

Strategies for Incorporating the Voice and Leadership of Disabled Youth

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For the purpose of this **tip sheet**, “youth and young adults” refers to young people under the age of 24, many of whom are still navigating school, or are just beginning to transition into living outside of their family home.

Introduction:

Disabled youth and young adults are often overlooked as effective agents of political and social change. Young people are not afforded many of the same rights given to older adults. For example, young people under the age of 18 are not allowed to vote, even though issues such as gun control, funding for home and community-based services, and access to reproductive healthcare all have direct impacts on their lives. Young people with disabilities may be placed in institutions with either minimal or no right to consent to treatment. Additionally, disabled youth may be forced into medical treatment they may never have wanted in the first place. In schools, they may face [seclusion and restraint](#) and other forms of discrimination because of their disabilities. They also face increased rates of criminalization and may be [more likely to enter the juvenile justice system](#).

However, many of the organizations that tackle issues directly impacting young people do not center youth voice. As a result, it's important that organizations advocating for disabled people also bring the youth voice to the table. Doing so can mitigate harmful policy making and advocacy strategies that may not have young people's best interests in mind.

This toolkit gives an overview of how systems of oppression, including **ableism** and **adultism**, impact disabled youth and young adults as well as strategies for incorporating youth voice and leadership into advocacy work.

What is Ableism?

Ableism is the system of power that constructs disability as a stigmatized and devalued social category. Ableism associates positive qualities, humanity, deservingness and worth with bodies that are perceived to be normal, able, and capable. Ableism causes negative attitudes toward

disabled people. Discrimination against people with disabilities can look like hate crimes, denied housing, denied education, segregation in institutions such as nursing homes and residential facilities, and other forms social marginalization, exclusion, and violence.

Examples of Ableism:

- Segregation of people with disabilities in nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals, and residential facilities.
- Beliefs that disabled people have limited intelligence, and that they should be spoken to like children
- Benefit structures such as SSI that trap disabled people in poverty

What is Adulthood?

Adulthood is a form of prejudice and discrimination that targets youth and young adults, undermining their political and social power and denying them agency and autonomy because of their age. Adulthood might look like attitudes that minimize young people's knowledge and skillsets. It can also look like the belief that adults "know better," or assumptions that young people are incapable of learning. Adulthood excludes young people from having a say in the systems that impact them most, denying them language, education, training, or other resources for growth.

Examples of Adulthood:

- Telling a young person they wouldn't "understand" complex social issues because they are too young.
- Lack of opportunities for young people to work on a systems level with people who have the most political influence.
- Undercompensating or not compensating young people for their time, labor, or feedback, often because they are seen as underqualified or not doing "real" work.

How do Adulthood and Ableism intersect?

Both adulthood and ableism intersect to prevent disabled youth and young adults from having a say on issues that directly impact them. Adulthood and ableism also share many features in common. For example, both young people and disabled people frequently face infantilizing attitudes. As a

result, a young person with a disability might experience more pronounced infantilization as a result of the way that their age and disability intersect.

Examples of adultism and ableism working together:

- “Status offenses” like school truancy may [criminalize disabled young people](#) for not showing up to school, many who may not be able to attend for mental or physical health-related reasons
- Young people are often [denied the right to consent](#) to their own medical or mental healthcare. Similarly, disabled people are often also frequently denied primary medical decision-making authority (e.g. guardianships). As a result, disabled young people often face even more restricted agency and decision-making power than non-disabled young people.

Tips for Authentically Engaging Youth and Young Adults in Advocacy Work

Your organization can incorporate several strategies for involving youth in leadership roles. This includes forming youth advisory boards and hiring young people for short-term contract work or projects, such as to speak on panels, lead trainings, or provide feedback on organizational structure or advocacy tactics. Focus groups where young people have the opportunity to review training materials or policy recommendations and provide feedback are also useful ways to engage young people. To see a full list of strategies and resources, you can find a tip-sheet [here](#).

Examples of YYA Leadership in Disability Spaces

Young people have been engaged in advocacy work to improve conditions for disabled people. Below are two examples of advocacy initiatives led by young people that have led to significant social change.

Youth and young adult leadership in movements to end institutional abuse:

- Young people who have survived abuse in residential facilities have recently taken to social media platforms and the internet to [share their stories of mistreatment within abusive residential programs](#). They have used tactics such as leaving negative google reviews on program profiles, staging protests outside of residential facilities, and sharing personal experiences on platforms such as TikTok. These

strategies have been effective at getting the widespread public attention needed to shut these facilities down. They have been successful at [shutting down a number of abusive residential facilities](#). Additionally, negative google reviews serve as a powerful diversionary tactic for parents who may otherwise fall for false advertising that paints many of these programs in a positive light.

Youth and young adult leadership on college campuses:

- Activism from disabled students around the country has led a number of universities to adopt [disability cultural centers](#) in recent years. Disabled young people have been frustrated that the typical places on college campuses to serve disabled people are resource offices where disabled students can go to receive academic accommodations, but not community support. As a result of student activism, a number of universities around the country, including the [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), [Stanford University](#), and [Georgetown University](#) have adopted disability cultural centers in recent years.

Summary and Conclusion

Disabled youth and young adults have valuable insight into how to best address the issues that directly impact their lives. They have led effective initiatives to address issues such as abusive residential care and the lack of culturally specific resources on college campuses. Moving forward, organizations that serve disabled young people should also incorporate their voices in advocacy strategies. This can include hiring young people as consultants or part-time employees, forming youth advisory boards, or providing young people the opportunity to lead trainings and initiatives on the issues that impact them most directly.