

What Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Professionals Need to Know From Youth

1. Build Trusting Relationships

“For many youth, VR can feel unfamiliar, intimidating, or overwhelming at first. Before discussing goals, services, or paperwork, take time to get to know us as people. When we feel heard, respected, and genuinely cared about, we are more likely to trust you, share openly, and stay engaged in the process.”

Don't Do This:

- Focus only on paperwork, eligibility, or service requirements
- Assume you know what a youth wants without asking them
- Talk primarily to parents, teachers, or other adults instead of the youth
- Rush into planning without building rapport

Try This Instead:

- Let conversations feel like conversations, not interviews. Leave room for natural discussion instead of moving through a checklist of questions.
- Learn one thing about the youth that has nothing to do with disability, school, or employment and follow up on it at your next meeting.
- Start meetings by asking what's new in the youth's life before discussing services, goals, or paperwork.
- Ask youth how they prefer to communicate and connect. Some may open up during casual conversation, while others prefer text, email, visuals, or having time to think before responding.
- Remember important milestones and personal goals - and celebrate them just as enthusiastically as VR achievements.
- Show youth they're more than a case file. Reference previous conversations, remember details they shared, and follow up on the things that matter to them.

Example:

During an *intake meeting, the counselor asks about the youth's interests, strengths, and goals and encourages them to actively participate in the conversation.

2. Make Information Clear & Accessible

“Many youth are navigating VR services, transition planning, and adult systems for the first time. We want to understand our options and feel informed about decisions that affect our future. Clear, accessible communication helps us feel confident, ask questions, and take a more active role in our own planning.”

Don't Do This:

- Use acronyms, *jargon, or professional language without explanation
- Assume youth understand the *VR system or *transition systems
- Leave youth uncertain about next steps

Try This Instead:

- Explain what a service actually looks like in real life, not just what it's called.
- Pause when using acronyms and ask, "Have you heard that term before?" before moving on.
- End meetings with three clear takeaways: what's happening next, who's responsible, and when it will happen.
- Remember that accessibility goes beyond language - if information isn't clicking, try a different approach, setting, or activity to make the conversation more meaningful
- Don't assume silence means understanding - some youth need more time to process information before responding.
- Use examples and real stories whenever possible to help youth understand unfamiliar concepts.

Example:

At the end of a meeting, the counselor reviews next steps in plain language and makes sure the youth knows what to expect moving forward.

3. Support Self-Determination

“We want opportunities to make choices, set goals, and have a voice in decisions that impact our lives. Supporting self-determination doesn't mean expecting us to have all the answers - it means helping us build the skills and confidence to make informed decisions and take ownership of our future.”

Don't Do This:

- Make decisions for youth
- Tell youth what career path they should pursue
- Focus only on limitations or barriers
- Assume adults always know what's best

Try This Instead:

- When a youth shares a goal, explore it before evaluating it. Ask "What excites you about that?" before discussing barriers or next steps.
- Don't rule out options too early. Present a variety of possibilities and let the student help decide which ones make the most sense.
- Ask youth to make at least one decision in every meeting, no matter how small.
- When a parent, teacher, or support person answers for the youth, intentionally circle back and ask the youth what they think.
- Give youth time to think about big decisions instead of expecting answers on the spot.

Example:

A counselor helps a youth explore multiple career options and supports them in choosing the path that best fits their goals and interests.

4. Focus on Strengths, Not Just Challenges

“Too often, conversations about disability focus on what we can't do. We want VR professionals to recognize our strengths, talents, interests, and potential alongside any support needs we may have. When our abilities are valued, we are more confident in pursuing our goals and exploring new opportunities.”

Don't Do This:

- Define youth by their disability
- Focus only on barriers or deficits
- Lower expectations because of a diagnosis
- Assume youth need to be “fixed” before they can succeed

Try This Instead:

- Ask youth what they wish adults noticed about them besides their disability. Alternatively, ask “What would your best friend say you're good at?”
- When discussing a barrier, ask “What's worked before?” before jumping to solutions.
- Connect accomplishments outside of work or school to strengths that can support future goals.
- Make sure every conversation about a support need is paired with a conversation about a strength or success.
- Help youth identify skills they've developed because of challenges they've faced, not despite them.
- Invite youth to bring in something they're proud of - a project, artwork, certificate, photo, video, hobby, or accomplishment - and use it as a starting point for career conversations.

