

# Creating a Curriculum

Creating a curriculum for your youth transition programs may be the best route if you want to have ownership, creative control, and the ability to personalize the material specifically for your group. However, to create your own curriculum you really need to do your research first. See what is out there that could be used as is or edited and revised to fit your unique needs. You don't have to recreate the wheel. Remember that teaching these foundational skills is not a new idea. People have been teaching different skills to youth with disabilities for several decades now. Try to find information that is already developed and then adapt the material to fit a peer-led session. CILs always focus on peer leadership, teaching, and mentoring. A peer-led youth transition curriculum can really make a deep and lasting impact.

Another factor in deciding if creating a curriculum is a good idea is whether or not the staff who will be developing the material have the time needed to dedicate to this project. CIL staff typically have multiple job responsibilities, so you may need to identify someone else to take the lead or assist in the process. Possibilities for assistance may include a board member, volunteers, or assigning an intern to assist in the curriculum development process.

If your decision is to develop your own curriculum, the following are some tips on how you may want to proceed.

**A note to remember:** If you are using portions of other curriculums, you must get permission if they are copyrighted and also acknowledge them within your own curriculum.

## Building a Team

If you decide creating your own curriculum is the route you would like to go, think about pulling a group of people together that would be able to help you with this. Be sure to include youth on your team. Their input is critical. Think of people that may have experience in the setting in which you would like to use the curriculum in. For example, if you want to use the curriculum materials in a school, you could reach out to a teacher in that school to provide input on both the content of the curriculum and how to best present it. Even if all of your team members don't have the time to write the curriculum, they could review the materials and/or pilot some of the materials.

## Who is Your Audience and Where are They?

Think about the population that you are working with and answer the following questions: What is their attention span? What are their interests? What are their ages? What are their disabilities? What accommodations will be required as the curriculum is implemented to ensure full participation of the youth and young adults?

When developing a curriculum for your youth programs, make sure you know the setting. Know where the curriculum will be delivered, as this will help you determine the skills that may need to be covered. Audiences may be in a school setting, part of a community group, a club, or a summer program.

## **Know the Expectations of Funders**

Agencies and organizations who typically fund programs for youth with disabilities often have requirements for what they expect to be covered. Be sure to keep these requirements in mind as you begin the curriculum development process so you don't have to go back and add in their requirements. Staff from these funding agencies and organizations may also be great partners to add to the development team! Partners from Vocational Rehabilitation will bring employment expertise to the table and the school system has in-depth transition skills and knowledge. Also, if the funding is from a community agency, they may also have expertise in areas of transition for a broad youth population.

## **Planning Sessions**

Decide the length of time and number of sessions you want to have. This may depend more on what the site will allow where the training will take place. For instance, schools may want the curriculum implemented only during school hours. You will also need to think about staff load and what they are able to handle. The distance of the location will play a big role in this as well. If you are traveling to a rural area, you may want to have a longer time with the group and fewer sessions. You will also want to consider the budget and whether funding is for travel, materials, supplies, food, etc. and how much funding is for each session.

## **Know your Staff**

As the curriculum is designed and you begin to think about implementation, assess the experience, knowledge and skills of your staff that could strengthen the curriculum. Do you have someone with a certain certificate, training, or degree that could bring that expertise to training? For example, is there someone on staff that is a certified yoga instructor who could incorporate those skills into the program?

For program sustainability, you will need to ensure that there is cross training on any specific skill. This may require clearly written directions and/or formal training to provide staff members with the knowledge and skills to implement all aspects of the program. You cannot have a strong curriculum that is heavily dependent on a single staff member.

As you are developing the curriculum, consider the best way to actually write it, including critical details. Think about the easiest way for material to be shared with new staff. Is there an outline for writing up the equipment needs, supplies, goals, facilitation methods, accommodations, alternate uses for the material, etc.? Having a standard format is imperative to ensure that the curriculum is implemented in a consistent manner by whomever is teaching and/or leading the session. Writing a curriculum that is organized, detailed, clear and understandable means that all youth will benefit because staff are conducting the training in a consistent manner. It also allows for easy orientation for future staff or volunteers. You may also consider writing a curriculum trainer's guide to help provide further guidance and ensure consistency.

## **Skills**

Think about the knowledge and skills that you want to address through this curriculum. You will probably want to focus on more than one skill. If so, think about how each skill

may need to build off previous ones. Knowledge and skills commonly addressed in youth transition curricula include:

- Financial Literacy
- Communication
- Self-Advocacy
- Travel Training
- Disability History
- Systems Advocacy
- Pre-Employment Skills (resumes, interviews, job sampling, volunteering)
- Social Skills
- Recreational Activities
- Mindfulness (this is the process of bringing one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment, which one can develop through the practice of meditation and through other training. This is done through breathing and visualization.)

As you determine the skills you are targeting, you will need to develop appropriate, detailed lesson plans, activities, media, and more that could support the skill development for each session. No matter how you choose to address the topic, make sure that the skill objective is met, regardless of the teaching method.

### **Add in Some Fun**

As you are planning the sessions designed for skill development make sure to think about fun engaging activities that could teach some of the skills. Young people are accustomed to sitting and listening to an adult talk to them all day. These adults use PowerPoints, books, workbooks, worksheets, and other typical methods for teaching a skill or new idea. You can really set yourself apart with young people by coming in with something that is hands-on, interactive, engaging, and thought provoking.

Instead of talking to them, ***talk with them!*** Youth are not used to being in control of decisions, sharing their thoughts (and having someone listen to them), and being in a leadership role. If you can add activities that allow them to have some control of decisions and engage in conversation with each other, the class, or others even better!

***You can find activities to add by checking out the Curriculum Resources factsheet.***

### **Flexibility**

When developing your material, create something that can be flexible. You don't want to spend all of your time planning to work with a group at the school for the blind and not have the ability to adapt that curriculum for a special education class in a public school. Think about how you might want to interchange activities. Be able to go deeper on a topic if a class needs more time on a certain area to ensure they understand it. Also, know that learning styles are different for each person and each group. Using a video for a specific activity for one group may need to be a hands on activity for a different group. The more flexible you can be, the more useful and versatile the curriculum can be!

## Evaluate

Don't forget to come up with several tools for measuring how youth are responding and retaining information from your sessions and if they are applying it. A quick thumbs-up/thumbs-down at the end of the session, a quick form for them to check (ensure to read it out loud or have images rather than words – depending on your group) would be useful at the end of each session. You can also do a pre/post-test for the whole section or curriculum, depending on the length of the program. You can even think about playing a review game like Jeopardy at the end to see how much they remember the material. It is more challenging to determine if the youth are actually applying what they have learned. Generally, follow-up individual interviews (or written short surveys, if applicable) can provide insights into how effective the curriculum has been in improving the knowledge and skills of youth with disabilities.



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