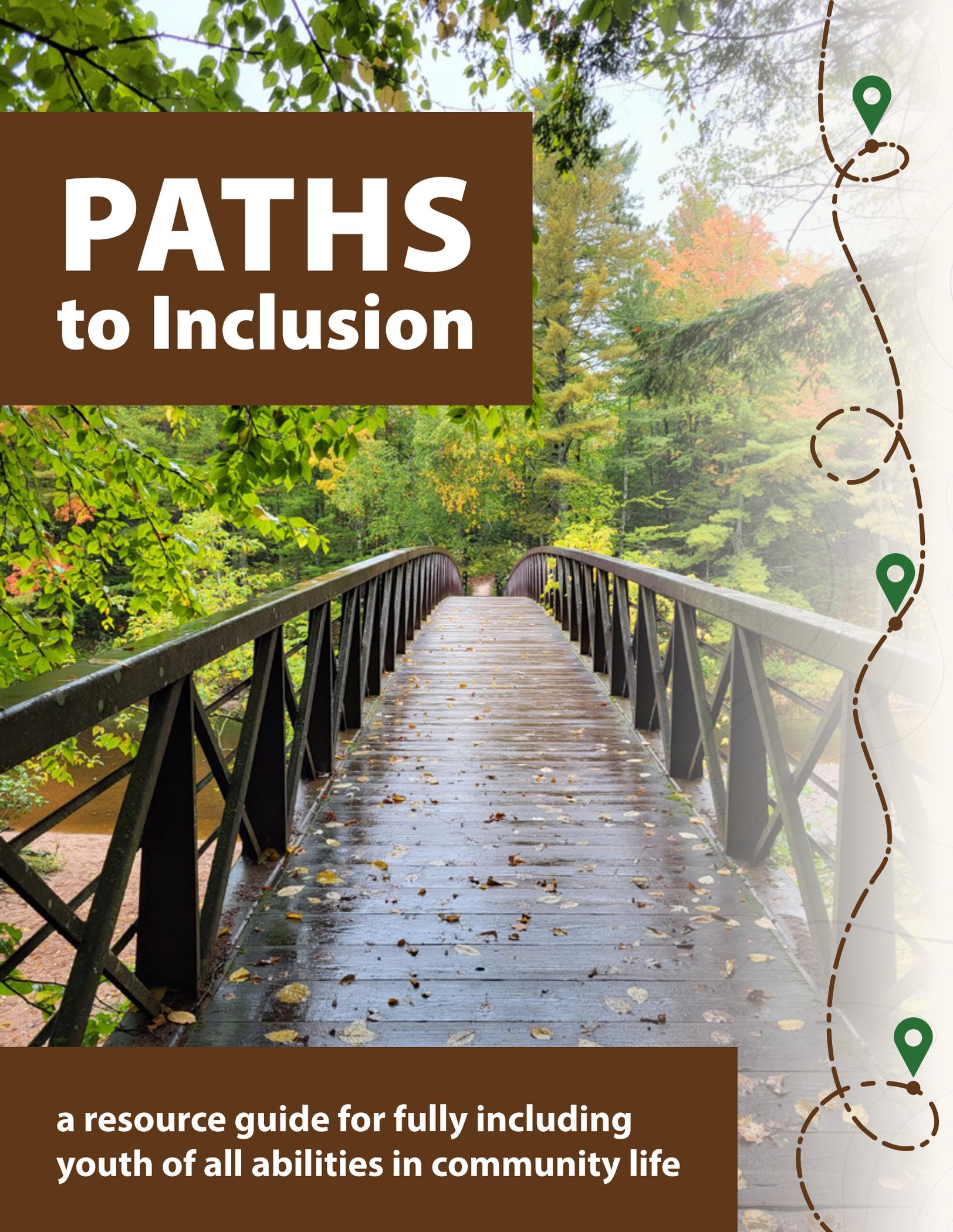


# **PATHS to Inclusion**

**a resource guide for fully including  
youth of all abilities in community life**



## About Paths to Inclusion

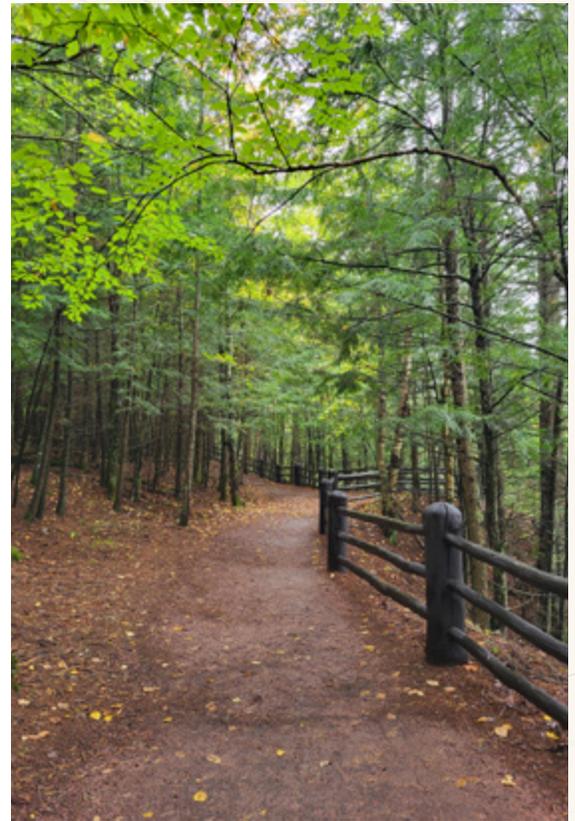
Along their pathways in life, many young people take part in youth programs, sports, clubs, or internships. However, youth with disabilities often have fewer opportunities than their nondisabled peers.

**All young people deserve positive experiences.**

This guide is designed to help you increase opportunities for disabled youth. As a youth program leader or volunteer, you can make your programs inclusive. The needed changes are often simple and low-cost, yet they can have a big impact. By being inclusive, you can become one part of a young person's journey to a productive, happy, and independent life.

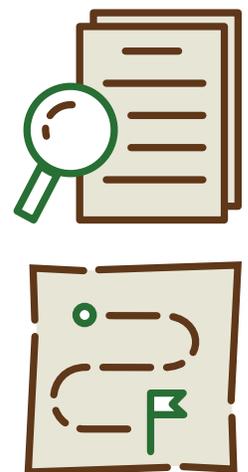
**Inclusion benefits everyone!**

Thanks to the work of organizations like the ones that contributed to this publication, there's a wide range of inclusion resources and best practices to draw on. Inclusion is the right thing to do, and the best time to start is RIGHT NOW!



## Getting the Most From This Resource

Throughout this guide, you'll learn about different aspects of inclusion. In each section, there is a **Case in Point** and a **Trail Marker**. The Case in Point provides additional information to build understanding and help you think about how to apply what you are learning. The Trail Marker provides tools or strategies to help you on your Path to Inclusion.



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# What Is Inclusion and Why Does it Matter?

**Inclusion** is making sure all people can participate in meaningful ways. Inclusion means that all young people:

- › are seen as competent and are shown respect,
- › are sought out and welcomed as valued members of the community,
- › fully participate and learn with their peers, and
- › interact with peers and adults in ways that benefit everyone.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, not every program has a solid foundation to support inclusion. Some environments are not welcoming to all youth. Some program leaders do not want to change their practices. They think that making the changes the law requires is good enough.

But inclusion goes beyond following the law.

Laws cannot mandate attitudes or commitment.

Inclusion is the ethical and moral thing to do.



**1 in 4**

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), public programs must be accessible.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **one in four** individuals has a disability. Through birth, accident, age, or illness, **nearly everyone** will experience disability during their lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

Learn about the ADA and other laws by visiting <https://www.ada.gov/>.

## The Need

Young people who take part in positive youth development programming are nearly four times more likely to contribute to their communities.<sup>3</sup> Yet, across the United States, 31% of youth with disabilities report no participation in after-school activities.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true of youth with emotional, developmental, or behavioral challenges. When youth with disabilities don't participate in out-of-school activities, they miss out on chances to build skills and make friends.

Use the ideas and practices in this guide to create inclusive environments where all young people feel like they belong and can grow.



