INCLUSIVE MENTORING

FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

SUPPLEMENT TO THE

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE FOR MENTORING

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Partners for Youth with Disabilities

MENTOR

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MENTOR is the unifying champion for quality youth mentoring in the United States. Our mission is to expand the quality and quantity of mentoring relationships nationwide. Potential is equally distributed; opportunity is not. A major driver of healthy development and opportunity is who you know and who's in your corner. Thirty years ago, MENTOR was created to expand that opportunity for young people by building a youth mentoring field and movement, serving as the expert and go-to resource on quality mentoring. The result is a more than 10-time increase in young people in structured mentoring relationships, from hundreds of thousands to millions. Today, we activate a movement across sectors that is diverse and broad and seeps into every aspect of daily life. We are connecting and fueling opportunity for young people everywhere they are from schools to workplaces and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

There are more than three million youth in America who are living with a disability

— 4.3 percent of all young people under the age of 18 — with those percentages trending even higher for many of the young people who come to mentoring programs for support.[1] Research on mentoring programs has found that the rates of youth with disabilities enrolled in a program can be more than twice the national average.[2] One national study of mentoring programs by MENTOR found that as many as 10 percent of youth served in mentoring programs nationally have a disability.[3] While it is heartening to know that many families of youth with disabilities are turning to mentoring programs for support, it also highlights the need for all mentoring programs to implement inclusive practices and strategies. Mentoring providers have an ethical imperative to meet the unique needs of youth with disabilities and ensure that their mentoring experience is both equitable and high quality. The good news is that creating inclusive services for those with disabilities will also improve the program experience for all program's youth, families, and volunteers.

This supplement was developed with the core goal of helping mentoring programs of all types build services that are more inclusive of those with disabilities. Although most mentoring programs take great care in developing services that are welcoming, warm, and caring, there are many subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) ways that youth and volunteers with disabilities can be excluded or offered a less-than-equitable program experience.

Therefore, this resource will help mentoring programs assess how they are doing and identify areas where they can improve. In addition, it will provide concrete next steps for when a program is ready to deepen its focus on and commitment to inclusion.

While the emphasis in this resource is on guidance for all mentoring programs, there are a few places where we offer specific advice for mentoring programs that exclusively serve youth* with disabilities. Such disability-focused mentoring efforts often provide mentoring experiences tailored to the unique needs of youth with disabilities and in a few sections in the resource we suggest practices that those programs will want to keep in mind as they design and implement their programs.

This resource was designed specifically for programs within the United States. However, many of the recommendations and practices are transferable to other regions, as they are built on well-documented and universally accepted disability inclusion standards, practices, and strategies.

As with every resource in this series of supplements to the original *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™* (EEPM), the recommendations and advice here are designed to be complementary of that core resource. Mentoring programs should still use the original EEPM (now in its fourth edition) as their guiding document in terms of effective program practices, using this guide as an additional tool to help ensure inclusive mentoring experiences for all, but especially those with disabilities. We note throughout the text here where recommended practices tie back to content in the main EEPM.

* While most of the guidance in this supplement is intended for programs working with youth 18 and under, we also recognize that many working in this space are working with young adults as well. Thus, where we refer to "youth," please note that most of these practices also apply equally well to working with young adult mentees in a program context.

BACKGROUND ON MENTORING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

As noted above, a significant percentage of the youth in the nation's mentoring programs report having a disability of some kind and it is not surprising that many have sought the support of a mentoring program. Many young people with disabilities who face social exclusion and lower-quality relationships with peers[4] are more likely to be struggling at school and receiving special education services,[5] and have less access to educational and employment opportunities as they approach adulthood.[6,7] These are all areas where mentors can be significant assets and sources of support. Social exclusion, in particular, is a common focus of mentoring services centered on disabled youth, with the mentoring relationship positioned as one that can help youth address and overcome their social development challenges.[8]

The mentoring research literature suggests that mentoring relationships, both in and out of mentoring programs, can have a positive impact on the lives of youth with disabilities. A major 2018 research review by the National Mentoring Resource Center[9] found evidence that mentoring can help youth with disabilities improve their:

- Academic and career development, including educational planning, knowledge of career options, and school-to-career transitions;
- Employment, including job readiness, job-seeking skills and confidence, and use of employment services and supports;
- Transition and life skills, including accessing and utilizing transition services and improving daily living skills; and
- Psychosocial development, such as self-confidence, self-determination, social connectedness, and perceptions of life quality.

GETTING STARTED: COMMITTING TO INCLUSIVITY

While the advice and recommended practices of this resource will help all mentoring programs assess and improve the inclusivity of their services, there is one factor that will determine, above all else, how successful a program will be in this effort: the commitment of the staff members themselves to the task at hand. In our experience, the programs that improve the mentoring experience for youth with disabilities the most are those whose staff members commit to learning more, reflecting on their work, and putting in the effort to make changes in both the short and long term.

Truly analyzing and changing practices and policies that may be excluding participants with disabilities can be both humbling and difficult. This is not "one and done" work where a small effort can make things perfect. Being an inclusive mentoring program will take effort, resources, and vigilance. The best thing a mentoring program can do to get started in this work is to truly commit to the effort and to adopt a mindset of continuous improvement. This guide will offer a lot of information about how to make those improvements, but we encourage program leaders and staff members to embrace this work and commit to always improving the ways they show up for the youth they serve.

Research on mentoring youth with disabilities has also suggested that mentors can build disabled youths' independence and communication skills,[10] hopefulness for the future, and even more positive attitudes about their disability.[11]

These positive benefits can be found across both naturally formed mentoring relationships, as well as those provided through a wide variety of program models, including one-to-one matches, group mentoring configurations, and online mentoring services. Mentoring also seems to be impactful for youth with disabilities of different ages, although research suggests that many programs that exclusively serve youth with disabilities focus their work on key transition points, especially the transition out of high school or out of foster care and into postsecondary pursuits and young adulthood.

There are several prominent theories as to why these mentoring relationships are impactful for youth with disabilities, and practitioners should consider how the programs they operate facilitate these pathways to impact. One such theory is self-determination theory, which suggests that interpersonal relationships provide a motivational context for effort, persistence, and growth[12] (see the following "Key Concepts" section for a more in-depth discussion of self-determination).

Another theory that has relevance for the mentoring of youth with disabilities, is the concept of credible messengers, which suggests that youth will have an easier time bonding with and listening to the advice of mentors who have shared the same challenges in life, or at least comparable circumstances and difficulties, which allows mentors to not only empathize with the feelings of youth but also offer advice grounded in lived experience and proven results. Youth, in turn, recognize the validity of their mentors' lived experience, which facilitates bonding and trust.[13] This theory has historically, and most prominently, been used to justify deploying mentors with gang or other criminal involvement in their pasts to mentor youth who are trying to avoid deeper juvenile justice involvement,[14] but has also expanded over time to include mentoring models in which adults with a wide variety of lived experience similar to the youth served (e.g., growing up in poverty, similar health challenges, immigration experience, etc.) are used to bring an air of authenticity to their conversations with mentees.

While there are many prominent examples of mentoring programs having a positive impact on disabled youth, unfortunately, the research literature also suggests some challenges that emerge when mentoring this population, including:

- the accessibility of the program setting and transportation issues;[15]
- the challenges of designing programming to meet the needs of a wide range of abilities and backgrounds;[16]
- the engagement of families and working effectively with overprotective parents; and
- communication challenges between mentors and youth.[17]

For these and other reasons, it can be challenging for youth in mentoring programs to persist in matches that last their intended duration, a challenge that may be exacerbated when mentors also have disabilities.[18] Youth with disabilities will only benefit from mentoring when barriers to their participation are removed and their relationships are defined by the same frequency, duration, and richness that other youth in the program experience. It is precisely the removal of those barriers

that defines inclusive mentoring and drives the recommendations in this resource.

It's also worth noting that about one in four American adults report having a form of disability.[19] This means that disabled individuals are certainly engaged as volunteers and staff members in the nation's programs, although, as is the case for youth with disabilities, they are likely substantially underrepresented in the composition of volunteer pools and program staffing. This resource also provides information that can help these adults feel welcome and valued in the delivery of program services.

KEY CONCEPTS

Throughout this guide we use disability-related words and concepts that may be new to mentoring professionals and volunteers. Here we present a key concept list that provides definitions and adds context to enhance the usefulness of the recommendations found in the following Sections 1 and 2. It is important that staff and volunteers understand these concepts, so including them in your staff and mentor training can deepen understanding across your team. Because we can only scratch the surface in some of these concepts here, we also include a Recommended Reading and Resources section at the end of this Introduction that can provide deeper learning on many of these topics.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

There are various laws that impact the rights of people with disabilities within the United States, including The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). On July 26, 1990, President Bush signed the ADA into law.[20] A pivotal moment for those with disabilities, this law was meant to protect against discrimination, ensure equal access, and guarantee reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Each year in July, the disability community hosts celebrations to reflect on the importance of the law and consider the work left to do to ensure equal rights for people with disabilities.

Disability

There are many definitions of disability, including those used in the medical field, education sector, and legal field. The ADA defines a person with a disability as **a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity**. Statistics assert that one in four people have a disability. Therefore, mentoring programs that serve more than four youth statistically can assume that they are serving youth with disabilities. Disability is expansive and can be visible or nonapparent. Nonapparent disabilities may include but are not limited to intellectual disabilities, health conditions, mental health conditions, and learning disabilities. Since mentoring services are often aimed at school-age children, it is

worth noting that approximately 6.7 million students aged 3 to 21 receive special education service in the United States.[21] Not only is disability broad, but it also is a fluid status — it can be temporary or acquired over time. In a recent example of acquired disability, nearly one third of people with COVID will have long-haul symptoms, which equates to nearly 10,000,000 newly disabled people who may not realize they are protected under the ADA.[22]

While there are various models of disabilities, mentoring programs are encouraged to develop an understanding of the social model of disability. The social model of disability contrasts to the medical model of disability which views disability as an impairment in the self — something wrong with a person that can be identified, labeled, and (in some cases) cured. Moving away from this concept, the Social Model of Disability[23] asserts that disability arises as a product of a person's social and physical environment. Disability is not something inherent to a person, but rather arises in relation to the environment that they are in and the extent to which that environment is enabling or disabling. For example, a mentee who uses a wheelchair and lives in a home that is fully accessible with ramps, lower counter tops, and other features is not disabled within that space. However, the moment this mentee leaves the home to go to a program that does not have a ramp, they become disabled by that space. From this perspective, it is not a diagnosis that disables someone; it is the person's environment that disables them. The social model of disability puts the onus on the external environment, in this case a mentoring program (and its staff and mentors), to be proactively inclusive. This framework is important and empowering for staff to keep in mind when designing programming and spaces to ensure they are accessible for the widest range possible — and debunking the myth of "normal."

