# A close-up of a logo  Description automatically generatedA green and white logo  Description automatically generatedThe Independent Living Advocate’s Toolkit for Mentoring Families of Children with Disabilities

## Brief #6: Enabling Self-Awareness & Self-Acceptance

Families can take several steps that enable their children with disabilities to mature into empowered, self-directed young adults, but nothing is more important than teaching them to know and accept themselves. Self-awareness and self-acceptance go hand in hand in the journey toward empowerment because when young people know what their strengths and challenges are, how their behavior affects other people, what environments work best for them, how their body moves and functions best, and what their interests are, they will more easily accept themselves as they are. If they don’t accept themselves and spend their days trying to hide their disability or not participate in meaningful activities for fear of failure or rejection, their lives are diminished beyond measure.

Self-esteem and self-confidence grow out of self-acceptance. Self-acceptance means acknowledging yourself just as you are. The most impactful and enduring accomplishment of the disability rights movement has been to introduce the idea of disability pride. One of the definitions of pride is having deep satisfaction or pleasure in a quality that is widely admired. Our larger society tells us that disability is something to be ashamed of. The disability rights movement tells us that it is something to embrace. When young people with disabilities are introduced to a Center for Independent Living, where most of the governing board and the staff are individuals with disabilities, they may have their first taste of being valued for having a disability, not despite having it.

Disability Pride as a way of thinking emerged in the disability rights movement in much the same way that LGBT Pride and Black Pride grew out of those social justice movements. Disability Pride teaches that disability is a natural and beautiful part of human diversity. Disability Pride Month is celebrated in the U.S. every July to commemorate the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in July 1990. Disability Pride Parades are held annually in numerous cities to celebrate people with disabilities and to try to change the way that society thinks about and defines disability. Self-acceptance and pride put an end to internalized shame. Ending shame leads to empowerment. Empowerment leads to self-advocacy which often leads to systems advocacy and systems change, and that impacts the structures, programs, resources/supports, and attitudes of communities.

It may be counterintuitive for families to embrace disability pride, but doing so can be a game changer. It doesn’t mean ignoring the physical, mental, or emotional needs of the disabled child. In fact, it’s just the opposite. When families can accept the individual as they are and guide them in taking pride in their strengths, goals, and contributions, empowerment may move ahead by leaps and bounds. Independent Living Advocates in both Centers for Independent Living and parent-led organizations can model for families the empowerment that is available when they teach their child self-awareness and self-acceptance.