

# ADVISING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES ON DISCLOSURE: TIPS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS



*As a professional who provides services* such as occupational skills training and job readiness training, you need to know how to help young people decide if they should share information about their disabilities. Disclosure is, by law, a personal decision that individuals with disabilities must make for themselves. As a person who works with youth, you may be in a position to assist youth with apparent and non-apparent disabilities to decide if, when, and how to disclose their disabilities. Understanding disclosure is especially important as youth transition from the K-12 education system to employment or postsecondary education systems. In this transition, they are leaving a system where they are entitled to receive services, and entering another where they may be eligible for reasonable accommodations if they make their needs known, and they are covered by the law.

In a disability context, “disclosure” means that people with disabilities share personal information about their disability for the specific purpose of receiving accommodations. There is no standardized form or set of requirements regarding what people must share about their disabilities. Thus, youth need to decide what, if anything, they want to reveal. Disclosure of a disability can also mean different things depending upon the type of disability. Youth with non-apparent disabilities must make the decision whether to disclose they have a disability. These youths should decide to whom they choose to disclose to and how much information to provide. Generally, youth with non-apparent disabilities find it most beneficial to disclose information only if they need accommodations.

To receive accommodations at work or in postsecondary school, information about disability must be shared with the relevant authorities. An accommodation is an adjustment to an environment, which makes it possible for people with disabilities to participate equally. While youth with disabilities may be familiar with accommodations, as they may have used them in grade school, they may not be familiar with the art of disclosure. Unlike in grades K-12, it is a youth’s responsibility to personally disclose his or her disability to someone who has the authority to provide accommodations.

Knowledge of the specific accommodations that youth will need in a given situation can help frame what disability information needs to be disclosed. If the youth does not require accommodations, it is generally not necessary to disclose the disability. Here are ways you can assist young people with determining whether disclosure is appropriate:

- 1) discuss the appropriateness of disclosing their disability in some situations and not in others (e.g. social, school, or work settings, or community activities);
- 2) evaluate the pros and cons with youth who are considering disclosure; and
- 3) encourage youth to practice effective communication of their disability, needs, skills, and abilities, with people whom they respect and trust, and who know their strengths well.

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People who interact with youth with apparent disabilities may be aware of some aspects of the condition without being informed. Nonetheless, the young people must know how and what to say about their disability, and to whom. All youth should learn the skill of emphasizing their abilities and strengths; this especially applies to youth discussing their disability.

As you advise people with disabilities, remind them that it is not necessary to share everything about their disability and its effects. It is most important to provide information about:

- 1) how their disability impacts the capacity to learn and perform effectively; and
- 2) what environmental adjustments, supports, and services they will need in order to access, participate, and excel in their job, studies, community activities, etc.

It is important to remember that only youth with disabilities can decide whether or not to disclose their disability. It is your job to assist them in making an informed decision. As with any decision, disclosure has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, disability disclosure can afford opportunities for success because reasonable accommodations can be provided. Disclosure may also help the youth find strong support systems. On the other hand, it may be intimidating for youth to share personal information about their disabilities, where there are no assurances that the other person will react positively.

Also, what may seem a disadvantage in one setting or situation can be an advantage in another. Encourage young people to reconsider the disclosure question each time they encounter a new setting, situation, or set of circumstances.

The table below offers a few examples of the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure.

### ■ ADVANTAGES OF DISCLOSURE

- Youth will be able to receive reasonable accommodations to pursue work, school, or community activities more effectively.
- It allows other professionals (educators, employment service providers, etc.) to assist the young people with learning new skills.
- It provides legal protection against discrimination (as specified in the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act).
- It can improve a youth's self-image by developing self-advocacy skills.

### ■ DISADVANTAGES OF DISCLOSURE

- It can lead to the experience of exclusion or being treated differently than others.
  - It can lead to being viewed as needy, not self-sufficient, or unable to perform on par with peers.
  - It can cause people to overlook youth with disabilities for a job, team, group, or organization.
  - It can be difficult and embarrassing.
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*Note:* It may be helpful to make the youth aware that if he or she experiences discrimination because of the disclosure, he or she may have a right to file a complaint under the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Rehabilitation Act.

## ■ RESOURCES

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2005). The 411 on disability disclosure: A workbook for youth with disabilities.

*[www.ncwd-youth.info/resources\\_&\\_Publications/411.html](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/411.html)*



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