Accommodations

Accommodations are modifications or adjustments that enable an equitable experience for an individual with a disability. Reasonable accommodations are required by employers and should not be considered special treatment. Accommodations fall into four different buckets: physical changes, accessible and assistive technology, accessible communications, and policy enhancements. There is a common myth that all accommodations are expensive, but this is not true. Many accommodations are free or low-cost and can be easily provided. These include extended time, providing paperwork electronically, and modifying the layout of a room. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) offers a free service to learn more about specific accommodations.

Person-First and Identity-First Language

People with disabilities have preferred ways of identifying. Some prefer person-first language, which is centering the person as the focus. This would be demonstrated by saying "a person with a disability" or "a person who is blind." Others prefer identity-first language and prefer to center disability as one of the important elements of their identity. In this case, one would say, "a disabled person" or "an autistic person." Therefore, within this guide we use both person-first and identity-first language to showcase that they are both valid ways to identify. One important note is that when working with an individual, they will typically share how they prefer to be identified and it is important that their preference, which they may feel very strongly about, is honored.

Disability Etiquette

Disability etiquette means the guidelines for respectful and inclusive ways to communicate with and about people with disabilities. This knowledge and its application are central to creating an

inclusive environment. Many of the resources suggested at the end of this chapter can further your learning about disability etiquette.

Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability. An environment (or any building, product, or service in that environment) should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework developed by a disability education organization called CAST to improve learning by leveraging research about how people learn. UDL's goal is to minimize the need for individualized accommodations or modifications by teaching and designing curriculum or programs in a way that reaches the widest range of students possible. UDL focuses on multiple means of engagement, expression, representation, and expression. In the mentoring context, this applies to how the program is providing mentees with flexibility in their goals, methods, and assessment options. Keep in mind that UDL is not a one-size-fits-all model and there must be person-centered approaches to ensuring how a program can best support a youth. More information about UDL can be found at cast.org.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to an individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping or interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. This is a key concept for those seeking to create a disability-inclusive environment, as disability is experienced

by individuals of all races, classes, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Therefore, it is common that youth with disabilities must navigate complex and overlapping systems of oppression and barriers.

Ableism

Ableism is the discrimination and bias against disabled people and the ways society is structured to favor able people. Ableism is based on the belief that typical abilities are superior and is rooted in the false narrative that people with disabilities cannot contribute or should be fixed. Ableism can be seen all around the everyday environment, from inaccessible buildings to lack of curb cuts on sidewalks. Ableism can also be found in our language, policies, and interactions. Since disability intersects with every culture and race, racialized ableism — the intersectional discrimination based on racism and ableism — is also an important concept.

Internalized Ableism

Not only do people with disabilities face blatant discrimination, exclusion, and prejudice, but our society is also subtly biased in favor of able-bodied and neurotypical people. As such, people without disabilities have many privileges. This can become internalized as disabled people begin to view themselves in relation to others through the layers of systemic oppression. One of the main ways a

mentoring experience can support a young person with disabilities is by encouraging them to identify and address the internalized ableism they may be imposing on themselves.

Disability Pride

Disability pride means taking pride in one's whole self, including the disability. When engaging with youth with disabilities, this is an important concept. Mentors can reinforce disability pride by ensuring the mentee learns about disability history and is introduced to successful individuals with disabilities.

Credible Messenger

A credible messenger is a mentor with life experience similar to the mentee. In the case of disability, this could be a mentor with a similar disability, but can also include other similarities, such as culture, race, and ethnicity.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is a concept that has broad application to the healthy development of individuals and has several overlapping definitions. Some have described self-determination as being the intrinsic motivation one can have to experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness in one's life.[24] Other scholars have described it as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference."[25] Regardless of the specific definition, the idea here is that the individual feels in charge and capable of steering the course of their own life and achievements. Needless to say, youth with disabilities can often have lower levels of self-determination and one of the major benefits of a mentoring experience may be building the confidence of these young people to fully adopt a self-determination mindset.[26]

ABOUT THIS NEW RESOURCE

This resource was developed jointly by MENTOR and Partners for Youth with Disabilities (PYD), building on the long-standing partnership between the two organizations and their expertise in the mentoring and disability youthwork spaces. The content of the publication was developed after a literature review that built on the 2018 National Mentoring Resource Center evidence review on mentoring youth with disabilities[27] by including an additional seven studies published in the last several years that highlighted mentoring for youth with disabilities.

In addition to the research review, we also engaged a Working Group of expert practitioners, technical assistance providers, and scholars to help shape the recommendations offered here (see sidebar for details). This group met with the authors throughout the summer of 2022 and offered their input regarding the types of practices that can improve inclusivity for youth with disabilities and the types of mentoring experiences that best meet the needs of youth with disabilities. They also provided guidance on how to best serve volunteer mentors with disabilities, as well as inclusive practices for supporting staff members with disabilities. The Working Group reviewed several drafts of the recommended practices before finally settling on the content found in these pages. Their support of this project helped ensure that these recommendations were grounded in real-world experience, practitioner wisdom, and the best research evidence available.

USING THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS RESOURCE

In the pages that follow, readers will find our recommended practices broken into two sections:

SECTION 1:
Program Planning, Leadership, and Operations – This covers key foundational pieces of inclusivity, such as inclusive policies, staff training and development, leadership commitment, and adequate resourcing of inclusivity work.

SECTION 2:
Standards of Mentoring Practice for Inclusivity – This section closely aligns with the main categories of the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*, covering everything from participant recruitment through the closure of matches and participant exit from the program. This section also includes information about inclusive program evaluation practices.

In both sections, we offer references to additional print and online resources that can deepen understanding of disability and help programs implement many of the practices recommended here. Readers are also encouraged to use this resource alongside the core EEPM and to draw information from other titles in this series of EEPM supplementary publications, as needed. Ultimately, it is up to practitioners to decide what practices are relevant to the success of their programs, but we think the practices detailed in this resource can help improve the experiences of youth with disabilities in even the most well-designed mentoring programs and we encourage programs to adopt as many of these practices as possible.

Readers looking for a more streamlined version of the practices recommended here can find a shorter "Checklist Version" of this resource on the MENTOR website.

PROJECT WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

The following individuals and organizations contributed to the development of the content of this guide. See the end of the introduction section for more information about the work of several of these outstanding organizations and leaders in the disability mentoring movement.

Eli A. Wolff – Power of Sport Lab

Eline Heppe – Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Janis Kupersmidt – innovation, Research, & Training (iRT)

Marcus Soutra - Eye to Eye

Sally Lindsay - Bloorview Research Institute, University of Toronto

Sophia Duck – Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern PA

Stephanie Woodward - Disability EmpowHer Network

Steven W. Allen – PolicyWorks/Peer MentoringWorks

T.J. Gordon - University of Illinois – Chicago and Chicagoland Disabled People of Color Coalition

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROACTIVE INVESTMENT IN INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Before we dive into the specific recommendations for designing, implementing, and evaluating inclusive mentoring services, we thought it was important to welcome you, the reader, into this resource with some words of encouragement to be proactive in the journey of working toward inclusion. In many ways, this multifaceted topic can seem overwhelming or intimidating. But we are grateful that you care enough about this work to have opened this resource, which is itself a proactive step on your part.

Inclusion is a proactive approach to ensure that all youth, including youth with disabilities, can meaningfully engage — in this case, engage with the services and activities of the mentoring program and the relationship with their mentor or mentors. Within this definition are two key words: proactive and *meaningfully*. **It is critical that practitioners like yourself invest in this intentional, proactive effort, both individually as professionals and organizationally**, through shifts in your leadership, facilities, policies, and procedures.

So, what does this investment look like in action?

- **Actively seeking out those with disabilities and inviting them in** — Programs are encouraged to make an intentional commitment to reaching out to youth and adults with disabilities in marginalized communities. These individuals may bring important connections to other community organizations that support those with disabilities. They might also offer a wealth of feedback on ways the program can improve services and better meet the needs of youth (and adult mentors and caregivers) with disabilities. Tips and guidance on how to put this into practice can be found in Sections 1 and 2.
- **Emphasizing representation of those with disabilities** — Representation matters, and programs are encouraged to involve people with disabilities at all levels of the organization, including the board and leadership level. Proactive hiring of people with disabilities will help to ensure that programs, policies, and practices are informed by people with disabilities. This representation also extends to program media and communications materials, which is discussed in more detail in Section 1.
- **Learning more about disability** — Practitioners can take a proactive approach by embracing self-education. Leaders can model the importance of this continuous learning and prioritize it organizationally. Ongoing professional development in inclusive mentoring is vital and, as noted earlier, inclusion is a journey of continuous learning. Disability is often overlooked even within conversations about social justice and marginalized communities. A good way to address that is to simply learn more and bring the knowledge and wisdom around supporting those with disabilities into the work of the program.

The rest of this resource will provide recommended practices that will help mentoring organizations build on the key concepts and principles covered here in the Introduction.

ONE PATHWAY TO ONGOING LEARNING

In 2021, Partners for Youth with Disabilities and MENTOR launched the disability mentoring certificate through which mentoring programs across the country were guided through a deep learning process to build programs that are inclusive for youth, volunteers, and staff with disabilities. Participants had the following reflections on their experience, which shed light on the importance of continuously learning about inclusive mentoring:

> *Being able to hear disabled people speak candidly is a unique learning opportunity. Thank you for organizing this."*

> *I liked that this certification program opened my eyes to things that I may not have considered before. This is such an important topic for all programs and businesses and just the world in general! We all need to be more accepting and accommodating for all people. There were things that I thought I knew about, but didn't know as much as I thought once we really got into it. Thank you for being such great moderators and supporters during this entire process!"*

> *I learned so much. Each lesson confronted ideas that I have long held. I thought that I basically had an understanding of most of the issues presented in the lessons. However, there was so much for me to learn."*

> *It was incredibly helpful to delve into topics that my undergrad/grad education had essentially glossed over. I feel that the knowledge that I've gained will make me a better clinician."*

RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES FOR LEARNING ABOUT AND ADDRESSING ISSUES OF DISABILITY INCLUSION

For mentoring leaders and practitioners who want to dive deeper into the topics and practices referenced in this Introduction and the remaining sections of this resource, we offer the following recommended readings. These materials can help with organizational assessments and can deepen staff and mentor understanding of disability (both through individual education or their use in staff or mentor training).

