



2018 Tower Foundation Family Survey

Learning Disabilities Youth Results

Like so many families, the Tower family has been affected by intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and substance use disorders. To learn how these issues affect the community, and help guide community efforts to address them, the Tower Foundation asked residents to respond to a survey in fall 2017. An additional survey targeted families of youth with learning disabilities. Youth with learning disabilities were also asked to share their experiences. Seventeen youth from the three geographic communities served by the Tower Foundation (Essex County and Barnstable, Dukes, and Nantucket Counties in Massachusetts and Erie and Niagara Counties in New York) responded to the survey.

The Tower Foundation defines **learning disabilities** as lifelong conditions that interfere with the ability to learn. They are neurological disorders that affect the ability of the brain to process, store, and respond to information.

School experiences

Of the 17 youths who completed the survey, four were in high school, nine were in college, and four had completed high school but were not enrolled in further education. All agreed that they had developed specific ways to help them succeed with their learning disabilities and 89% said they understood how they best learn information and ideas. All respondents said they received help in school for their learning disabilities and 82% said they were involved with developing and education plan. However, fewer students agreed they were comfortable asking for support in school to help with their learning disabilities (67%) or felt the school had enough resources for students with learning disabilities (54%). Of the 13 students who had completed high school, 92% tried to get help for their learning disabilities since leaving high school (Figure 1).

1. School experiences as a youth with learning disabilities

	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
You have developed specific ways to help you succeed with your learning disabilities.	16	13%	88%	0%	0%
You understand how you best learn information and ideas.	17	12%	77%	12%	0%
You received the help you needed in school for your learning difficulties.	16	19%	81%	0%	0%

1. School experiences as a youth with learning disabilities (continued)

	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In general, your school has enough resources to help students with learning disabilities.	15	7%	47%	40%	7%
You helped develop your educational plan, such as an IEP or individual education plan, 504 plan, or person centered plan. ¹	16	13%	69%	13%	6%
You were comfortable asking for support in school to help with your learning disabilities. ¹	15	20%	47%	20%	13%
[For youth not in school or in college] You have tried to get help for learning disabilities after high school	12	42%	50%	8%	0%

¹One person responded, "Don't know" to each of these questions.

Note: Due to rounding, row totals may not equal 100%.

Work experience

Of the responding youths, six currently have a full or part time job, five previously had a full or part time job, and five had never had a job. They were more comfortable talking to their coworkers about needs related to their disability (64% agree) than their supervisors (56% agree). Fifty percent said they get enough support at work for their learning disabilities. Of the seven youths who responded to the last work experience question, 43% agreed employers in the community provide enough support for employees with learning disabilities (Figure 2).

2. Work experiences as a youth with learning disabilities

	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
You are comfortable talking to your supervisor about your needs related to your learning disability. ¹	9	0%	56%	33%	11%
You are comfortable talking to your co-workers about your needs related to your learning disability.	11	9%	55%	27%	9%
You, personally, get enough support at work for your learning disabilities. ¹	10	20%	30%	40%	10%
In general, employers in your community provide enough support or accommodation for employees with learning disabilities. ²	7	14%	29%	29%	29%

¹One person responded, "Don't know" to each of these questions.

²Four people responded, "Don't know" to this question.

Note: Due to rounding, row totals may not equal 100%.

Youths' words

To better understand the experiences of youth with learning disabilities, survey participants were asked to share their thoughts about three open-ended questions. The first question explored what youth like about their community's support of young people with learning disabilities. Some responses mentioned opportunities such as places to work and social or recreation activities. Others talked about the willingness the schools and others have to offer accommodations. They also said compassion and support are things they like (Figure 3)

Youths expressed a variety of supports they would like to help them with their learning disabilities. They wished for more professionals to help young people as well as more awareness and proper identification of disabilities. Youths also asked for more opportunities to build skills and work in different settings, some with more challenging work. At a community level, they wished for more equal and respectable treatment of people with learning disabilities (Figure 4).

Prevailing themes youths expressed about their experiences with learning disabilities were their appreciation of support and their determination to do well. They acknowledged that it sometimes takes longer to accomplish something, but they are successful when they put in the effort. Another theme was the feelings of loneliness. A few youths said they would like more opportunities to interact with others in social settings (Figure 5).

3. Youth perspective about what they like about their community's support for young people with learning disabilities

Please finish this sentence: When I think about my community's support services for young people with learning disabilities, I like . . .

That Market Basket hires disabled kids.

I like the art they have (what kind of art) They have classes that have a lot of community services like going to the gym, picking up trash, senior care centers.

I like this program that is a Boy's and Girl's club which is an agency because it makes me feel happy and I have friends there too. I also like Around the Work WOW, and that program is with Aspire. Education and outdoor resources that helps me be able to get a job and work with a job coach. I also like SABAH and overnight because I feel inspired by the things they provide.

Social activities (more?) to interact with my friends and just be with them with supervision.

