

## **7. A National Picture of the Self-Reported Perceptions and Expectations of Youth With Disabilities**

This report has drawn on nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) to fill a gap in information about how youth with disabilities in the 15- through 19-year-old age group who can report their own views describe

- the kind of people they are—their feelings about themselves and their lives, and their skills and competencies;
- their secondary school experiences;
- their personal relationships; and
- their expectations for the future.

Major findings from these analyses are summarized below.

### **A Generally Positive Outlook**

On every measure of youth's perceptions and expectations, there are some youth who express the most positive and some the most negative views. However, positive views predominate when youth describe themselves, their school experiences, and their relationships. For example, more than half of youth with disabilities who could express their own views report having a variety of strengths, ranging from mechanical, athletic, and artistic abilities to being well-organized and sensitive to others' feelings. Two-thirds of youth who received or still receive special education services in high school report they do not believe they have any kind of disability or special need that interferes with their activities. About 60 percent or more report thinking of themselves as nice, proud, able to cope, useful, and important. Similarly, the majority say they are rarely if ever depressed in a given week, and report enjoying life and feeling it is full of interesting things to do most or all of the time. About half give themselves high scores on a measure of personal autonomy,<sup>1</sup> and a similar proportion feel confident in their ability to express their feelings to their peers. More than 6 in 10 have high scores on self-realization abilities and report being able to get adults to listen to them and to get information they need. More than 8 in 10 score high on psychological empowerment. Perhaps a note of caution is in order, however, when considering this generally positive view that youth have of themselves and their abilities, in light of some research that has shown a "positive illusory bias" in such assessment on the part of youth with disabilities (Evangelista et al. 2004; Gresham et al. 2000; Heath and Glen 2005; Hoza et al. 2002; Klassen 2006).

When it comes to views of school, generally positive perceptions also are reported. About two-thirds of youth with disabilities report liking school and feeling part of school at least "pretty much." The majority of youth with disabilities report that school is not particularly hard and that they only occasionally have problems with academic and interpersonal challenges. Most feel at least "pretty safe" at school, and almost half agree "a lot" that they get the services and supports at school that they need to succeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see chapter 3 for definitions of these self-determination concepts.

Personal relationships, particularly those with parents or guardians, also are reported in a positive light by the majority of youth with disabilities. More than 8 in 10 youth with disabilities report having parents who care about them “very much,” and of all relationships, youth are most likely to turn to parents for support when they have problems or decisions to make. Other adults, including school staff, also play an important support role for youth with disabilities. Peer relationships also are important to youth with disabilities and are viewed positively by most. About three-fourths of youth with disabilities are confident in their ability to make friends and report they can “find a friend” when they need one. Most report rarely or never feeling lonely or disliked by others in the previous week.

The generally positive views of themselves and their lives expressed by the majority of youth with disabilities on multiple dimensions are consistent with the hopeful view of the future expressed by many. The large majority expect to graduate from high school with a regular diploma, and about half expect to continue their education after high school. Almost all expect to find paid employment, two-thirds believe they will be able to earn enough to be financially self-supporting, and three-fourths expect to live independently away from home.

### **The Minority View**

However, despite this overall positive tone to the reports of youth with disabilities, on every measure, a minority of youth report negative and sometimes strongly negative views. For example, almost 1 in 10 youth with disabilities report they do not identify at all with feelings of being useful or important, 1 in 8 report they rarely or never feel hopeful about the future, and a similar proportion feel unable to share their ideas and feelings with peers. About 10 percent of youth with disabilities report they do not like or feel part of their school at all, and about three times as many say they never become involved at school, even when they have the chance.

Smaller proportions of youth with disabilities report poor interpersonal relationships. For example, 3 percent report they feel their parents care about them “very little” or “not at all,” and twice as many say their parents pay little or no attention to them. About 1 in 12 youth with disabilities say they feel lonely most or all of the time, and a similar proportion report a pervasive feeling of being disliked. Six percent think it is unlikely that they will be able to live independently without supervision in the future; half of those do not believe even having supervision will enable them to live away from home.

### **Disability Category Differences**

Disability category differences are apparent on most, although not all, of the range of views examined in this report. Some of the perceptions or views youth report are consistent with the fundamental nature of their disabilities. For example, youth in the other health impairment category, to which youth with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder as a primary disability typically are assigned, are more likely than most others to report having daily trouble paying attention in school. Those with orthopedic impairments are less likely than most others to report having strong athletic or mechanical skills. Youth with autism, which affects their ability to establish relationships with others and engage in daily activities, are less likely than those in most other categories to report a strong sense of affiliation at school or to be involved in activities there; they also are among the least likely to report they make friends easily or feel cared about by friends “a lot.” Youth with emotional and/or behavioral challenges often can have

relationships with others in which conflict is common; consistent with this, youth in the emotional disturbance category are less likely than many others to report infrequent trouble getting along with others at school and that they are cared about “a lot” by adults other than family members. Finally, youth whose disabilities are more obvious, such as those with deaf-blindness or visual or orthopedic impairments, are much more likely to report having a disability than youth with learning disabilities or speech/language impairments, for example, whose disabilities often are less immediately apparent to others.