IN PRINT

- ***A Disability History of the United States*** by Kim E. Nielsen (2013, Beacon Press)
- ***Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist*** by Judith Heumann and Kristen Joiner (2020, Beacon Press)
- ***Being Seen: One Deafblind Woman's Fight to End Ableism*** by Elsa Sjunneson (2021, S&S/Simon Element)
- ***Black Disability Politics*** by Sami Schalk (2022, Duke University Press)
- ***Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*** by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018, Arsenal Pulp Press)
- ***Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally*** by Emily Ladau (2021, Ten Speed Press)
- ***Disability Friendly: How to Move from Clueless to Inclusive*** by John Kemp (2022, Wiley)
- ***Disability Visibility Project: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*** by Alice Wong [editor] (2020, Penguin/Random House)
- ***Sincerely, Your Autistic Child: What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up, Acceptance, and Identity*** by Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, Emily Paige Ballou, and Sharon daVanport (2021, Beacon Press)

ONLINE

- ***Becoming Hellen Keller***- A documentary from PBS about her amazing life and advocacy.
- ***Crip Camp | A Disability Revolution*** - A documentary film available on Netflix.
- ***I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much*** – A TED Talk by Stella Young.
- ***Our Fight for Disability Rights — And Why We're Not Done Yet*** – A TED Talk by Judith Heumann.
- ***Rising Phoenix*** – A Netflix documentary.
- ***The Heumann Perspective*** on Apple Podcast
- The following free guide books are accessible through PYD at ***https://learn.pyd.org/guidebooks/***

    Best Practices Guidebook for Mentoring Youth with Disabilities

    Expanding Access and Inclusion for Youth with Disabilities: An Inclusion Guide for America's Youth Programs

    Global Partnership for Children with Disabilities: Global Mapping Exercise and Needs Assessment Report

    Transportation Advocacy Mentoring Initiative Implementation Guide

TOOLS TO SUPPORT THE WORK

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) - https://adata.org
- ADA Standards for Accessible Design - http://www.ada.gov/2010ADAstandards_index.htm
- American Association of People with Disabilities – http://www.aapd.com
- Braille Works - http://brailleworks.com/
- Center for Parent Information and Resources - www.parentcenterhub.org
- Disability.gov https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/topics
- Institute for Community Inclusion – http://www.communityinclusion.org
- Job Accommodations Network - http://askjan.org
- National Center for Learning Disabilities - http://www.ncld.org
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition Institute on Community Integration – http://www.ncset.org
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth NCWD/Youth, c/o Institute for Educational Leadership – http://www.ncwd-youth.info
- The following free tools are accessible through PYD at https://learn.pyd.org/guidebooks/

  Boston Common Accessibility Assessment Tool (BCAAT)

  Creating Inclusive Activities – Strategies & Tools

  Disability Inclusion Tips for Youth Sports and Recreation Programs

  Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs

  Sensory Tools Tip Sheet

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT OUR PROJECT WORKING GROUP

The following organizations and individuals are all contributing to the development of young people with disabilities through their programming, scholarship, thought leadership, and services to the broader mentoring and disability empowerment communities. We thank them for their invaluable contributions to this project.

Steven W. Allen
PolicyWorks/Peer MentoringWorks

PolicyWorks (PW) leads the **Peer MentoringWorks Community of Practitioners (PMW CoP)** providing training, tools, and programmatic technical assistance to State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs) for the provision of peer mentoring for transition-aged youth and students with disabilities. These products and services include customizable on-demand training, web-based workshops, and direct service provision tools available through PMW LearnCTR and the innovative **PMW FieldGuide APP**. Developed through the **Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC), PMW** emerges as a suite of program resources supporting agency and fidelity in the implementation and provision of peer mentoring as a **Pre-Employment Transition Services (PreETS)** or traditional VR transition support. PolicyWorks through Peer MentoringWorks supports the development of a peer mentoring workforce of trained and certified peer mentoring professionals available to support self-advocacy and self-determination nationally. Contact PolicyWorks or discover Peer MentoringWorks through www.peermentoringworks.org.

Dr. Eline Heppe
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Dr. Eline Heppe works as a researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and the Academy of Royal Kentalis (the Netherlands). Eline Heppe has gained extensive experiences studying (young) people with vision and/or hearing impairments. She designed and ran a community-based mentoring program for young people with vision impairment in the Netherlands, called Mentor Support. In this program, adolescence with vision impairment receive support for improving their social participation and psychosocial functioning from a mentor with or without vision impairment. Eline Heppe studied the program by testing its effectiveness in a randomized controlled trail. Her work has been awarded with the Next Generation Award 2017 by the International Society for Low Vision Research. In her current position she is working as a researcher at the Vrije University Amsterdam continuing her work studying the lives of (young) people with vision impairment. She is also working at the Academy of Royal Kentalis studying the lives of people with a vision and hearing impairment (deafblindness). She supervises multiple research projects all focusing and including people with disabilities. In one of those studies Eline Heppe is evaluating a community-based support program in which voluntary personal support workers provide accessible one-on-one support to people with hearing and vision impairment (deafblindness) who live independently in the community. Contact details: e.c.m.heppe@vu.nl / e.heppe@kentalis.nl

Marcus Soutra
Eye to Eye

Eye to Eye's mission is to improve the educational experience and outcomes of neurodiverse young people while engaging them and their allies in the movement for a more equitable and inclusive society. Our near-peer mentoring brings together middle school students who learn differently with local high school and college students who also learn differently. Together, students engage in a two-year cycle of art-based, action, and reflection-driven mentoring. Eye to Eye also offers general educators competency-based professional learning in a variety of modules and workshops. The focus is to help educators build affirming, supportive, and equitable learning environments for students who learn differently. https://eyetoeyenational.org/

Eli A. Wolff
Power of Sport Lab

The Power of Sport Lab is a platform to fuel and magnify creativity, diversity, connection, and leadership through sport. The power of sport can inform, empower, and transform. The Power of Sport Lab is dedicated to delivering a space for people around the globe to share their power of sport stories and how sport has influenced, challenged, and inspired. The Power of Sport Lab involves research, education, and advocacy initiatives including Disability in Sport International, Athletes for Human Rights, the Olympism Project and Mentoring for Change. www.powerofsportlab.org

Stephanie Woodward
Disability EmpowHer Network

Disability EmpowHer Network is a nonprofit organization run by and for girls and women with disabilities. Disability EmpowHer Network connects, motivates, and guides disabled girls and women to grow, learn, and develop to their highest potential and have the confidence to lead. We are a catalyst for positive change, and we're driven by our commitment to skill-building, encouragement, and mentorship. Disability EmpowHer Network works hard to connect girls with disabilities with successful disabled women to serve as mentors and role models. Our mentors serve in different capacities. Some write letters to girls with disabilities to give them a boost of confidence, other mentors join in video or phone calls for mentoring sessions, and some mentors join us at our EmpowHer Camps. Learn more at: https://www.disabilityempowhernetwork.org/

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SECTION 1

PROGRAM PLANNING, LEADERSHIP, AND OPERATIONS

The fourth edition of the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™* offers recommendations for the design and implementation of youth mentoring programs, including elements such as program staffing a nd professional development, program leadership, policies and procedures, resource development, marketing and communications, and other operational aspects of programs that we know influence the quality of the mentoring experience for everyone involved. Below we offer additional recommendations related to several of these operational processes that may improve the experience of mentees and mentors with disabilities, starting with some first steps that can get your program on the road to implementing more inclusive programming.

IN THIS SECTION:

INITIAL STEPS FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Before diving into the recommended practices around program design, policies, staffing, and more, it is helpful to offer some initial steps that programs can take to demonstrate commitment to inclusion work:

Get buy-in and commitment to inclusion efforts from program and organizational leadership – Disability inclusion only becomes part of organizational culture when the leaders of the program and organization are committed to the work. Leadership buy-in is necessary because this work may require considerable training, changes in policy and practice, and budgetary considerations. If you are not in a leadership role, consider ways to share what you have learned with others in the organization. When presenting ideas for more inclusive practice, present these improvements in a way that amplifies the mission of the organization and proactively addresses hesitations that may arise. In addition, if you are experiencing hesitation or barriers from others, explore possible solutions to those hesitations. For example, if you identify that your colleagues have detected cost as a barrier to increasing accessibility to program policies, activities, and trainings, research funders who are supporting disability inclusion efforts and apply for funding to support your efforts. By presenting the results of this research to those in your organization who may be hesitant to increase inclusivity, you

may calm their fears that implementing inclusive practices will be exorbitantly expensive. If you are a leader within an organization, your inclusive words and actions can change and set the culture and be the catalyst for creating and executing a new priority of disability inclusion.

Assess your current organizational climate around disability – To begin the journey of creating an inclusive mentoring program, benchmarking where inclusion practices currently stand is an important first step. One way to do this is by taking an inclusion assessment, such as the free organizational inclusion self-assessment offered through PYD at learn.pyd.org. Categories to reflect upon may include measuring the organization's accessibility, creativity, flexibility, communication, promotion of social skills, policies, and human resources. For example, a good initial accessibility question is: Are programs and activities held in accessible locations (for example, where ramps and automatic doors are installed, sufficient space exists for mobility devices, etc.)? Questions involving creativity and flexibility may include, "Do staff and/or volunteers have the skills and commitment to adapt program activities, games, sports, and fitness activities (or offer a variety of activities to engage all participants)?" Organizational policy questions might include, "Are staff and/or volunteers offered disability inclusion training at the start of their involvement with the program?" Asking questions to assess disability inclusion is an important first step in an ongoing journey of continuous improvement. (Access PYD's free organizational self-assessment tool here.