## Case in Point: Everyone Benefits

The environment and people's attitudes are just two barriers to inclusion. When programs reduce

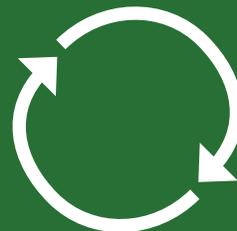
these barriers, providers find that everyone benefits.

Successful inclusion builds a sense of community and connection for disabled youth. All participants gain understanding and appreciation of our human diversity.<sup>5</sup>

### *Accommodations can benefit everyone.*

Accommodations may focus on the needs of one or a few individuals. Most accommodations not only benefit the individuals who need them, but also enhance the experience for *all* participants. For example, a wheelchair user may request extra space between tables, which lets all participants move freely.

Successful inclusion can foster a sense of community for youth with disabilities.



For youth without disabilities, disability inclusion can provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of human diversity.

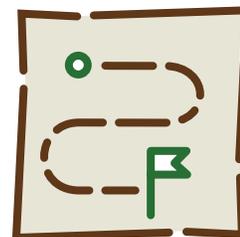


## Trail Marker: Words are Powerful!

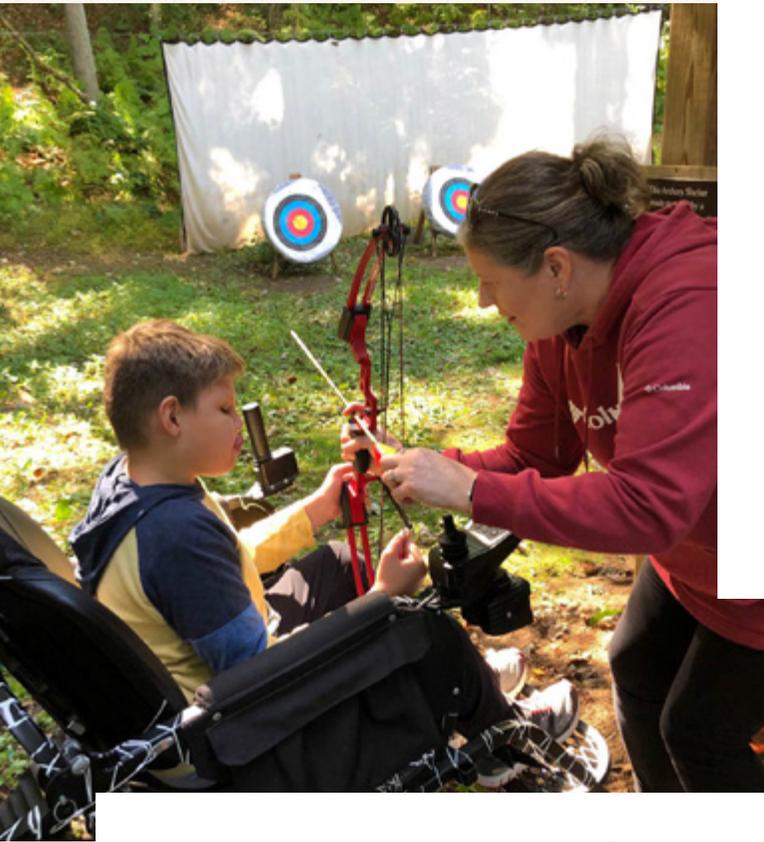
The key to inclusion is to respect each young person as an individual. That starts with using a person's preferred language.

**Person-First Language:** Some people prefer person-first language, which puts the person before the disability—for example, saying “person who uses a wheelchair” instead of “wheelchair user.”

**Identity-First Language:** Some people prefer identity-first language. They believe a person's disability is a part of who they are; it is an important part of their identity. It is a response to feelings that person-first language looks at disability as a disease. Identity-first language examples include “deaf person” or “autistic person.”



**The best way to show respect is to refer to a person by name and to ask their preference regarding person-first and identity-first language.**



## What Do We Need to Know About Disabilities?

### EVERYONE IS LEARNING!

We do not need to know everything about a young person's disability to be able to support them. Everyone is learning all the time! Start with getting to know the youth as an individual. Learn about their strengths, interests, abilities, and challenges. Use what you find out to guide how you support them.

Explore the resources listed in this guide to learn more.



