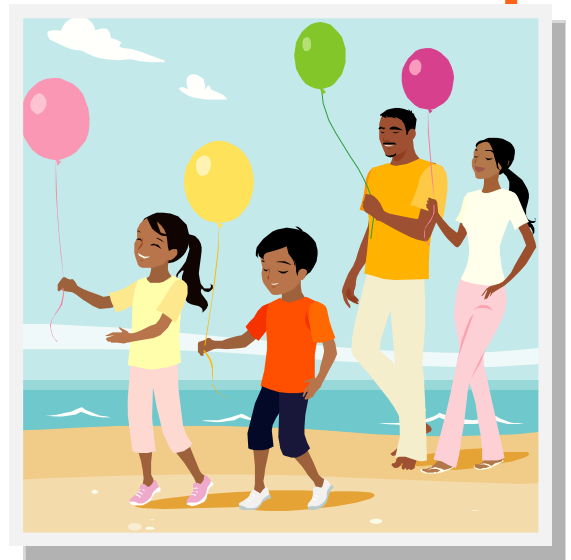


Ways Parents and Families can Support Leadership!

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It takes support from multiple people to foster leadership, and families are no exception! You play an important role in providing leadership opportunities for your son or daughter. Sometimes it is easy to overlook the importance of leadership in our children, particularly if your son or daughter has a significant disability. Leadership qualities can help in all facets of life. It's great to have a leadership role in a high school club, but what you learn from that position can be so helpful later on. Children can learn responsibility, organization, communication skills, social skills, cooperation, negotiation, and so many other skills. They can use these skills within job interviews, higher education, personal relationships, and as a community member. To become leaders, we first must become *participants*. The trick is to move past participation into leading! Once your son or daughter becomes involved in a school or community group, opportunities for leadership will present themselves; your encouragement and use of the following strategies can help them reach out and take on leadership roles in the school and community.



Find out about the different kinds of extra-curricular activities your son or daughter's school provides (school clubs, service learning projects, etc.). Ask your son or daughter about his or her interests, and if any of these activities or clubs might meet those interests!

Assessing opportunities is key. Support your son or daughter to participate in extra-curricular activities. Encourage your student to get involved! You know what interests your son or daughter, and you can help find groups or activities that your child will enjoy.

If your son or daughter uses an augmentative or alternative communication (AAC) system, make sure that the device includes the vocabulary your son or daughter will need to participate in that activity. Your son or daughter's teacher or speech-language therapist can help to make sure that the necessary vocabulary your child will need is already in his or her system for that activity.

Provide your son or daughter with transportation or arrange transportation so your child can participate in after-school or weekend activities. Are there other students whom your son or daughter knows who are interested in the same activity? Could you share transportation with other families?

Listen to your son or daughter. If your son or daughter needs help or something is going wrong at school, he or she *needs* to be able to rely on you. A sense of security is necessary for students to develop a firm foundation for future leadership!

Help your son or daughter learn, understand, and practice *self-advocacy*. Self-advocacy is the ability to communicate or convey your needs, wants, and rights to others. A good way to do this is supporting him or her to communicate with healthcare providers, like doctors or dentists. When you make an appointment, allow your son or daughter to explain his or her concerns to the health care practitioner. This helps students feel responsible for their own care and understand the importance of taking action to get when is needed. And this is an important leadership skill that they will need as adults!

Implement weekly chores and scheduled homework time, and reinforce your son or daughter for starting those chores or homework without you saying it! Doing things without having to be told is a form of self-leadership.

Does your family belong to a church, synagogue, or other faith community? Are there opportunities for leadership for your son or daughter in church activities, such as youth groups, being a server at worship, or assisting with the community service that your faith community does?

Have high expectations of your son or daughter! Do not let a disability limit what you believe your son or daughter can do. High expectations will also prepare your son or daughter for expectations at school or at a job. Research has shown that parents' expectations really make a difference in terms of post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2012).

All students need space to grow and learn from their own experiences and mistakes. Of course, we always want to protect our children from doing something really harmful, but often, in the little things, it is by making mistakes – and correcting them – that we all learn.