Establish a baseline to understand how many individuals with disabilities currently participate in the program – In order to measure progress toward inclusion, it is important to intentionally track how many mentees and mentors with disabilities a program is already engaging. By getting a baseline, the program can set benchmarks to proactively include more youth, mentors, and staff with disabilities. It is also important to note that, as mentioned in the Introduction, disabled youth may or may not disclose their status. Therefore, your program is likely already serving many more mentees (and mentors) with disabilities than they may be aware of. As inclusion practices improve, an additional benefit may be that individuals feel comfortable disclosing their disability. Similarly, including disability as part of staff and board demographic surveys is important for establishing a baseline from which the program can work to proactively hire staff, recruit board members with disabilities, and measure progress.

> **Your program is likely already serving many more mentees (and mentors) with disabilities than they may be aware of.**

POLICY AND INFRASTRUCTURE SELF-REVIEW PRACTICES

Once a program has established a baseline understanding of its disability demographics and disability inclusion practices (or lack thereof) there are some additional steps to further examine its work through a lens of inclusivity. We recommend that all mentoring programs engage in the practices recommended below.

Examine and revise program policies to support inclusive practice

A programs' policy and procedure manual should have an inclusivity statement that demonstrates commitment, as well as:

- **Develop a public inclusion statement**—The organization's inclusion statement, which is different than an anti-discrimination statement, should be included on the organization's website and program materials. An inclusion statement should proactively communicate an organization's commitment to inclusion. This statement should reflect the values and practices within the organization. See the sidebar for a few examples from our organizations that your program can build on and customize.
- **Examine and revise policies around hiring staff or managing volunteers** – When thinking about hiring and managing practices, consider how your policies may impact individuals with disabilities. For instance, is your hiring process accessible to individuals with disabilities? Your organization should ensure that the website where you post your application for prospective employees or volunteers is accessible to individuals who use screen readers or other assistive technology. It is also crucial to provide a space in the application asking individuals if they require any accommodations. This practice demonstrates a proactive approach to disability inclusion and your commitment to creating equal opportunities for employment for all individuals.
- **Strengthen policies related to bullying and harassment** – Most programs' anti-bullying and harassment policies likely include protective language related to race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Make sure that these policies include disability. This inclusion can help ensure that hate speech, harassment, or bullying based on disability will not be overlooked or ignored. Many assume that disability is included in these policies "by default," but in our experience, there is value in explicitly naming it as prospective mentors, mentees, and employees will be looking for that explicit recognition.

Examine and ensure physical accessibility

Physical accessibility is a foundational and often overlooked element of inclusivity. Physical accessibility should be ensured for the mentoring office or headquarters, any community-based sites, and for any community-based events or activities sponsored or promoted by the mentoring program. Conduct a walk-through of space options in advance to be sure accessibility options are not offered in a way that compromises an individual's dignity (such as entering through a back service door while peers enter a front door). In addition, if transportation is being provided, it is important that all participants can access the transportation options. There are several online tools that can help a program assess the accessibility of its physical spaces. This one from Autistic Advocacy is a good starting point.

With the rise of remote and hybrid mentoring models since COVID-19, a program should also evaluate the accessibility of any websites or online platforms used in program intake and delivery. It's important to remember that virtual spaces can be just as exclusionary as in-person ones. It is recommended that organizations check out the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to benchmark their website against WCAG standards. More information on this is detailed in Section 2 where we discuss participant recruitment. The creation of accessible websites and online environments is also explored much more extensively in the E-Mentoring Supplement to the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*, also available through MENTOR, and we encourage programs to explore that detailed information as well.

Examine and revise planned program activities and events

Each program will have unique special events and unique activities for mentors and youth to participate in, but, as with the program's physical facilities, these activities and events also need to be examined through a disability inclusion lens. Locations and participation should be accessible (both physically and cognitively). Specific recommended practices include:

- **Build in a higher staff to youth ratio** as it will allow for additional support and resource brokering that may be needed for supporting mentees with disabilities.
- **Build in extra time in the agenda** as it can be helpful for transitions from activity to activity and processing information.
- **Build in extra space** to allow for a quiet, sensory friendly space during program activities, as many participants, not just those with disabilities, may benefit from some less-stimulating and more reflective physical spaces. It can also be helpful to offer fidget items, headphones, or colored pencils/markers and coloring books in these spaces as a "cool down" or relaxing activity.

SAMPLE INCLUSION STATEMENTS

From MENTOR: MENTOR is committed to fostering an environment of diversity and inclusion for all. We embrace our differences and celebrate our common humanity in advancing awareness of the need for a transformative power of supportive relationships for our young people. We believe that varied perspectives, experiences, and opinions are central assets in our mission to close the mentoring gap.

From PYD: At PYD, we welcome and include people of all abilities and disabilities, identities, and backgrounds. We believe that diverse and fully inclusive organizations empower individuals, heal communities, and create a better world for us all.

- **Provide choices** as an opportunity for empowerment and self-determination. Sometimes, mentees may get mentally stuck on something that program staff or mentors have to refuse. Instead of just saying "No," staff can use respectful behavioral redirection methods that respect the agency of mentees and give them acceptable alternatives from which to choose (e.g., "We can't do this, but we can do this or this instead.").
- **Communicate in multiple formats** to ensure that activity materials and instructions are cognitively accessible. This can include providing both verbal and written instructions, as well as using visual cues, examples, and demonstrations to support engagement and understanding.
- **Use what's known as "Plain Language"** for all program materials to increase access and understanding. Plain Language is writing in a concise, clear, familiar, and organized way and ensuring it is age appropriate for your audience. This approach benefits all participants, including those with cognitive disabilities, low reading literacy, and people who are reading the material in a language other than their primary language.
- **Communicate expectations thoroughly and in advance** as previewing what to expect and reviewing consistently can help reduce uncertainty and help mentees (and mentors) with disabilities to process information. An example of this is to provide an agenda ahead of time so participants know what to expect. Another example is providing a 10- and 5-minute reminders prior to transitioning to another activity.

STAFFING PRACTICES

Programs will have an easier time meeting the needs of youth and volunteers with disabilities if they have disabled adults on their staff and if all employees have received high-quality training that deepens their understanding of inclusive practices

Proactively hire staff with disabilities

This practice not only demonstrates your commitment to inclusion but also will help participants feel welcome in the program. Strategies to proactively hire staff with disabilities include:

- Sending interview questions ahead of time to allow an applicant more time for processing information.
- Ensuring that interview location is physically accessible.
- Ensuring that any requested accommodations are provided.
- Posting the position in locations that may attract applicants with disabilities. For example, organizations should develop a relationship with local organizations and agencies that support disabled workers seeking employment, such as Commissions for the Blind or Rehabilitation Commissions.

Offer robust training and professional development on disability topics to staff

Practitioners have shared that one way to break down barriers to inclusion is the provision of training to all staff on disability awareness, bias, and responsiveness. Therefore, it is important to prioritize professional development opportunities. Prior to staff development training, staff members should be encouraged to do an individual self-assessment to understand their biases around disability. One way to accomplish this is through the free personal self-assessment available at learn.pyd.org. (Note that this assessment differs from the organizational assessment recommended earlier in this section. The previously mentioned questionnaire assesses overall organizational inclusion, while the individual assessment tool mentioned here helps uncover personal perceptions, knowledge gaps, and biases, which lays the groundwork for professional development training to improve those personal skills and understanding in staff.)

There are several foundational training topics that can increase staff confidence and competence, such as inclusive communication and disability etiquette, universal design and universal design for learning, understanding the ADA, and addressing challenging behavior. As noted below, forming partnerships with local disability services/rights organizations can help you find knowledgeable trainers or quality training materials that could be brought into the mentoring program. See the Reading and Resources section at the end of the Introduction for more materials that might provide content for professional development.

SUSTAINING INCLUSIVITY PRACTICES

While the practices noted above will help mentoring programs start making meaningful changes around disability inclusion, those gains can be temporary or undone entirely without engaging in practices that sustain those efforts over time.

Section 2 provides more detail about how to build inclusion into day-to-day program practices that impact mentors and mentees — here we focus on practices that support disability inclusion at the organizational level.

Build an accessibility/ accommodations budget

While most requested accommodations are free or low cost, it is important to prioritize accessibility and accommodations during your budgeting process. It is most effective to build this expense into your overall organizational budget so that it can include accommodations for participants, volunteers, and staff. Having this expense centralized can encourage a focus on inclusion because program directors will not need to cover costs using precious programming funds, but instead can access funds from a "neutral" place in the budget that doesn't directly impact services for youth and mentors. In addition, a centralized accessibility/accommodations budget emphasizes disability inclusion as an organizational priority. Practitioners should note that the U.S. Department of Labor offers the Job Accommodation Network (askjan.org), a valuable free resource to help understand accommodations and receive guidance about specific accommodation requests.

Form partnerships with local disability organizations and agencies

These partnerships can be a valuable source of mentors, trainers, referrals, and other supports to the program and its participants. These can be disability-centered and/or disability-friendly organizations. Organizations led by people with disabilities include Centers for Independent Living (CILS) and self-advocacy groups like the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network, and Sins Invalid. These organizations can be valuable sources of feedback, resources, ongoing assessments, and general disability expertise. Mentoring programs can benefit from joining professional development networks such as the National Disability Mentoring Coalition to engage in resource sharing with other disability mentoring practitioners. In addition to informing program planning, collaborating with disability organizations can lead to joint proposal writing enabling each respective organization to strengthen their mutual missions.

Conduct periodic and ongoing organizational assessments and policy reviews

No program gets all these things right the first time. Frequent reviews of policies and procedures can help with continuous improvement over time. There are multiple ways to understand what is working and what still needs to be improved, including:

- Surveying mentees, families, and mentors, especially those with disabilities, to understand their experience in the program and their perception of the program's inclusion efforts.
- Evaluating your demographic information to understand if more mentees, mentors, and staff with disabilities are engaged.
- Developing a participant advisory board that includes participants with disabilities.
- Retaking the free online organizational inclusion assessment on learn.pyd.org to see how the organization is improving and what areas still require improvement.

The most important factor in sustaining this work is regular information gathering, reassessment, and reflection on an annual or other consistent frequency, even as things clearly improve. Engaging in ongoing education efforts and self-evaluation will ensure that disability inclusion remains a priority of focus for your program and organization, even if there is turn over in staff or other competing priorities. So, make sure you have scheduled tasks that ensure continuous improvement.