## Case in Point: Disability Basics

**Accommodations** are supports made for individual youth to help them participate in your program. They could include:

- › Physical accessibility
- › Changes to the environment
- › Adjustments in how staff interact
- › Visual and/or communication supports
- › Sensory supports



Work with the young person and their family to figure out what accommodations they need. In some cases, accommodations can be adjusted or even phased out over time.

***Inclusion doesn't have to cost too much.***

Program modifications and supports are often inexpensive. Find out what adaptive equipment a young person has and what they need. Then, be creative. Think about how to use what you have in new ways. Personalize accommodations to individuals' needs.

***All youth are unique.***

Take time to discover each youth's abilities. Assume that all youth are competent. Focus on what someone can do instead of what they can't. Adjust your plan as needed to help all young people be successful in your program.

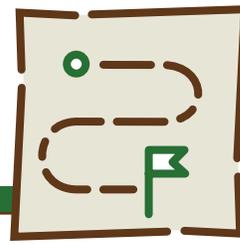
# Trail Marker: Common Disabilities

Every person is unique. How their disability impacts them may also be different from other youth with the same disability. Developmental disabilities start at birth; some other disabilities may begin later in life. They may be permanent or temporary. Temporary limitations may still require accommodations.

Here are four groups of disabilities. Many disabilities fit into more than one group.

- › **Intellectual disability**—Disabilities that may involve communication, learning, and memory challenges. Activities of daily living, such as self-care, safety, communication, and socialization, may also be difficult. Individuals may process information more slowly or have difficulty with abstract concepts such as money and time. **Examples:** Fragile X syndrome, Down syndrome, and developmental delay.
- › **Physical disabilities**—Disabilities that may affect—temporarily or permanently—a person’s physical function and/or mobility. Causes may be genetic, serious illness, or injury. **Examples:** brain or spinal cord injury, spina bifida, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy.
- › **Sensory disabilities**—Disabilities that impact how the brain processes sensory information (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, balance, and awareness of the body in space). Sensory disabilities can affect how a person learns about the world around them since we take in 95% of that information through seeing and hearing. **Examples:** blindness and low vision, deafness and loss of hearing, autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and sensory processing disorder.
- › **Mental health disabilities**—Disabilities that significantly affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves, and interacts with other people. Mental health-related disabilities can range from being difficult to being exhausting to manage for those experiencing them. They can also be permanent, temporary, or come and go. **Examples:** bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

**Reminder:** Treat each youth as an individual, no matter their disability.



	Permanent Disability	Temporary Disability
<b>Intellectual Disability</b>	 Down Syndrome	 Concussion
<b>Physical Disability</b>	 Wheelchair User	 Broken Arm
<b>Sensory Disabilities</b>	 Autism Spectrum	 Migraine
<b>Mental Health Disabilities</b>	 Bipolar, Depression, Anxiety	



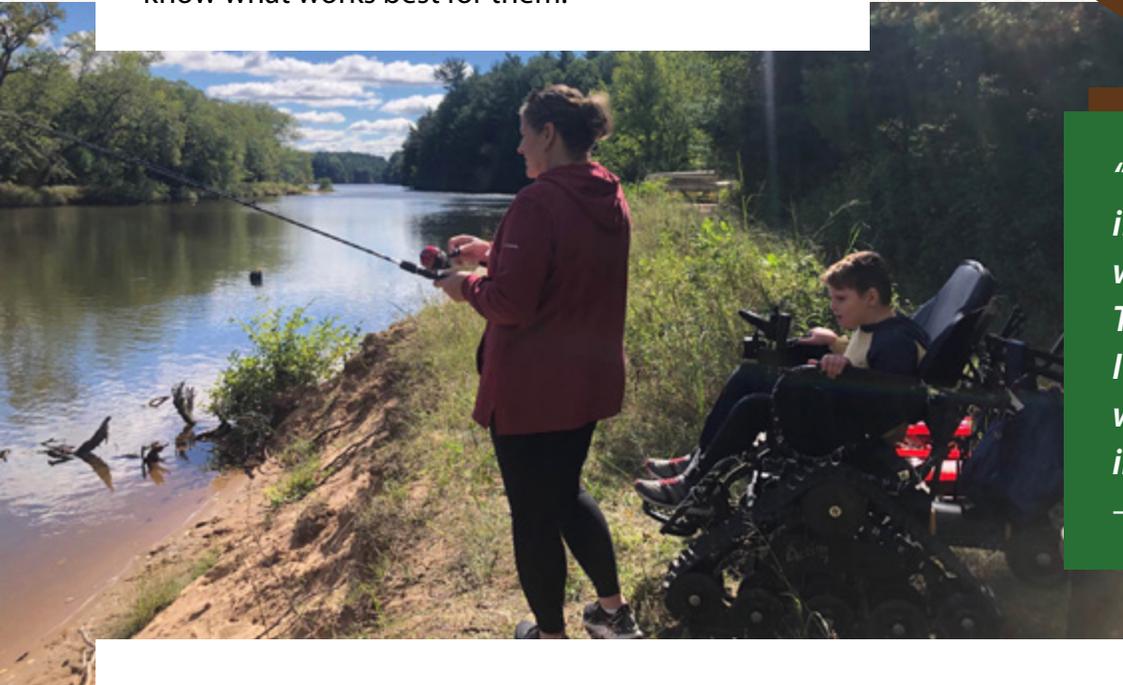
## How Does Inclusion Happen?