Example:

During career planning, the counselor highlights the youth's skills, talents, and accomplishments to identify future opportunities.

5. Make Career Planning Meaningful

“For many youth, career planning can feel overwhelming or disconnected from their everyday lives. We want to understand how employment connects to our interests, goals, independence, and future. Meaningful career planning helps us see the bigger picture and stay motivated throughout the process.”

Don't Do This:

- Treat career planning like completing forms or checking boxes
- Focus only on jobs or career titles
- Repeat activities that don't add value or build new skills
- Ignore the youth's personal goals, interests, and priorities

Try This Instead:

- Ask youth to describe their ideal adult life, then explore careers that could support that vision.
- Connect every career conversation back to something the youth cares about outside of work.
- Prioritize hands-on career exploration over worksheets whenever possible.
- Treat changing goals as progress and use new experiences to refine the plan together.
- Regularly revisit goals and ask, "Does this still fit the future you want?"

Example:

Help youth connect employment to where they want to live, how they want to spend their time, and the life they want to build.

6. Encourage Youth Voice & Participation

“We are the experts on our own experiences, goals, and dreams. When our ideas, preferences, and perspectives are genuinely considered, we feel more invested in the process and more confident advocating for ourselves. Meaningful participation isn't just being present at meetings, it's having a real voice in the decisions being made.”

Don't Do This:

- Let adults dominate conversations about the youth's future

- Assume youth are not ready to contribute to planning discussions
- Treat youth as passive recipients of services
- Make decisions without seeking youth input

Try This Instead:

- Engage students as active partners throughout the meeting, ensuring they have opportunities to share their goals, preferences, questions, and decisions.
- Use a “before we plan” check-in: What do you want? What feels hard? What support would help?
- Give youth time to review options before making decisions, instead of expecting answers on the spot.
- Invite youth to bring a trusted person, communication tool, notes, or questions to help them participate.
- End each meeting by asking youth to name one decision they made and one next step they understand.
- Follow up directly with the youth, not only the adults, so they stay included after the meeting ends.

Example:

During a transition planning meeting, the youth shares their goals, interests, and support needs and helps shape the decisions being made.

Graphic Version: <https://canva.link/b03ej9zp9lvpi1>

Word Bank*:

You may already be familiar with many of the terms used throughout this document. However, youth, families, and community partners may not be. We intentionally included a word bank as a reminder that accessibility starts with communication. Taking time to explain unfamiliar terms, acronyms, and professional language helps create a more inclusive environment where everyone can participate meaningfully in conversations and decision-making:

- *Informed Choice: Having access to information, options, and support so a person can make decisions that align with their own goals and preferences.
- *Intake Meeting: One of the first meetings with a service provider where information is gathered about a person's interests, strengths, needs, and goals.
- *Jargon: Specialized words or phrases used by professionals that may be unfamiliar or confusing to others.
- *Person-Centered Planning: A planning process that focuses on the youth's strengths, interests, goals, and vision for the future.
- *Rapport: A positive, trusting relationship where people feel comfortable communicating openly and honestly.
- *Self-Advocacy: Speaking up for your needs, preferences, rights, and goals, and helping others understand the support you need to succeed.
- *Self-Determination: The ability to make choices, set goals, solve problems, and make decisions about your own life.

- *Strengths-Based Approach: A way of working with youth that focuses on their abilities, talents, interests, and potential rather than only their challenges or barriers.
- *Transition Systems: The programs, services, and supports that help youth move from high school to adulthood, including education, employment, independent living, healthcare, and community services.
- *Vocational Rehabilitation (VR): A program that helps people with disabilities prepare for, find, and keep employment through services such as career exploration, training, workplace accommodations, and job support.