Address incidents of discrimination or exclusion quickly and thoroughly

Programs should ensure they follow their own policies in practice by quickly addressing incidents as they arise and not letting issues of exclusion, bullying, discrimination, or microaggression linger. Many programs have wonderfully written policies and statements, but fail to "walk the walk" when faced with a stressful situation where those with disabilities have been excluded or worse. Make sure your policies and procedures have clear responsibilities, protocols, and timelines of action.

In addition, it is helpful to consider the ways in which people can bring up these issues and why people may be reluctant to do so based on past precedent or power dynamics. Staying on top of incidents that run counter to your rules or values as an organization requires frequent check-ins with staff and participants to uncover areas of concern, as well as monitoring known situations to ensure that problems are addressed promptly and effectively.

The most important factor in sustaining this work is regular information gathering, reassessment, and reflection on an annual or other consistent frequency, even as things clearly improve.

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE FOR MENTORING PROGRAMS FOCUSED EXCLUSIVELY ON YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

While the previously recommended practices can be helpful to *every* mentoring program, some programs choose to exclusively serve youth with disabilities to ensure that they receive appropriate and customized mentor support that addresses their unique disability-related needs.

For these types of programs, we offer some specific program design and operations considerations.

Involve mentees and mentors with disabilities in program planning

The perspectives of people with disabilities are crucial to building services that hit the mark. In fact, in the disability community there is a common mantra, "Nothing about us without us!" This phrase highlights that program plans and evaluations should be done with people with disabilities if they are for people with disabilities. Invite participants to engage on committees, serve on the board of directors, and evaluate program plans and goals.

Build a strong theory of change

While a strong theory of change is a foundational component of every mentoring program, as noted in the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™* (EEPM), there are some unique aspects to consider for programs that are exclusively designed to support youth with disabilities. These include:

- **Tailor program activities and mentor approaches to the specific needs of mentees** – As noted earlier in this resource, there is tremendous diversity along the spectrum of disabilities, each type of which presents specific opportunities, challenges, and barriers for young people. A mentoring program may find that their services are more aligned with the needs surrounding some disabilities more than others. For example, a program designed to build confidence in navigating the community might be more meaningful for those with some types of physical disabilities than other types of disabilities. Ideally there is strong alignment between the disability experiences of mentees and the types of mentors recruited and the activities offered. Additionally, research suggests that youth with disabilities often experience varying results from mentoring experiences based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics (see the 2018 National Mentoring Resource Center review for more details), suggesting that programs should consider the intersectional identities of mentees, not just their disability, when designing the program. Practitioners are encouraged to think carefully about who might benefit the most from the mentoring experiences and conversations being offered.
- **Consider the processes that lead to positive outcomes for mentees** – Research suggests several processes that may be especially important in facilitating mentoring benefits for mentees with disabilities:
  - **Social processes** – These involve opportunities to interact with others to build social skills, to increase confidence in being around others, and to improve the overall quality and quantity of relationships and social support.
  - **Learning processes** – These focus on skill building and increasing knowledge about academic, career, or other important topics. These processes can also emphasize the seeking out of information (e.g., learning how to navigate a system on one's own) or building skills that facilitate learning (e.g., digital literacy).

- **Autonomy** – As noted earlier, there is a long history in disability-focused youth work of emphasizing self-determination, bodily and decision-making autonomy, self-advocacy, and other aspects of independent agency and authority over one's actions and future. Mentoring work supporting autonomy can often facilitate youth's perceptions of improvements in quality of life (for example, see Powers et al, 2012[1]).
- **Emotional support** – All young people need empathy, encouragement, and someone to confide in when facing challenges or disappointments, and mentees with disabilities may especially benefit from engagements with a mentor who provides these moments.
- **Role modeling** – Youth with disabilities may benefit considerably from the additional example of a mentor with a disability who can offer them a reflection of their future self and instill confidence that they can succeed on the journey of life as their mentor has.

Once these potential processes are identified, a program can more easily craft the experiences, activities, conversations, projects, and teaching moments that mentors and youth will engage in to facilitate growth and move the young person down the pathway to positive outcomes.

- **Identify the right outcomes** – Perhaps the most challenging aspect of developing a theory of change is identifying the types of outcomes that should result from the mentoring activities and relationship (and those processes in action), as well as the sequence in which one might expect them to occur. For example, the work of a mentor might focus on helping a young person improve their academic performance, but shorter-term outcomes such as improved study skills, increased self-confidence as a student, and stronger self-advocacy during their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings might all be important precursors to that ultimate outcome of better grades and test scores.

Below we offer some examples of the types of short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes for disability-focused mentoring programs that are seen in both the research literature and in real-world programs. Whether these outcomes fit as proximal or more distal goals is entirely dependent on the scope, duration, and services of the program. In general, programs are encouraged to focus most on the outcomes on which mentors could reasonably have an influence during the time mentees are in the program or in the immediate timeframe after. Most of these outcomes would involve growth or improvements in these areas unless otherwise noted as "reduction."

Socioemotional growth outcomes	Building networks of support / social capital outcomes	Academic and career support	Disability management and transition support
• Adaptive coping with stress • Agency, autonomy, self-determination • Collaboration, teamwork • Communication skills • Hopefulness for future • Leadership skills • Life quality, life satisfaction • Loneliness (reduction) • Peer support (perceptions of, satisfaction with, connectedness to peers) • Relationship quality with peers, parents/caregivers, teachers, etc. • Self-esteem • Social anxiety (reduction) • Social competence, social skills • Social participation	• Community involvement, connectedness • Help-seeking behaviors, asking for accommodations • Network size, quantity, composition, engagement • Participation in extracurricular activities • Participation in support groups or other healing spaces • Self-advocacy	• Academic achievement (e.g., grades, graduation, etc.) • Academic skills, study habits • Career exploration, intentions • Career-related network size and diversity • Employment persistence • Employment-related certifications or licensure • Job-specific skills, knowledge • Sense of belonging in a career or industry • Understanding and use of university services • Wages and promotions	• Acceptance of disability • Disability pride, understanding disability history • Health self-management • Independent and interdependent living skills • Self-advocacy, self-direction • Self-disclosure and expression

There may be many other relevant outcomes for youth with disabilities participating in a mentoring program beyond those provided here. What's critical is that mentoring programs only select outcomes with direct relevance to the activities of the program and the types of support offered by mentors.

Consider extended age ranges of services

While the transition from youth to adulthood is challenging for most individuals, youth with disabilities are often presented with additional barriers that exacerbate these challenges. Some youth with disabilities choose to remain in high school until age 22, which extends their transition period compared to their peers without disabilities. Further, in some U.S. states, youth with disabilities often lose valuable services and supports when they turn 22, so offering mentoring into young adulthood may be particularly valuable for individuals with disabilities. Research shows that the transition into adulthood for youth with disabilities is longer, more disharmonious, and more complex than that of expected developing young people.[2] "Transitioned age youth" for people with disabilities is frequently defined as individuals who are between the ages of 16 and 24 years. A recent survey of programs within the National Disability Mentoring Coalition found that service providers defined the term "young people" as up to the age of 26 years. As such, disability service providers often increase the upper limit of the age range they serve, with some including individuals up to age 26 to reflect the reality of the timelines that youth with disabilities may experience. Mentoring programs are

encouraged to consider extending the age range to mid-twenties to allow for enhanced support during a key time in the lives of youth with disabilities. Listening to the perspectives of the disability community can give program developers a good sense of the ages where mentoring might be most valuable to the youth the program wants to serve.

Consider a focus on transition points

Youth with disabilities may struggle with big life transitions, with research suggesting mentors might be important at junctures such as into middle school and high school and into postsecondary education or career paths.[3] In addition, support around aging, decision-making, and grieving are key transitional points that can deeply impact individuals with disabilities.

Another key skill that mentors can help their mentees develop is self-advocacy, an important skill to support a successful transition to adulthood. Given that youth with disabilities often lose services during their transition to adulthood it becomes even more imperative that they are able to self-advocate. A mentor can be a sounding board for mentees to practice self-advocacy skills to help build their confidence.

Consider program models or formats that might enhance outcomes

Electronic mentoring might open up more possibilities for connection for some youth. Group or peer approaches, both with and without mentors with disabilities, may also be important approaches to unlocking certain outcomes in that theory of change.

Online mentoring may be of particular benefit to youth with disabilities as it reduces the barriers that inaccessible transportation can present. Youth with disabilities may also have a need to exercise additional caution in the pandemic due to special health considerations, and the connection of a mentor online can provide an important source for support.

In Section 2, we offer additional practices that should make the key program standards, such as recruitment, training, and match support, more inclusive for mentees and mentors with disabilities.

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SECTION 2

STANDARDS OF MENTORING PRACTICE FOR INCLUSIVITY

While Section 1 offers guidance to mentoring programs on the big picture ways that they can plan for inclusive mentoring experiences for youth with disabilities, we also know that there are key things that program staff members can do each day while implementing the program that bring those inclusive philosophies, policies, and commitments to life in the delivery of services to young people, their families, and the program's mentors. Thus, this section focuses most on the practices that program staff can use to improve the inclusivity of day-to-day tasks and staff member roles.

From the initial recruitment of program participants through the closure of mentoring relationships, the advice here aligns with the general Standards of practice categories in the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*™, 4th edition (EEPM). In addition, we have also included a section on inclusive program evaluation practices in case staff are also responsible for implementing tasks associated with evaluation. Where a recommended practice aligns with or builds on practices from the original EEPM, we have noted that below. Mentoring programs are encouraged to also familiarize themselves with all of the benchmark practices in the EEPM and incorporate them to the degree possible for their program model. The recommended practices here are provided in an effort to strengthen the inclusion of youth with one or more disabilities in programs, although as noted in the Introduction, we believe that implementation of all of these practices can benefit all youth in the program.

IN THIS SECTION:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

We begin with recommended practices for the recruitment stage of a youth or mentor's participation in the program.

The inclusivity practices described here can help ensure that participants with disabilities feel welcome to join the program and are encouraged to participate, based on the signals they receive from the program demonstrating that the program understands the disability experience.

▶ Benchmark all program websites and online content against the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

Ensure that information about the program is accessible to all. In order for youth and volunteers to join mentoring programs, it is critical that they can find your program, beginning with an accessible website. As noted in Section 1, programs should ensure that their website meets accessibility standards.