### INCLUSION IS A PROCESS, NOT A PROGRAM

True inclusion takes a commitment from everyone. We must understand, adopt, and communicate the value of inclusion in our programs.

Working together is key to successful inclusion. Partnering with community organizations, schools, and families can give you the resources and information you need to support everyone in your program. Depending on their age, you can even ask youth how you can help meet their needs. They know what works best for them.

### CENTERING YOUTH



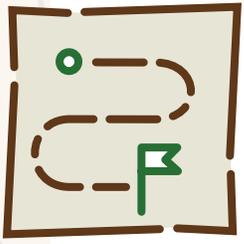
*"I would not have attended if the [all-terrain wheelchair] wasn't available to me... The chair reassured me that I could safely go into the woods again to attend this informative and fun event."*  
– Youth program participant

## Case in Point: Inclusion Begins With "I"

Inclusion begins with "I." Start with yourself. Build from there. Ask yourself:

- › What can I do to help make my organization more inclusive?
- › Who can I partner with to support these efforts?
- › How can I adjust an activity to support multiple learning styles?
- › What is the true goal of the activity or program? How can I adjust the process to help all youth reach the goal?
- › How can we bring in a variety of supplies and equipment so everyone can be successful?
- › How can I adjust the setting to feel more welcoming? To make it easier for youth to move around? To reduce noise that could be distracting, overstimulating, or difficult to hear?





## Trail Marker: Planning Ahead for Inclusion

Planning ahead for inclusion benefits everyone. We can anticipate potential needs and create a more inclusive environment using **Universal Design**. This is a proactive approach that removes barriers to inclusion, helps create a sense of belonging, and enables everyone to thrive.

Universal Design aims to create inclusive and equitable spaces that accommodate everyone regardless of their age, size, mobility, cognitive abilities, or sensory capabilities. Universal Design benefits all participants, not just those with disabilities. Ask, don't assume, what accommodations are most beneficial.



Universal Design approaches are:

- 1. Equitable:** Make the design useful and accessible to people with diverse abilities.
  - » Provide both large- and small-grip crayons so youth can choose what works best for them.
  - » Make ramps, lifts, and adapted equipment available where needed.
- 2. Flexible:** Make the design adaptable to individuals' preferences and abilities.
  - » Designate a safe space for taking breaks from the group.
  - » Offer equipment and supplies of different sizes, weights, and textures.
  - » Simple: Make the design easy to understand and use.
  - » Break directions up into easy-to-understand steps.
  - » Use color coding to organize information.
- 3. Sensory Friendly:** Design communications to be clear to participants regardless of their sensory abilities.
  - » Select/view videos with closed captioning.
  - » Increase font size for all print resources.
  - » Include picture schedules and social stories.
  - » Provide fidgets or sensory strips to support focus and ease anxiety.
- 4. Safe:** Make sure the design reduces the risk of accidents.
  - » Set clear boundaries for outside activities.
  - » Use safety features such as non-slip surfaces and handrails.
- 5. Comfortable:** Make sure the design is comfortable and requires minimal physical effort.
  - » Use picnic tables near accessible park trails.
  - » Use height-adjustable tables and flexible seating.
- 6. Physically Accessible:** Make sure the design provides adequate space for different body sizes, postures, and mobility devices.
  - » Create space between tables to allow people using wheelchairs and others to move freely.
  - » Offer opportunities for both seated or standing positions.
  - » Provide a variety of seating options (yoga balls, beanbags, rocking chairs, etc.).





