



2020 Tower Foundation Family Survey

Learning Disabilities Youth Results Essex County

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 local efforts to address them, the Tower Foundation asked community residents to respond to a survey in fall 2019. To dig deeper into the experiences of families of youth with learning disabilities, the Foundation conducted an additional survey of families in 2020. Twenty-nine youths, age 14 through 26, from Essex County in Massachusetts responded to the survey about their experiences with learning disabilities.

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 29 youths who completed the survey, 24% were in high school, 3% were in trade school, 41% were in college, and 31% were not currently in school. Of those who were no longer in high school, 95% had obtained their diploma or GED. Most respondents agreed that they developed specific ways to help them succeed with their learning disabilities (89%), they understood how they best learn information and ideas (89%), and they received help in school for their learning disabilities (78%). In general, 72% percent felt their school had enough resources for students with learning disabilities, and 85% said that they were specifically involved with developing an education plan. Eighty-two percent of students agreed that they were comfortable asking for support in school to help with their learning disabilities (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.	26	31%	58%	12%	0%
You understand how you best learn information and ideas.	28	25%	64%	11%	0%
You received the help you needed in school for your learning difficulties.	27	37%	41%	22%	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. ^a	25	36%	36%	24%	4%
You helped develop your educational plan, such as an IEP or individual education plan, 504 plan, or person centered plan.	28	21%	64%	14%	0%
You were comfortable asking for support in school to help with your learning disabilities.	27	26%	56%	19%	0%

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

^aOne person responded with "Don't know" to this question.

Work experience

Of the responding youths, 52% currently have a full- or part-time job, 22% previously had a full- or part-time job, and 26% had never had a job. Among the individuals with work experience, a slightly greater proportion were more comfortable talking to their supervisors about needs related to their disability (79% agree) than they were to their co-workers (74% agree). Seventy-two percent said that they get enough support at work for their learning disabilities, while fewer (58%) agreed that employers in the community provide enough support for employees with learning disabilities, in general (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. ^a	19	26%	53%	21%	0%
You are comfortable talking to your co-workers about your needs related to your learning disability. ^a	19	32%	42%	26%	0%
You, personally, get enough support at work for your learning disabilities. ^b	18	33%	39%	28%	0%
In general, employers in your community provide enough support or accommodation for employees with learning disabilities. ^a	19	37%	21%	42%	0%

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

^aOne person responded with "Don't know" to this question.

^bTwo people responded with "Don't know" to this question.

Youth voices

To better understand the experiences of youth with learning disabilities, survey participants were asked to share their thoughts through three open-ended questions. The first question explored what these youths like about their community's support of young people with learning disabilities. The most common themes involved specific programs or services (N=5), including specific educational supports and opportunities for reaching their goals, including employment goals (N=2). Two respondents shared that they appreciate that they do not feel different from their peers.

That there are some opportunities to go out and work.

How our local library is supportive of my needs.

The young adult club in our town.

The fact that I am not made to feel different and nobody judges me.

Youths expressed a variety of supports they would like to help them with their learning disabilities. The most common theme was a desire for more understanding, acceptance, and kindness in the community (N=4). In addition, respondents wished for more resources, supports, and opportunities (N=3), including more job training and opportunities (N=3) and more tailored supports to meet individuals' needs (N=2).

More people were understanding and there were more resources to help people with disabilities.

There was more support for different learning styles.

I wish they had programs that would help me get a job for living. Not many programs give me a job so I can earn money.

Those who are severely disabled should be separated from lightly disabled persons.

When asked about their experiences with learning disabilities, respondents described both challenges (N=2) and strengths (N=2) associated with their disabilities.

Okay. It effects attention and ability to focus but can cause high optimism and creativity. Forgetfulness is common in [diagnosis] and will require medication or caffeine to focus on details.

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 build awareness of learning differences to help better support and accept individuals with learning disabilities?

Methods

This survey was targeted to youth, age 14 through 26, who have a learning disability. Three 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 6,000 random addresses in Essex County in fall 2019, the mailing included information for residents to complete an additional family survey specific to learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities.
- Youths who participated in the youth survey in 2018 were sent the results from that survey and invited to participate again in 2020.
- Tower Foundation and Wilder Research staff designed outreach and recruitment materials for local organizations and schools to share with families to increase participation.