Specifically, programs should ensure that their website and all online content meets or exceeds the AA-level of the most current version (as of 2022: v2.1) of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These guidelines are the international gold standard for online accessibility, and are used by courts and U.S. government bodies to evaluate if a website is ADA-compliant or not. This resource enables organizations to type in their website and get an audit of how accessible it is. The audit includes flagging of any accessibility errors.

See MENTOR's *E-Mentoring Supplement to the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (specifically pages 46–57) for more details about building accessible online sites and platforms that also protect minors and ensure that online privacy laws are also addressed.

▶ Ensure that youth and adults with disabilities are represented in recruitment materials.

This recommendation concerns creating the materials used for recruiting mentors, youth participants, and staff positions. When prospective staff, volunteers, and youth look to join a mentoring program, it is important that they "see" themselves represented within the community. To foster this impression, it is recommended that mentoring programs include people with disabilities on their website, flyers, social media, and other marketing materials. When people see themselves, it sends a message that "this program is for me." If your program does not have such photos, many stock photo companies, such as Design Pics or Getty Images, provide authentic photos of people with disabilities. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.1.1, B.1.2, and B.1.6 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Offer recruitment materials in a variety of formats to accommodate those with disabilities.

It is important that all recruitment materials are accessible and written in Plain Language (see "Key Concepts" in the Introduction). It is recommended that staff familiarize themselves with resources for translating and producing materials in braille and understand how to convert to large print materials. Staff should also have access to companies that offer qualified sign language interpreters and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioning. It is helpful for staff to generate a resource list, enabling them to easily access these services when needed. Sharing your organization's inclusion statement on recruitment materials is another way to communicate your commitment to the disability community.

Include information in recruitment materials about the program's commitment and practices designed to be welcoming and inclusive of mentors and mentees with disabilities.

Share your organization's inclusion statement in recruitment materials to communicate your program's commitment to the disability community. Ensure that all recruitment materials mention that your organization provides reasonable accommodation.

▶ Ask about any accommodation needs prior to delivering recruitment presentations.

It is critical to ask about accommodation needs throughout every step of the mentoring process, including during the recruitment stage to ensure that the process is accessible. This recommendation includes being ready to provide accommodations during program presentations, including the program having access to sign language interpreters and CART reporters upon the request of a program participant, having the ability to convert materials to Braille and large print, and creating materials that are accessible to screen readers. If the presentation is in person, ask about dietary restrictions.

When delivering a recruitment presentation in person, arrive early so you can set up the room and provide any feedback to the event hosts, in case you need to modify the setup to be more accessible. For example, tables and chairs should be set up in a way that a wheelchair user can easily navigate the space and find a place at the table.

When creating PowerPoint presentations or other slides or visuals, programs are encouraged to review methods for making the slide deck accessible. Some key items to focus on include using the built-in slide layouts in PowerPoint, which have been predesigned with accessibility in mind, and making sure that each slide has a Header/Title section. It is also important to make sure that your color scheme has good color contrast between the background and text color. Include alt text for any image inserted into the slide deck. Avoid tables if possible, but if it's necessary to include them, see the link below for guidance on how to make them more accessible. Use the "Check Accessibility" option in PowerPoint and resolve any errors before finalizing your presentation. For additional information, refer to the full guide on the subject here.

▶ Share information about the program in advance of recruitment presentations.

Sending information in advance gives participants with disabilities additional time to review and digest key messages and details about the program. Participants who process information better visually may benefit from having these materials in hand, in addition to having the extra time to process information. Print handouts for participants. Read aloud any written content or visuals on your slides. This ensures equal access to the information for participants who are blind or have a visual impairment. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Enhancements E.1.2 and E.1.4 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Recruit a mix of mentors with and without various disabilities.

Recruiting a diverse pool of mentors, including mentors with and without disabilities, helps to increase the chances of finding a best fit for each youth within the program's mentee pool. Remember that there is more to connecting with youth than just sharing a disability experience. Look for mentors with disabilities who have other meaningful traits that would make them strong mentors, such as prior experience in helping roles or familiarity with the mentee's interests. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.1.3 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Emphasize the recruitment of mentors (and staff) who have prior experience working with youth with disabilities.

Some mentees with disabilities coming into the mentoring program will request a mentor with prior experience working with youth with disabilities. Therefore, intentionally targeting mentors with this background can be important for recruiting a volunteer pool with specific experiences relevant to youth with disabilities. Mentoring programs may consider partnering with programs such as LEND (Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities); state disability services offices or specific departments such as schools for occupational therapy, physical therapy, or speech pathology in colleges and universities. Additionally, research has shown that mentors with backgrounds in helping professions have been associated with stronger mentoring relationships.[1] **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.1.3 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Detail the specific benefits to youth with disabilities and their parents/caregivers in recruitment materials.

Particularly in programs exclusively serving youth with disabilities, there may be specific benefits unique to those youths' circumstances. For example, programs may support youth with disabilities in the areas of building self-determination skills, practicing self-disclosure of disability, understanding disability history, fostering disability pride, developing comfort in asking for an accommodation, and learning and practicing general self-advocacy skills. Programs may support the transition to adulthood, which, as noted in the Introduction, is a particularly critical time of need for young people with disabilities. Parents and caregivers may benefit from their youth gaining increased autonomy and reduced stress due to the additional buffers of a mentor's support. Whatever the benefits are of your program, make sure that those with disabilities can see how your mentoring services will address their unique needs. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.1.6 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Have staff with disabilities lead recruitment presentations.

This strategy allows prospective mentors and youth participants to see themselves represented in the program's administration. Representation is important within all levels of programming, including during the initial step of recruitment, when prospective youth and volunteers first learn about the opportunity.

▶ Partner with local organizations who can help with the recruitment of participants with disabilities.

Programs are encouraged to partner with organizations who serve youth or adults with disabilities in non-mentoring contexts, or from disability affinity groups within larger organizations, as these can be potentially rich sources of mentors. Recruiting from disability service offices at local high school or colleges, disability commissions, and disability community organizations is another approach suggested in the research for targeted mentee and mentor recruitment.[2] In addition, most regions have Centers for Independent Living, which can be strong recruitment partners for mentors. Disability focused mentoring programs, such as Eye to Eye (see Introduction for more details on their work), often partner with schools based on the number of students reported to have individualized education plans (IEPs) or enrollment in special education because of a diagnosis of a learning disability and/or ADHD. So, think about which organizations and institutions in your community might allow you to more easily access youth and adults with disabilities and explore opportunities for ongoing partnerships and referrals. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Enhancement E.1.3 in the core EEPM.)**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARTICIPANT SCREENING AND ACCEPTANCE

Once participants are recruited and start the application and screening process, there are several additional practices that can support those with disability at this stage of their involvement.

▶ Proactively gather information about disability needs, and strengths, when youth and mentors apply to the program.

All participants (i.e., youth, mentors, parents/caregivers, staff) should be asked about disability and accommodations on intake forms and as part of the screening process so that the program can be both aware and responsive to each individual's needs. If someone may not be able to explain their disability or needs, discuss what makes them comfortable navigating the community and being with people.

Having a tool or form of evaluation to assess each youth's strengths, challenges, learning styles, and preferences can also help. Programs may explore using free tools such as the Boston Common Accessibility Assessment Tool, which was designed to assess student strengths, challenges, learning styles, and preferences to ensure that content and program designs are accessible to those with hidden disabilities that may never have been diagnosed, were not disclosed, or for whom a historical IEP was not available. It is important to be clear that your program is only asking about any disability challenges or needs to best support the mentoring experience, not as a discriminatory practice.

In addition to asking about disability-related needs of mentees, it is also important to learn about and document the strengths that prospective mentees with disabilities bring to the program. While assessing the strengths of mentees during the screening process is a best practice for all mentoring programs, it is worth emphasizing this practice is an example of an inclusive mentoring practice. It is particularly important to discuss and build upon the strengths of mentees, given that youth with disabilities often experience stigma, including others having lower expectations of them. When first getting to know a new prospective mentee, ask strength-based questions such as:

- *"What activities do you enjoy?"*
- *"What is your favorite thing to do in your spare time?"*
- *"What is your favorite subject in school?"*
- *"What are your strengths?"*

You can find more of these questions and tips in the Partners for Youth with Disabilities resource, *Expanding Access and Inclusion for Youth with Disabilities: An Inclusion Guide for America's Youth Programs.*

▶ Offer accommodations around screening tasks and activities.

Many programs focus on inclusive practices once participants are actively in the program, but there are accommodations that can apply to the screening process, such as offering sign language interpreters or CART report (captions) during interviews for participants who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, and ensuring all forms are accessible to screen-readers for participants who have a visual impairment. If interviews are conducted in person, ensure that the building is accessible with easy access to transportation. It is also beneficial for interviews to be accompanied by visual supports for participants who process information better visually.

Resources to assist with inclusive materials include: Braille Works and the ADA Standards for Accessible Design.

Some individuals may need assistance completing their application form. The type of support needed

will depend on the range of formats used by your mentoring program. Prepare your staff to support volunteers, parents, and prospective mentees when they are completing their applications.

In addition, ensure that applicants understand that there can be flexibility around match requirements, if needed. For example, if face-to face interaction is difficult at times due to health needs or other barriers, work with mentors, mentees, and parents of mentees to create virtual meet-up options. This kind of flexibility can help reduce barriers to participation for individuals with disabilities.

▶ Ask questions or present scenarios about working with those with disabilities when screening mentors, so that the program can assess potentially harmful bias or prejudice.

While many programs save discussion of potential scenarios related to mentoring youth with disabilities (or other vulnerable youth populations) for formal mentor training, they can be embedded within screening interviews as well. Incorporating scenarios and follow-up questions can help staff to better understand the motives, beliefs, knowledge, and skills of prospective mentors. Scenarios are also a helpful way to assess a mentor's anticipated length of commitment and can help to screen out mentors who may be unsure of whether they can be consistent for the program's duration, something especially important for mentees with disabilities, who may have prior histories of adults not following through with them. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.2.3 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Emphasize language around program's anti-bullying and disability inclusion policies when mentors and youth sign any commitment agreements for their participation.

Because youth with disabilities are more likely to experience bullying than their nondisabled peers, program staff should be made aware of this issue, if they are not already sensitized to it. Staff should review the programs' anti-bullying and disability inclusion policies when participants fully commit to the program, ensuring that participants understand these policies including the consequences for violating them. For group events and special outings, community agreements and rules should be stated at the beginning of the event, and throughout using frequent reminders, so that everyone understands the program's behavioral expectations for participants. Implementing these practices will increase the likelihood that program events are safe and welcoming environments for all participants. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.2.6 and B.2.7 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Get youths' written assent to participating in the program experience.

