



Taking Charge

by Beth Schaffner, PEAK Parent Center

How important is taking charge of your own life? For most people, it's a natural part of the "growing up" process. When you are young, you depend totally on adults for meeting your needs. Then gradually, as you develop competencies and confidence in yourself, you move away from total dependence and begin to make your own choices and decisions.

For young people with disabilities, barriers can get in the way of what should be a very natural process. Due to societal attitudes and restrictive support practices, instead of developing a sense of autonomy, power, and control, people often remain disempowered and dependent, relegated to lives of isolation, rejection and low expectations.

During the three years of the Enhanced Person-Centered Planning Project (June 25, 2007 to September 30, 2010), funded through a grant from the Colorado Developmental Disabilities Council, PEAK Parent Center staff and facilitators engaged personally with over 700 young adults with disabilities, parents, family members, friends, community members and service providers from throughout the state of Colorado. The focus of the project was assisting the young people with disabilities to take charge of their lives and work actively toward richer, more complete lives, with support from their families, friends, and service providers.

Project activities designed to help the young adults to develop their vision for the future and achieve their goals included:

PATH Planning Sessions

The PATH planning process helps individuals build their personal support circles and make plans for reaching their goals for the future. An assigned facilitator and a recorder guide the young person with the disability, family members, and other people of their choice through a creative, graphic planning process during which they identify their dreams, set goals and plan for how they will achieve those goals with the assistance of the people in their circle. The final PATH step is an Action Plan noting specific steps that will be taken to move forward.

The Taking Charge Advocacy and Leadership Course

Taking Charge is a five-session course designed to open up new possibilities for a good life for young adults with disabilities and to support them through the process of clarifying their vision for the future, developing a plan for how they will get there and taking concrete steps toward reaching their goals. The young adults who participate in Taking Charge each invite two or three people from their lives to attend and plan with them. During the Taking Charge sessions, all participants engage in fun learning activities with the entire group, hear stories shared by other young adults with disabilities who became empowered through person-centered planning, and work with their own circle members to plan how they will put what they are learning into action to move forward on their goals.

Other project activities that supported the goal of helping young adults take charge of their lives were the Aurora Life-Building Course, “Making Your Circle Work for You” workshops, circle support services, Spanish - English Person-Centered Planning Facilitator Training Institutes, and facilitator professional development newsletters, communication, and teleconferences.

Lessons Learned

This project was a profoundly moving and meaningful experience for everyone involved. The self-advocates, their circle members, the facilitators, and the PEAK staff members who were involved all learned valuable lessons from each other.

Project staff and facilitators learned that, no matter what their disabilities, young people can find and develop their own voices when provided with opportunities and deliberate, focused support. Having a voice does not have to do with how a person communicates nor is it based on judgments about how “articulate” a person may be. Rather it is about becoming empowered. The focus of this project was to assist empowerment through emphasizing the “five accomplishments” noted in the person-centered planning literature from O’Brien and O’Brien, Mount, and others as critical to having real lives. Those five accomplishments are belonging, relationships, respect, choices and control, and making a contribution. The outcomes of this project that provided evidence that the young people were becoming empowered were when they...

- watched their vision for a good life grow on their PATH wall charts in bright colors and pictures; they later learned that with support from the people who care about them, they could successfully take actual steps to get to that vision.
- built up the self-confidence and courage to hold and communicate into the microphone to tell who they are in front of a group; later many became public speakers who were invited (and paid!) to tell their story to others who wanted to learn how to help themselves or their children.
- risked moving away from the security of being with their parents during mixed group activities at Taking Charge; later, as their self-reliance increased, they wanted to do even more for themselves.
- took responsibility for the keys to their own hotel rooms at the Taking Charge Course; later they got keys and moved away from their families and into their own homes.
- began their circles of support with a few people, but later watched their circles grow after they reached out to invite new people.
- took the risk to open up and share their true selves...their strengths, their interests and even their vulnerabilities... with people they had just met; later their self-confidence grew when they learned how much those people liked and appreciated them.
- learned that they could start their life-building process by taking small steps that could lead toward bigger goals; later they felt a sense of accomplishment with each small step taken and gained the desire and courage to keep moving forward.

The growth seen in the young people who participated in these activities is expressed in this excerpt from Laura Hershey's poem, "You Get Proud By Practicing":

*Power makes you proud, and power
comes in many fine forms
supple and rich as butterfly wings.
It is music
when you practice opening your mouth
and liking what you hear
because it is the sound of your own
true voice.
It is sunlight
when you practice seeing
strength and beauty in everyone
including yourself.*

*It is dance
when you practice knowing
that what you do
and the way you do it
is the right way for you
and can't be called wrong.
All these hold
more power than weapons or money
or lies.
All these practices bring power, and power
makes you proud.
You get proud
by practicing.*

Laura Hershey, 1991

The Enhanced Person-Centered Planning Project helped open doors and facilitate new opportunities for participants to get proud, to dream big, and to begin realizing their dreams. Although not all participants grew in the same ways, each person gained new confidence and skill by participating. Seeds were planted that will hopefully continue to sprout in significant ways for everyone.

The message threaded throughout the project's activities was that person-centered planning is a critical, ongoing tool to help you stay empowered on your journey throughout all the phases of your life. The need to maintain strong circles, continue to dream "big," and to keep taking the steps, big and small, that will lead you to your dream was continually emphasized. The last stanza of Laura Hershey's poem expresses this important message very well: "...Once you are proud, keep practicing, so you won't forget."

Opening the doors to self-empowerment and community membership can make a huge difference in people's lives. It is time to make these possibilities a reality for all of our young people with disabilities; it is time that they each get to take charge!

PEAK thanks the Colorado Developmental Disabilities Council for providing financial support and guiding the implementation of this project from 2007 - 2010. We hope to build on valuable lessons learned to continue to work collaboratively with the Council and others to make these person-centered planning opportunities available to people in communities throughout Colorado. We know the outcome can be better lives for people with disabilities as fully participating members of their communities. We also know that the ultimate result of this work can be better, richer communities where all people are included and valued for their contributions.

NOTE: PEAK has an extensive archive of information and outcome data related to this project. Please contact Beth Schaffner at bschaffner@peakparent.org with requests for additional information.