Encourage your son or daughter to persevere through problems. All students may need support to face certain challenges; provide this support while allowing your son or daughter to come to a solution on his or her own. And if it is a reasonable solution, support your son or daughter to carry it out.

Make it known every day that your son or daughter is unique and capable of many things! If such an outlook is created in the home, your son or daughter will carry that positive outlook through life.

Make sure your child is present at his or her own IEP meeting. And encourage your child to share his or her own strengths, needs, goals, and dreams for the future.

Children and youth develop leadership qualities through their relationships with peers. Ask your school about connecting your child to a peer support network to foster these types of important relationships.



Activity 1: Sit down with your son or daughter and make a list of his or her top five favorite things. These could be things like a sport your son or daughter likes to play or watch, a movie, a book or series of books, art he or she enjoys making, a type of music, an interest in cars or a certain animal, really anything! When you have come up with five, search online for groups or clubs in the community that also have an interest in that specific topic. Check with your child's teacher about any clubs *at school* that might match his or her interests.

For example, look for things like an animal shelter your son or daughter can visit and volunteer at, a Harry Potter or Star Wars fan club, a gymnastics or swim team he or she can participate in, or any sort of organization that has the same interest as your son or daughter, and that include other students of the same age as your son or daughter.

Facebook may be helpful when searching for local groups. Students should be supervised when searching on Facebook for groups. Then make contact with the group and ask about the next meeting or the enrollment process. Use this process to get your son or daughter involved in the community in a way that is interesting for him or her. Students can use this same process when looking for involvement opportunities at school.

Activity 2: When your son or daughter becomes involved with a new group, keep your eyes and ears open for leadership opportunities within the group. It can be an open officer position, someone to organize an event, someone to take roll at meetings, anything that requires a little more than simply showing up. Encourage your son or daughter to apply for the position or do whatever is necessary to take on a leadership role in the group. Offer help, if your son or daughter seems overwhelmed by the new responsibility, or is fearful of taking it on. The skills your son or daughter can learn from a leadership position will be of benefit throughout life!

For Further Reading...

Carter, E. W., Swedeen, B., & Moss, C. K. (2009). Supporting extracurricular involvement for youth with disabilities. *Exceptional Parent*, 39(9), 32-33.

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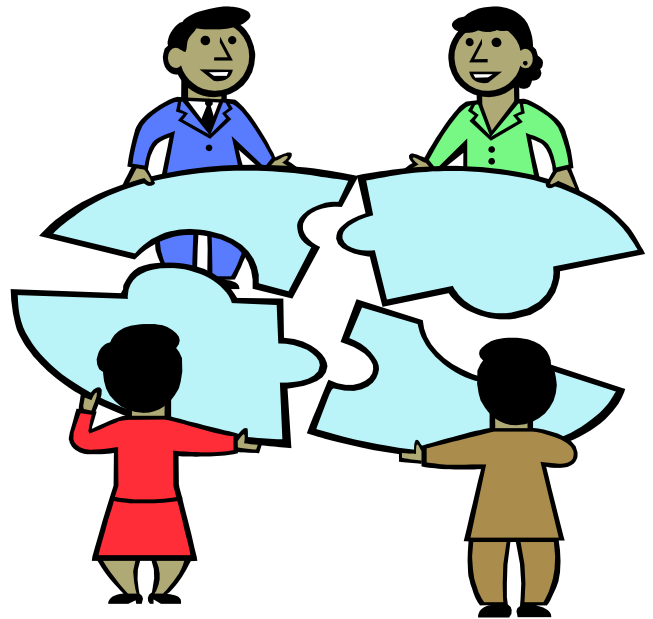
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Weir, K., Cooney, M., Walter, M., Moss, C., & Carter, E. W. (2011). *Fostering self-determination among children with disabilities: Ideas from parents for parents*. Madison, WI: Natural Supports Project, Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Available at <http://>

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Doren, B., Gau, J. M., & Lindstrom, L. E. (2012). The relationships between parent expectations and postschool outcomes for adolescents with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 79, 7-23.



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