I'm not sure. I haven't had many experiences with that. For severe cases, they have sports teams for them. A couple other things for people who can't keep up with the flow.

I like the extra time that my school gives me on tests. My school has a testing center specifically for people with disabilities and accommodates for those who has those disabilities.

The lack of resistance in providing support (how so) it's like when my family presented the issue at school, the school didn't throw too many barriers (what kind) like contesting how much support they needed to give.

More communication.

The way they communicate with me. They care about how I feel and what I need indeed.

That they are there, when they are able to help someone (prob) I don't really have anything I like about it.

To say I got enough support and help from them. I really appreciate their effort toward me.

Feel sad that it's so hard to get a job I'm passionate about.

I don't know.

4. Youth perspective about what they wish for to support young people with learning disabilities

Please finish this sentence: When I think about my community's support services for young people with learning disabilities, I wish . . .

I could get more chance to practice my skills.

It had more interesting jobs and not just bagging groceries day after day.

More businesses would hire disabled kids.

There were more positions for people with autism to gain work experience.

More programs (what kind) I don't know.

My community could have more professionals to help us.

That people would be able to get support even if their families weren't really pushing forward for it.

There was better transportation (what about it?) like it being on time instead of me waiting for an hour and to be able to schedule transportation at the last minute instead of 3 days in advance.

I like to be a little more private. Sometimes it is so obvious--like the teachers will say in front of everybody, "Now you have to sit in front of the class." this was in middle school. (right now) I am doing what I am supposed [to do] in school so there hasn't been anything else with my plan. (what about the community) I haven't thought about it.

I wish I would be more open minded to meet more new friends. I wish I had more things to do with my friends. (what kind of things) I would like to do more acting with my friends. I want to go out and be like the kids my age. I just want to be a typical young adult that goes out, but it's difficult.

I wish there were early testing for the disabilities. (say more) For things like dyslexia because I was tested early but they never told me. They tested me for something else. I realized after high school which was after taking the ACT and SAT. I think if I knew before, it would have helped during. Even during high school with tests. I think if people were to know earlier, it would help them through high school. I wish getting accommodations wasn't so expensive and time consuming.

It was brought more to the public to help young people with learning disabilities because they might need more time to learn the job but will learn it.

They would help people with disabilities and treat them equal (prob) don't treat them like they are stupid or an idiot because of the disability that they have. Or you don't treat them the same as others without a disability.

Better environment.

I don't wish upon any more or any less. They accommodate already.

5. Additional youth perspective about their experience with learning disabilities

Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a young person with a learning disability?

Awesome working.

Everyone has the ability and the right to learn things, even people like me with a learning disability. We can go to college like others. The only thing we need to do is never stop trying and never give up.

There are definitely boundaries and I find way to get over them and prove to people I can accomplish anything I put my mind to.

I like it because I can be more responsible and I would like job training so I can be more responsible and being nicer. Everything's seems fine.

Takes time to figure out how to study.

I would like to say I would get along with my learning disability and try my best to be a better person. Thank you for caring about people like me.

My mom is my best advocate. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have the opportunity I have today.

I just don't want to be lonely, I just want to be who I want to be, I just want friends. I struggle because I have Down's Syndrome too. I don't want people to judge my appearance, but I want them to see me for me on the inside.

It is hard to find social opportunities where I am welcome and since I don't drive, it's hard to get to most things I want to do.

I don't think so or No (4)

Conclusions

The Tower Foundation conducted this survey because of its commitment to address issues in the communities it serves related to learning disabilities. Foundation staff and Trustees will look at these youth results in connection with results from families and community-level data to help community organizations explore what they can do to better support families and youth experiencing learning disabilities. The following questions can help guide future discussions and decisions:

- What could schools do to provide additional supports for students with learning disabilities to succeed academically and increase their comfort level in asking for support?
- How might communities expand work opportunities and improve work environments for young people with learning disabilities?
- How might communities provide more social opportunities for young people with learning disabilities to help build connections and decrease loneliness?

Methods and caveats

This survey was targeted to youth, 26 or younger, who have a learning disability. Two primary methods were used to invite youth to participate. Any youth who completed the survey received a \$20 gift card.

- When the Tower Foundation mailed community surveys to 4,000 random addresses in each community in fall 2017, the mailing included information for residents to register for an additional family survey specific to learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. When Wilder staff completed their phone survey with those who registered, they asked for names of youth who might be interested in completing the youth survey. The youth were contacted to complete the youth survey.
- Tower Foundation and Wilder Research staff designed outreach and recruitment materials that local organizations and schools could share with families and youth to increase participation. Facebook promoted posts were also used. Families and youth were directed to a website to complete the survey online or request a phone interview.

The outreach methods were not as successful as we had hoped. Future data collection efforts will consider alternative options for reaching this population. Because of the low number of respondents, the results may not be representative of the entire population of youth with learning disabilities.