*"I had so much fun at camp. [At camp, it] was easy for me to get in and out of places. I liked that I could go canoeing with my group and that the shower in the dorm worked well for me."*  
– 9-year-old Collins B. 4-H program participant

## Where Is Inclusion Happening?

### INCLUSION IS HAPPENING NOW

Many youth-serving organizations work to attract and accommodate youth with disabilities. They are proud when their programs and practices create meaningful experiences for their youth. The most meaningful experiences include:

- › time to get to know peers and caring adults,
- › opportunities to try new things and build life skills,
- › feeling that they belong, and
- › having autonomy and independence as they participate.

*"Bringing nine individuals with [intellectual and developmental disabilities] to the Northern woods and then seeing them be able to kayak, just as any neurotypical peer would, on Lake Superior was incredible."*

– Wilderness Inquiry trip group leader



## Case in Point: Rolling Out the Welcome Mat

Welcoming spaces for youth and their families create a sense of belonging. All youth want to feel they're truly part of your program. Welcoming programs pay attention to:

- › messages that invite youth with disabilities to participate,
- › removing barriers that may make it difficult for some to get involved,
- › marketing and other materials that
  - » show inclusive representation of youth and adults with disabilities,
  - » are digitally accessible and/or in alternative formats (such as Braille, large print, or audio), and
  - » have accommodation statements.
- › preparing staff and volunteers to use inclusive practices in all programs,
- › the ways youth interact with each other in program activities, and
- › how activities can be adapted to increase participation and meet participants' interests and needs.

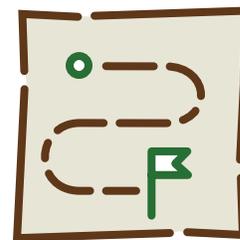


Check out the [Inclusion Checklist for Programs](#)<sup>6</sup> at Kids Included Together.



## Trail Marker: An Organizational Assessment

Use a [Facility Accessibility Assessment](#)<sup>7</sup> to consider the accessibility of your space. In shared or community spaces, you may not have the ability to make permanent changes; however, you can still find ways to overcome barriers to accessibility. For example, if the doors do not have buttons to automatically open, prop doors open or have a greeter who holds the door open for all participants.





## How Can We Support Well-Being?

Each of us has a physical self as well as a mental, emotional, and spiritual self that make up our whole person. In inclusive spaces, we take extra special care of every individual's mental health, including our own.

### TEACHING YOUTH ABOUT EMOTIONS

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a way to teach young people skills they can practice with those around them. SEL is a process in which young people and adults:

- › learn and practice what they need to know to develop a healthy identity,
- › develop skills and strategies to manage emotions,
- › strengthen resilience to reach for and achieve goals,
- › experience empathy—both giving and receiving,
- › build healthy, supportive relationships, and
- › make responsible, caring decisions.

These are knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are needed in any space where young people participate. Volunteers can show care for youth by modeling and teaching SEL as part of every program or activity.

In effect, SEL is the art of inclusion, as it teaches all of us how to treat ourselves and others with empathy, thoughtfulness, and care.

[Learn more about SEL.](#)<sup>8</sup>

*“Often, inclusion means that people can have choices and can choose what they want to show up to. We welcome visitors of all abilities to come to any of our programs.”*

– Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center's On-site and Accessibility Coordinator

## Case in Point: Shift Your Perspective



Sometimes managing thoughts, feelings, and actions is difficult for youth. When their emotions feel big, youth may behave in ways that seem challenging or distracting.

Rather than seeing these behaviors as bad or wrong, consider what the behaviors communicate about what the youth need. Something is not working for them, and they need support.