For youth with disabilities, we recommend not relying solely on parent permission for their child's participation in the program. As previously noted, the term "youth" encompasses a wide age range, up to mid-twenties. Therefore, it is increasingly important to consider opportunities for youth to exercise independence and autonomy. When a youth demonstrates their own desire to participate in a mentoring program, it increases the likelihood of a successful match compared to them not being asked to provide active assent, such as a situation of youth participating due to parental pressure. In addition, since youth with disabilities do not always have opportunities to demonstrate self-determination and independence, the assenting process offers a chance to practice this critical skill. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.2.10, B.2.11, and B.2.12 in the core EEPM.)**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARTICIPANT TRAINING

Mentor training should include training topics that facilitate increased disability inclusion in your program, such as inclusive communication and strategies for addressing challenging behavior.

Training is also part of the overall screening process for mentors, allowing staff to observe mentor behaviors and skills that can inform both matching and match support practices. Training can also reveal whether a mentor has the willingness and skills to support a young person with a disability. As noted under the Screening recommendations, discussions about building a relationship with a person with a disability during training also reveals biases in a mentor or limitations in their ability to commit.

The best outcome of any training is that mentors gain the skills they need to support young people with disabilities while also learning how they can hold themselves accountable for actively pursuing additional education that can deepen those skills.

In terms of specific training practices, we recommend the following inclusive practices when delivering mentor (and mentee) training.

▶ Act on reasonable requests for accommodation during training.

Providing reasonable accommodations is important for all mentoring programs directly serving youth and mentors with disabilities. A participant may require instruction and collateral materials delivered in formats that best fit their needs. Designing training with accommodations means ensuring that presentations are accessible by screen-readers, are adapted in multiple languages (including Braille), can be delivered using both in-person and virtual formats, and have visual materials to accompany any content delivered orally. It helps to send all training material and supplements, including any slides, to participants prior to conducting the training. The accommodation budget built by an organization (see Section 1) should include the costs for any program workshops or any group events, in addition to individual training and support.

Breaks should be included as part of any training. It is the responsibility of the presenter to ensure that all the material can be covered within a reasonable amount of time. If the training workshop is held in-person, offer incentives such as refreshments, fidget toys, and other materials that can help someone process the information with minimal distractions or interruptions. Ensure there is adequate space for mobility and be transparent about the amenities, or lack thereof, available on the premises (elevators, escalators, etc.). This recommendation includes providing directions for travel and parking, as well as locating the presentation space inside the building.

▶ Provide mentors specific training topics that will support their continued and ongoing work with the disability community.

Providing relevant training topics may be enhanced by partnering with outside organizations that have a disability focus or expertise working with other marginalized youth groups, as a means of supplementing mentor training. Topics that should be included in training for mentors working with youth with disabilities include:

- Inclusive communication.
- Navigating challenging behaviors.
- Guidance for mentors on finding accessible activities and events.
- Understanding of the intersections of the queer and disability community.
- Challenging racial or cultural biases.
- Navigating disability-related challenges in sustaining the match.

(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.3.2 and Enhancement E.3.2 in the core EEPM.)

▶ Include some form of self-assessment on disability awareness and bias during mentor training.

Offering a tool for self-assessment helps increase self-awareness and assess further training needs for participants. PYD offers a free inclusion self-assessment for individuals at learn.pyd.org. It is designed to increase reflection and awareness of inclusive attitudes and behaviors. In addition, having a pre- and post-training evaluation helps program staff gauge the effectiveness and accessibility of the training.

▶ Offer disability-specific program orientation to parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities.

This recommendation allows families to assess their commitment to the program and address any lingering concerns about their child's participation. Programs should be clear that mentorship is not a substitution for physical or cognitive therapy, nor is a mentor a social worker or service provider of any kind.

Caregivers may have myriad questions around the boundaries and limits of the mentoring role, the experience of the staff in serving youth with disabilities, logistical challenges like meeting times and transportation, and a host of other nuances around serving their child where the program will need to clarify and provide information. Make sure that any pre-match training or orientation for caregivers has this type of information specific to the disability community. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Enhancement E.3.6 in the core EEPM.)**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MATCHING AND INITIATION OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Starting a match off on the right foot creates a solid foundation for ensuring the longevity and health of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Matching is often an emotional process for youth with disabilities, and it is the program's responsibility to determine the best match for each participant and that the process is a positive one. The following practices can help ensure quality matches for youth with disabilities.

▶ Honor the preferences of the mentees in the program (to the degree possible) during the matching process.

For mentees with disabilities, who often need to build experience with self-advocacy and self-determination skills, listening to their preferences is fundamental to achieving successful program outcomes. The first way a mentoring program can demonstrate that they respect and value mentee's preferences is to empower them by honoring their preferences during the matching process. Programs should solicit mentees' opinions about their preferences for a particular mentor and when these preferences are denied, discuss the reasons for the decision about mentor assignment with them directly. Even if a mentor wants to move forward with their mentee, the final decision should come from the mentee. A mentee may seek specific characteristics and qualities in a mentor that may not be in the volunteer pool, such as matching with a mentor with the same disability or matching with a mentor who shares their career goals. Those situations may require more mentor recruitment rather than forcing an unwanted match on the mentee.

Experience shows that matching based on shared values, interests, and outlook is more effective than matching solely based on a shared identity characteristic such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or, in in this case, disability. While shared identity can be a meaningful factor in a match, shared values are often what makes the match meaningful for both the mentor and the mentee.

It is important to note that parental or caregiver involvement is a vital part of any mentoring relationship, and programs can and should consider parents' preferences for a mentor, particularly based on the mentee's age and/or developmental level. However, parents' opinions may not align with the preferences of the mentee. In some families with children who have disabilities, and perhaps depending upon the disability itself, there may be heightened levels of parental involvement, in general. These highly involved parents may also want some control or say over who the mentor is, but their children may see this as an opportunity to establish an independent relationship with a caring and supportive adult. In fact, some mentees may prefer little to no parental involvement. Not surprisingly, too much parental involvement that undermines the quality of the mentoring relationship may lead to complications within a match, which may result in the match prematurely ending (see Relationship Closure and Program Exit) or being less effective in achieving the desired youth outcomes. Programs cannot interfere with or supersede a legal guardian's authority, but the goal of any mentoring program should be to empower youth to lead self-determined lives. As mentioned previously, pre-match training that involves caregivers and parents can help them better understand the goals, methods, and value of their child being in a mentoring relationship, as well as set expectations

about the roles they should play in supporting the match, and respecting the boundaries set by the mentee with respect to their relationship with their mentor. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.4.1 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Consider any transportation issues or other logistical factors involved with arranging meetings between mentors and mentees.

Every community will have unique transportation options and varying levels of accessibility for individuals with disabilities, making it extremely important for programs to consider these factors when making mentor-mentee matches. While transportation issues and geographic distance can be a challenge for any match, these issues can be devastating to participants with disabilities and may lead to prematurely ended relationships. Programs may want to study their service area, making note of transportation options for those with disabilities and how the physical environment itself might limit a match in meeting as frequently as they should.

The nature of participant disability also plays a factor, especially in community-based programs. How does the youth travel within their community and what will they need to interact with a mentor on outings? Programs will need to know in advance if the mentee needs visual aids or time reminders when out in their community. If they use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, what should a mentor know about them? Will the mentee need to bring a Personal Care Assistance (PCA) or an interpreter with them?

If site-based, programs should provide clear directions and accessible amenities on the premises. Any special field trips or group activities should also be within the established service area and take place in easy-to-travel to and easy-to-access locations. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.4.1 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Before making a match, ask mentees and mentors with disabilities what information about their disability they are comfortable sharing in advance with their prospective match partner.

It is important to remember when gathering disability information that some mentees may not identify as being disabled or having a disability (although their parents or caregivers may have disclosed this information to the program). This situation may also be true of mentors. Having different framing tools for gathering information on disability is key. This could mean asking "What would you like your mentor (mentee) to know to make you feel comfortable when together?"

Informing mentors about a mentees' specific needs is key, as is outlining how the mentee learns best and processes information. Mentoring programs will often write bios for their mentors and mentees to facilitate the "getting to know you" process; but a preferred option is to have participants write their own bios. These descriptions should focus on interests, goals, and fun facts, as well as relevant information about their disability, if the mentor and mentee are comfortable sharing. Caregivers may also support teaching a mentor about a mentee's disability by providing fact sheets, which are freely available on PYD's Learn platform. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Enhancements E.4.5 and E.4.6 in the core EEPM.)**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Having a consistent and robust system in place for supporting participants as they navigate their mentoring relationships not only ensures a higher-quality mentoring experience but also keeps all lines of communication open for addressing any concerns and challenges that may occur in the match.

In the context of youth with disabilities, match support also provides mentors and mentees with the skills and resources needed to thrive in their relationship.

Mentorship is not a linear process and complications are to be expected. There is no guarantee that any match, no matter how compatible on paper, will run smoothly — unexpected situations can arise and vary in their severity. It is the responsibility of a program to ensure that challenges are addressed and that participants continue to build skills that will provide the youth with the support they need. The following practices can help programs offer this ongoing support in ways that honor the principles of inclusiveness for participants with disabilities covered throughout this resource.

▶ Check in with the mentee and mentor on a consistent basis.

The Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™ recommends checking in at least twice a month in the first month and once a month thereafter— this practice not only ensures healthy communication between participants and staff, but illustrates to both that the program is responsive to their needs. This practice is especially important for mentees with disabilities who may be accustomed to having their needs overlooked and having service providers fail to honor their commitments. Also, mentors may need ongoing coaching and feedback to help build their relationship and foster positive outcomes in their mentees, especially when faced with challenges related to one or more match members having disabilities. Thus, while the timing and frequency of these check-ins is not changed from the core EEPM in this recommendation, we are strongly emphasizing its importance here for this population.