Further, generally more positive perceptions and expectations are apparent for some categories of youth with disabilities and more negative ones for others. Youth with visual impairments and those with mental retardation illustrate these differences.

Youth with visual impairments are more likely than those in several other categories to report a strong sense of being able to handle things that come their way and to report rarely or never feeling depressed. They report little trouble getting along with others at school and a strong sense of affiliation with and level of involvement there. They tend to have high self-determination skills, confidence in their ability to find a friend, and a strong sense of being cared about by their friends.

In contrast, compared with youth in several other categories, those with mental retardation are more likely to report not feeling cared about by their parents or other adults and are less likely to report there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them. They also are less likely than most categories of youth to be active participants in organized activities at school. Youth with mental retardation are more likely than many others to report feeling not very or not at all useful, not able to deal well with challenges they face, and that they rarely or never enjoy life. They are less likely to report rarely or never feeling depressed and feeling hopeful about the future most or all of the time. However, despite being more likely than other groups of youth with disabilities to express negative feelings or perceptions, it is a minority of youth with mental retardation who do so.

Despite these differences, there are some dimensions on which statistically significant disability category differences are not apparent. For example, there are no statistically significant differences across categories in the percentages of youth who report enjoying life most or all of the time and identifying strongly with a statement that their lives are full of interesting things to do.

### **Demographic Characteristics Rarely Differentiate the Views of Youth With Disabilities**

Despite NLTS2 findings that demographic differences between youth with disabilities are associated with significant differences in their experiences in secondary school (Wagner, Marder, Blackorby, et al. 2003) and in the early years after leaving school (Wagner et al. 2005), differences in the views of youth with disabilities who are distinguished by gender, age, household income, or race/ethnicity are not common. For example, there are no statistically significant differences between demographic groups in their self-determination skills or their feelings of competence in expressing their feelings, getting adults to listen to them, or finding information they need. Similarly, statistically significant differences are not found in demographic groups’ views regarding being cared about by parents, friends, and other adults and being paid attention to by their families.

Gender differences reflect common stereotypes; adolescent females with disabilities are more likely than males to report they are sensitive to others' feelings and boys are more likely to report they have strong athletic and mechanical abilities. Female teens also are more likely than males to say they turn to friends for support a lot; a similar difference is noted between White and African American youth with disabilities. Age differences are noted only with regard to a lower participation rate in extracurricular activities at school and a lower likelihood of turning to a boss or supervisor for support among older youth with disabilities relative to younger peers. No statistically significant differences are noted between youth with disabilities from households with different levels of annual income.

## **Comparisons With Youth in the General Population**

The picture of youth with disabilities presented in this report is similar to that of youth in the general population on several dimensions, yet significant differences between the two groups also are apparent.<sup>2</sup> For example, there are no statistically significant differences in reporting that they are cared about "very much" by parents or that they rely "a lot" on them and on siblings or a boy- or girlfriend for support. There also are no statistically significant differences in responses related to feelings of safety at school or in expectations of "definitely" receiving a regular high school diploma.

However, in several respects, youth with disabilities express somewhat more negative views, experiences, or expectations than their general-population peers, particularly with regard to school. For example, youth with disabilities are more likely than youth in the general population to report having daily trouble paying attention, completing their homework, and getting along with teachers and students. They also are more likely to have little or no sense of affiliation with school and to report strong disagreement that they enjoy school. Interestingly, however, youth with disabilities also are more likely to report strong agreement that they enjoy school. They are less likely than youth in general to expect "definitely" to attend or complete postsecondary school. Regarding their relationships in general, youth with disabilities are more likely than others to report feeling lonely and disliked by others "most or all of the time." Nonetheless, compared with youth in the general population, those with disabilities are more likely to say they receive "a lot" of attention from their families and to report enjoying life and feeling hopeful about the future "most or all of the time."

## **Cautions in Interpreting Findings**

Readers should remember the following issues when interpreting the findings in this report:

- The analyses presented in this report are descriptive; none of the findings should be interpreted as implying causal relationships, neither should differences between disability categories be interpreted as reflecting disability differences alone, due to the confounding of disability and other demographic factors.

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<sup>2</sup> Readers are reminded that, although most comparisons between youth with disabilities and the general population in this report are based on items and response categories that are identical for the two populations, differences in the wording of some items may suggest that the results of those comparisons be interpreted with caution.

- The report addresses the “self-representations” of youth with disabilities—that is, how they describe themselves to others. Their “true” views and actual competencies are unknown.
- Although discussions in the report emphasize only differences that reach a level of statistical significance of at least  $p < .01$ , the large number of comparisons made in this report will result in some apparently significant differences, even at this level, being “false positives”—that is, Type 1 errors. Readers also are cautioned that the meaningfulness of differences reported here cannot be derived from their statistical significance.

This report provides the first national picture of the self-representations and expectations of youth with disabilities, how they differ across disability categories and demographic groups, and how they compare with those of youth in the general population. NLTS2 will continue to solicit the views of youth as they age, which will provide information to examine, for instance, how later achievements mesh with expectations and how views might evolve over time.