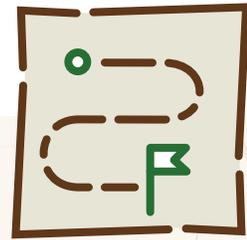
Here are five steps to help a young person return to meaningful participation:

1. **Notice.** Recognize that youth use behaviors to express that they are upset or having an emotional crisis. If you notice a young person is beginning to struggle, it's important to step in before the behaviors get big.
2. **Calm yourself.** Check in with how you feel. Make sure you are calm. Young people mirror adults' actions and ways of being. Take a deep breath as you approach the youth.
3. **Calm the youth.** Invite the youth to take a deep breath with you. Acknowledge their feelings.
4. **Connect.** Focus on your relationship with the youth. After they are calm, connect to remind them that you care. Talk about a youth's special interest, do an activity together, or make each other laugh. This can be short (1-5 minutes), depending on the youth and situation.
5. **Encourage.** With curiosity, empathy, and understanding, help the youth re-engage with peers and activities.<sup>9</sup>

## Trail Marker: Energy to Stay Open and Inclusive

Supporting youth programming can be energizing. It can also require a lot of energy and work. Self-care helps us recharge our personal "batteries." Self-care is anything you do to care for your health, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. It can reduce anxiety, depression, and stress levels and can generally increase happiness.

[Read more about self-care.](#)<sup>10</sup>



Watch these five steps in action in this video called, "[Bringing Youth Back](#)" (2:16).<sup>11</sup>



## Practice Shifting Your Perspective

Think about a time when you worked with a youth who seemed to be misbehaving. Might they have needed support? Ask yourself these questions to plan how to bring the youth back to meaningful participation.

What did you **notice** about the situation and how the youth reacted?

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What could you do to **calm** yourself?

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How could you have helped the youth feel more **calm**?

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How might you **connect** with the youth?

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How could you **encourage** them to return to participation?

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# Supporting Youth with Disabilities: Tips, Tools, and Training for Volunteers and Professionals

## TIPS AND TOOLS

### [Boy Scouts of America](#)

Inclusion toolbox and training resources for volunteers.

### [Boys and Girls Clubs of America](#)

Resources for staff & volunteers working with youth with disabilities.

### [Center for Parent Information & Resources](#)

Overview of specific disabilities, educational implications, and additional resources.

### [Disability Self-Advocacy and Allyship Skills, University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension](#)

Recommended youth-focused curriculum, training resources for adults and youth leaders, and tipsheet.

### [Inclusive 4-H, Purdue University Extension](#)

Practical tools and information for creating inclusive environments.

### [University of Minnesota Extension: Accessible for All Abilities](#)

Information and tools for supporting youth with disabilities.

## TRAINING

### [Kids Included Together](#)

Training opportunities for child and youth-serving professionals and volunteers on how to activate inclusive practices so all children are welcomed.

### [National Inclusion Project](#)

Training, tools, and support for community organizations so youth with disabilities can be included in their programs.

### [Partners for Youth with Disabilities](#)

Online training, free guidebooks, and newsletter.

### [University of Arkansas Partners for Inclusive Communities](#)

Tools and training for promoting disability access and inclusion.

Access the digital links above and in the Resources for Youth with Disabilities section using the QR code or by visiting: <https://go.wisc.edu/paths-to-inclusion>



# Resources for Youth with Disabilities

## DISABILITY

### [Aspiritech](#)

Neurodiversity resource library to help maintain good mental health in the workplace.

### [Autistic Self-Advocacy Network](#)

Works to make our society more inclusive for autistic people, and works to protect disability rights and civil rights.

### [Easter Seals](#)

Helps children and adults with disabilities attain greater independence.

## LEADERSHIP

### [Disability EmpowHer Network](#)

Empowers girls and young women with disabilities through mentoring and transformational learning experiences.

### [National Consortium on Leadership & Development for Youth](#)

Youth-led resource, information, and training center for youth and emerging leaders with disabilities.

## SPORTS

### [Move United](#)

Provides access to competitive and recreational sports regardless of ability through adaptive sports.

### [Special Olympics](#)

Engages youth with and without developmental disabilities through unified sports programs.