Having a set list of questions to ask during these check-ins helps, but it should be personalized to the individuals involved, especially when asking about any disability-related successes or struggles. Staff will want to get a clear picture of the progress of the match: What activities have they done together? How often do they communicate? Are there any questions or concerns? In addition, the match support staff member should share access to program resources, upcoming events, ongoing trainings and workshops, and other program updates. These interactions should be well documented in case notes, so that programs can track and evaluate the overall progress of a match over time, as well as identify common challenges across matches that may need to be addressed holistically in the program. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.5.1, B.5.2, B.5.3, B.5.7, and B.5.8 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Honor accommodation requests and participant needs when conducting match check-ins and offering match support.

Check-ins can be initiated through email, text, or a phone call based on the comfort and needs of the individuals. When it comes to major anniversaries or milestones for a match, such as the three- or six-month mark, you may wish to host the participants

in-person or on a video call. Most mentoring programs have a virtual logging system in place for mentors to submit their match activities. If there is an online match activity form, ensure there are accessible ways disabled participants can convey information if doing so online is burdensome.

Programs will also want to ensure that the tools made available to support matches and match activities include visual resources to aid in information processing. Make sure these tools are accessible, such as offering social stories on various outing scenarios, visual guides for nonverbal mentees, and recorded information (captioned) that can be sent to matches. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.5.9 and B.5.10 and Enhancement E.5.1 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Share information about upcoming program activities, especially group outings and special field trips, well in advance.

While many programs are structured around one-to-one meetings, most offer supplemental group activities and special events that allow mentors and youth to interact with other pairs, and these events may even involve parents and caregivers. Programs should ensure that all activities are hosted in an accessible location and should share the information about the amenities and accessibility features offered during these events. Try not to schedule last-minute changes to group events or outings (to the degree possible). Last-minute shifts in plans can create challenges for participants with disabilities who may need to schedule transportation in advance. If something should change, allow a window of time for rescheduling and readjusting. Sending email or text reminders before an event can help individuals to plan their transportation to the event in advance. Programs should monitor forecast updates as they become available and communicate any weather-based cancellations in advance, if possible. Setting up automated text reminders may help. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Enhancements E.5.2 and E.5.3 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Facilitate ongoing learning activities, training, and referrals that support disabled mentors and mentees in their personal and professional lives.

Youth and mentors with disabilities benefit considerably from training that not only strengthens their match, but also teaches skills that can be applicable to other areas of their life outside of the program. Topics for such post-match trainings may include:

- Anti-bullying training.
- Resume/cover letter workshops.
- Mock job/college interviews.
- Stress management and other wellness tips.
- Goal setting and support skills.
- Independent living skills and transitions from care.

The list of potential topics is endless, so listen to your mentees and mentors to discover what they would find valuable to learn. Another option is to invite mentors and mentees to create workshops on topics of their choosing. The latter activity empowers participants, allows them to highlight and build their presentation skills, and offers them an opportunity to support their peers in their program. Provide community rules for participants before any workshop, and state how the program will respond to disruptions and harmful behavior that may arise in any participant-led trainings. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmark B.5.11 in the core EEPM.)**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELATIONSHIP CLOSURE AND PROGRAM EXIT

Match closure is a sensitive and emotional process and may be especially so for mentees with disabilities.

If rushed or done improperly, closure can negatively affect how mentors and mentees approach future relationships. Program support is critical in making sure match closure is done thoughtfully and with consideration to the feelings of everyone involved.

A match should close based on mutual understanding of the situation by the mentor and mentee. Many premature closures happen because of miscommunication; parental involvement can also be an instigating factor in closure, as caregivers often expect more out of the program and mentor. Before closing a match, the program should determine why exactly the relationship has struggled. If disability has played a role in that struggle, the situation may require extra attention and intentional effort to support the young person and their perceptions of the end of their match.

Policies for closing a match should be clearly stated during the onboarding process. As noted in the core EEPM, all mentoring programs should have a framework in place for handling both anticipated and unanticipated closures, and the various options and decision points around closure should be communicated to mentees, parents and caregivers, and mentors both during onboarding and at other points as the match progresses. It's never too early to communicate about closure and set participant expectations on how it is handled.

These practices can help ensure that youth with disabilities, and their mentors, are cared for during this time of transition:

▶ Prepare mentors and mentees for the closure experience with as much lead time as possible.

Participants with disabilities may need additional time to process emotions and find other sources of support as the mentoring experience ends. Some mentoring programs begin this process months before known closure points to ensure there is sufficient processing time. Many programs have a period of match renewal, usually at the end of a school or calendar year that marked their initial program commitment. Even if mentors or youth are unsure if they can commit to another year as this renewal time approaches, it is important to still lay out the options and the steps to be taken as the potential end of the match approaches. The match should be made aware that it is their responsibility to communicate about closure with one another, based on what works best for each party (preferably not using a parent or the program staff as a proxy). Staff should be available to console a mentee (or even their caregivers or the mentor) who may feel overwhelmed by the loss. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.6.7 and B.6.8 and Enhancement E.6.1 in the core EEPM.)**

▶ Ensure the closure experience offers opportunities for celebration, reflection, and referral.

Formal closure meetings between the mentor and youth can help frame the end of the match in a positive light. It will also ensure that all parties understand the reasons for closure and can reflect on the successes and uniqueness of their match. Having a list of guiding questions can help contextualize the meeting and allow feelings or concerns to be heard and processed.

It is important to note that while the relationship via the program may have closed formally, in many situations the relationship can (and ideally should) continue between mentor and mentee and their family. For matches that end under positive circumstances (and not because of problems or negative experiences), these relationships can continue to thrive outside the structures of the program. In these cases, the staff should make sure that all participants understand the program's policies around ongoing contact between match members, and encourage match members to be specific about what each should expect from one another in terms of their ongoing communications and boundaries now that the program is no longer there to support them.

Finally, because mentees with disabilities may be particularly sensitive to negative feelings as a supportive relationship closes, programs should validate their feelings and, if allowed, encourage mentees to continue participating in the program. **(Note: This practice builds on the general guidance noted in Benchmarks B.6.7, B.6.8, and B.6.9 and Enhancement E.6.2 in the core EEPM.)**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

There are several evaluation practices that mentoring programs can utilize to ensure that mentees with disabilities are able to contribute fully to program evaluation activities.

As with many of the recommendations in this resource, these practices should facilitate better engagement in evaluation activities for all program participants, but they will certainly make sure that the voices of mentees and mentors with disabilities are represented in evaluation findings. Please see the full *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™* for additional practices that foster quality program evaluation.

▶ Provide accommodations for those with disabilities as needed during data collection activities.

Data collection activities should be conducted similarly across all the participants in the program, so that everyone is reporting their information through the same process, avoiding inconsistencies that emerge when there is variability in how responses are gathered (for example, having some youth fill out an end-of-year survey in front of staff while others take it home and get help from caregivers). That consistency in data collection is a standard best practice. However, it is important to allow for accommodations for participants with disabilities when they are completing evaluation-related surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other data collection tasks. Some examples are providing extra time to complete surveys; offering braille, online, or audio-only versions of evaluation instruments; and allowing parents and caregivers help their youth complete responses on surveys or write about their mentoring experience.

Ensuring that evaluation instruments are accessible in design and written in plain, developmentally appropriate language will also help all mentees, but especially those with disabilities, to understand the questions they are being asked and provide their most accurate responses.

▶ Emphasize qualitative methods.

While many mentoring programs track youth outcomes using numbers-driven quantitative methods, mentees with disabilities may especially benefit from qualitative methods that emphasize mentees expressing their voice in telling their story about their mentoring experience and the value they feel it has brought to their lives. It may be easier for youth with disabilities to express themselves when they respond to open-ended questions or live interview questions asked either in individual interviews or focus groups, especially if they have detailed information to share about how their mentor and their program supported them, or ways the mentoring experience could be improved. These methods can also be a source of personal and moving quotes that can illustrate the impact of the program, particularly on hard-to-quantify outcomes, such as perceptions of self-determination or improved self-esteem. Not only can qualitative methods raise up the voices of mentees with disabilities, but they can also tell a more detailed and nuanced story about the mentoring experience, providing memorable examples that illuminate any numbers-based quantitative findings.

▶ Measure relationship quality with an inclusivity lens.

Collecting assessments at predefined intervals of the quality of mentoring relationships, both from the mentee's and mentor's perspective, is one of the standard practices recommended in the EEPM. There are a number of validated and widely used

tools available to mentoring programs that can support this important aspect of tracking program quality. Several tools are recommended in the National Mentoring Resource Center's Measurement Guidance Toolkit. While these tools ask about important features of strong relationship quality, such as feelings of trust or perceptions of caring about each other, supplemental questions can be used to cover topics that are relevant to mentoring relationships involving mentees with disabilities. For example, questionnaires often ask about the degree of instrumental support being provided to the mentee by a mentor, in other words, the degree to which mentors provide practical support to mentees to address problems or accomplish tasks. Questions can also explore the degree to which mentors understand and accept the mentees they are mentoring and the mentor's ability to work effectively with parents and caregivers.

Unfortunately, no questionnaires were located that asked explicit questions about how responsive mentors are to a mentee's disabilities or need for accommodations, or how much the mentor supports the mentee's autonomy or self-determination. Programs can always add questions to their surveys that explore these constructs. Periodically assessing mentoring relationships along these quality dimensions can help to monitor and support mentors to better ensure that mentees with disabilities are getting their needs met in the program and can identify situations where a disability may be a barrier within a mentoring relationship.

▶ Incorporate the perspectives of parents, caregivers, teachers, mentors, and other informants, if applicable.

This recommendation builds upon a practice suggested in the EEPM that has special relevance for evaluating programs serving mentees with disabilities, because mentees may find it challenging to fully articulate the impact that the mentoring relationship has had on them. All mentees can find responding to this question challenging, as they often aren't aware of how a mentor has influenced them, and can struggle with the self-reflection needed to sense and verbalize changes in one's self. Mentees with cognitive or physical disabilities can find this type of reporting about the impact of a relationship especially difficult. However, the adults around them can often see signs of progress and change much more objectively, and can be a great source of additional information about how the mentoring experience has facilitated growth and achievement in mentees. Teachers, coaches, counselors, and others who work with mentees may provide additional testimony as to the impact of mentoring. Mentors themselves, as well as parents/caregivers, can also see growth and benefits that the mentees themselves overlook. Gathering these additional perspectives during evaluation activities can tell a more complete story for mentees with disabilities, as well as for all mentees in the program irrespective of their disability status.

SECTION TWO REFERENCES

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