



2020 Tower Foundation Family Survey

Learning Disabilities Youth Results Erie and Niagara Counties

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. Fifty-six youths, age 14 through 26, from Erie and Niagara counties in New York State 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 56 youths who completed the survey, 41% were in high school, 9% were in trade school, 7% were in college, and 43% were not currently in school. Of those who were no longer in high school, 79% had obtained their diploma or GED. Most respondents agreed that they developed specific ways to help them succeed with their learning disabilities (87%), they understood how they best learn information and ideas (73%), and they received help in school for their learning disabilities (84%). Similarly, over three-quarters of students agreed that they were comfortable asking for support in school to help with their learning disabilities (76%) and that they were involved with developing an education plan (77%). Seventy percent felt the school had enough resources for students with learning disabilities in general (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.	53	21%	66%	11%	2%
You understand how you best learn information and ideas.	56	14%	59%	21%	5%
You received the help you needed in school for your learning difficulties.	54	32%	52%	17%	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	50	26%	44%	20%	10%
You helped develop your educational plan, such as an IEP or individual education plan, 504 plan, or person centered plan. ^b	52	21%	56%	19%	4%
You were comfortable asking for support in school to help with your learning disabilities.	54	24%	52%	22%	2%

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

^a Three people responded with “Don’t know” to this question.

^b Four people reported they did not have a plan.

Work experience

Of the responding youths, 28% currently have a full- or part-time job, 15% previously had a full- or part-time job, and 57% had never had a job. Among the individuals with work experience, a greater proportion were more comfortable talking to their supervisors about needs related to their disability (71% agree) than they were to their co-workers (53% agree). About two-thirds (65%) said that they get enough support at work for their learning disabilities, while slightly 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	21	19%	52%	19%	10%
You are comfortable talking to your co-workers about your needs related to your learning disability.	23	9%	44%	39%	9%
You, personally, get enough support at work for your learning disabilities. ^a	20	5%	60%	25%	10%
In general, employers in your community provide enough support or accommodation for employees with learning disabilities. ^b	19	16%	42%	37%	5%

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

^a Two people responded with “Don’t know” to each of these questions.

^b Three 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) and general help and support available for people with disabilities (N=5). In addition, four individuals appreciated opportunities to volunteer and help others.

That the school district is a big help.

How much people are willing to help.

To think we the people are making our best efforts to help those in need.

Youths expressed a variety of supports they would like to help them with their learning disabilities. They wished for more resources, supports, and opportunities (N=6), including greater availability of services (N=4) and more options available after leaving high school (N=4). At the community level, youths also wished for more understanding, acceptance, and kindness in the community (N=5), including more awareness and knowledge about disabilities (N=4).

Information about the services were readily available and advertised so I'd know where to get the information... I'm told there are counselors that can help me but I have not used them. I know there are not enough people out there to help.

Once you are out of school, it's harder to get support.

Services and help were not as hard to find.

I would let people understand more instead of just staring at me. I think people need to learn more about my disability.

[The community] would take time and help them instead of seeing them as dumb, or slow.

When asked about their experiences with learning disabilities, the most prevailing theme was that it is difficult and frustrating (N=9). Youths also shared that they have worked really hard (N=3) and others have helped them grow (N=4), but that they wished their peers would be more understanding (N=3).

It was very hard when I was younger, but with the support I had, it made it easier to survive out of school on my own.

My experience has been difficult, but I have worked hard to improve every day. I also have many people around me who have helped me.

It may take me longer to complete a task, but in the end when it's all done it's the best feeling in the world.

I wish other kids were nicer about it.

It's not easy being different and having difficulty learning. I wish schools had better ways to give us what we need and that other students didn't treat us poorly.

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 Erie and Niagara Counties 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.