### [Team IMPACT](#)

Matches youth with disabilities with college sports teams creating a long-term, life-changing experience for everyone involved.

## OUTDOOR RECREATION

### [Inclusive Recreation Resource Center](#)

Promotes participation by people with disabilities in inclusive recreation activities through training, technical assistance, and resources.

### [National Ability Center](#)

Provides a safe, inclusive, and uplifting environment for people with disabilities, cultivating independence and self-advocacy.

### [National Park Service](#)

Offers an America the Beautiful Access Pass for individuals with disabilities. Visit the website to learn about accessibility of National Parks and Federal Recreation Lands.

### [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#)

Provides information about accessibility of trails throughout the United States through the TrailLink app.

### [Wilderness Inquiry](#)

Connects people of all ages, backgrounds, identities, and abilities through shared outdoor adventures to equitably experience the benefits of time spent in nature.



# Resources for Youth with Disabilities (cont'd)

## VOLUNTEERING & SERVICE

### [The Arc](#)

Provides information and support for inclusive volunteering opportunities.

## MENTORING

### [Best Buddies International](#)

Works to end social, physical, and economic isolation through one-on-one friendships, leadership development, integrated employment, and inclusive living.

### [National Disability Mentoring Coalition](#)

Strives to advance inclusive mentoring opportunities through awareness, connections, resources, and recognition.

## INDEPENDENT LIVING

### [National Council on Independent Living](#)

Works to advance the disability-led Independent Living Movement.

### [Pacer Center](#)

Provides information and resources about transitioning to post-secondary programs, inclusive employment, and independent living skills.

### [TASH](#)

Advances inclusion through advocacy, research, and practice.

## POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

### [Association of University Centers on Disabilities \(AUCD\)](#)

Supports disability research, provides workforce training, and creates an equitable future for all.

### [Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education](#)

Provides an overview from the U.S. Department of Education.

## INTERNSHIPS

### [American Association of People with Disabilities](#)

Offers summer internship program for youth with disabilities.

### [Disability:IN](#)

Empowers businesses to achieve disability inclusion and equity.

## EMPLOYMENT

### [CelebrateEDU](#)

Empowers people with disabilities through online business and entrepreneurship education.

### [Job Accommodation Network](#)

Offers guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment.

### [National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth](#)

Provides employment considerations for youth with disabilities.

### [Project LIFE](#)

A pre-employment training program to take before Project SEARCH.

### [Project SEARCH](#)

Provides employability skills training and internships for individuals with disabilities.

### [Uniquely Abled Academy](#)

Training young adults with autism and their employers for successful careers in manufacturing.





## Paths to Inclusion Team

### Darcy Cole

Extension Educator, Youth Development,  
4-H Program Operations  
University of Minnesota Extension

### Karleen Craddock

Extension 4-H Educator, Richland County  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Division of Extension

### Janet George, MS, CTRS

Curriculum Development Specialist  
Kids Included Together

### Tara Havlicek

Program Manager  
Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation

### Monica Lobenstein

Learning Resources Specialist  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Division of Extension

### Vanessa Spero

Regional Specialized 4-H Extension  
Agent  
University of Florida/IFAS Extension 4-H  
Youth Development

### Anne Strootman

Participant and Volunteer Engagement  
Manager  
Wilderness Inquiry

### Jennifer Taylor-Winney Ph.D., CAPE

Associate Professor, Division of Health &  
Exercise Science  
Western Oregon University

### Kevin Webb

Senior Director  
Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation

The Inclusion Task Force grew out of the Inclusion Initiative, launched by the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation from 2003 to 2011. Comprising nearly \$6 million in grants and leveraged funds invested in two dozen youth programs, the Initiative impacted the lives of thousands of youth with and without disabilities across the US.

Educators at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension found Paths to Inclusion again as they were searching for resources to support inclusion efforts in the state's programs. Conversations about the resource became the catalyst to bring together a national team to update and build on the original work of the Task Force.

The members of this team come from community-based and national organizations serving youth and people with disabilities, as well as from universities and foundations. The new Paths to Inclusion reflects their experience, expertise, and collaborative efforts.



## Endnotes

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