



This document will help you develop and implement supports for working with youth with disabilities. It includes strategies to achieve inclusion in your program. The goal is for everyone to feel safe and supported so they can successfully participate in programming.

Notes on Key Legislation

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability¹ as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a history of such an impairment, or is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

<i>Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)</i>	<i>Rehabilitation Act of 1973</i>
Guarantees that individuals with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate and benefit from public entities and places of public accommodation.	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. The needs of students with disabilities must be met at the same level as those without disabilities.
<i>Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '04)</i>	<i>Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)</i>
If participation in the program is considered important to a student's development it may be written in their IEP, of Individual Education Plan, which ensures they have equal opportunities to participate in school-sponsored extracurricular activities.	States must provide all children with significant opportunities to receive a fair, equitable and high-quality education and to close achievement gaps.

Youth with Disabilities at a Glance

There are various disability types.

- Physical disabilities affect a person's mobility, capacity, dexterity, and stamina which may impact their ability to move. Examples include Cerebral Palsy, spinal cord injury, or Multiple Sclerosis.
- Cognitive disabilities are conditions that create greater difficulty for individuals to perform mental tasks. Examples include learning disabilities and ADHD.
- Sensory disabilities are neurological disorders that affect the brain to process sensory information like sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell normally. Autism Spectrum Disorder, blindness and low vision, sensory processing, and hearing loss are all types of sensory disabilities.
- Emotional/behavioral ²disabilities are conditions with one or more characteristics over a long period of time and to the degree that adversely impact daily

¹ <https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/>

² <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/programs-services/special-education/specific-disabilities/emotional-disability>

performance. Characteristics include an inability to learn that can't be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships; inappropriate types of behavior or feelings; pervasiveness of unhappiness or depression; or tendency to develop physical symptoms.

Create an Inclusive Environment

It is important to understand some fundamental building blocks for implementation of an inclusive program. The goal is to create a supportive environment.

- **Access.** Remove any physical barriers and obstacles that may keep youth with disabilities from attending. Create appropriate environments such as a quiet space for those who may become overstimulated or someplace for those who have sensory sensitivities. Make sure the space is welcoming to everyone.
Example: Rearrange furniture to ensure there is adequate space for youth to walk through with no obstacles.
- **Participation.** Use strategies during sessions to promote engagement and a sense of belonging for everyone. Create opportunities to build relationships for all participants.
Example: Conduct small group activities that allow participants to contribute and include everyone in social interactions.
- **Supports.** Provide program staff development and other individualized supports.
Example: Connect with the [Office for People with Disabilities](#) to get resources on supporting youth with disabilities. A national resource is the SIP (Supporting Inclusive Practices) recorded webinars at [Archived Virtual Events - Supporting Inclusive Practices \(sipinclusion.org\)](#)
- **Communication.** Use various forms of communication for youth with disabilities.
Example: Use larger font or assistive technology to help with communication.

One approach to consider using when considering how to support youth in the program may be Universal Design for Learning or UDL. Cast defines UDL as a "framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn."³ The UDL guidelines, which were updated in July 2024, include 3 components:

- **Engagement.** Motivate youth by providing various ways for them to engage with the program. During your program, this may look like giving youth choices in how they would like to participate or offering varying levels of challenges.
- **Representation.** Ensure that information is accessible to all youth by presenting content in various formats. An example would be to use text, audio, video, or other interactive media as a way to deliver information to youth in your program.
- **Action & Expression.** Allow youth to demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of ways. An example is if your program is having youth do a culminating project,

³ <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>



allowing them to complete it by either submitting a written document, giving a presentation, or using technology in other ways.