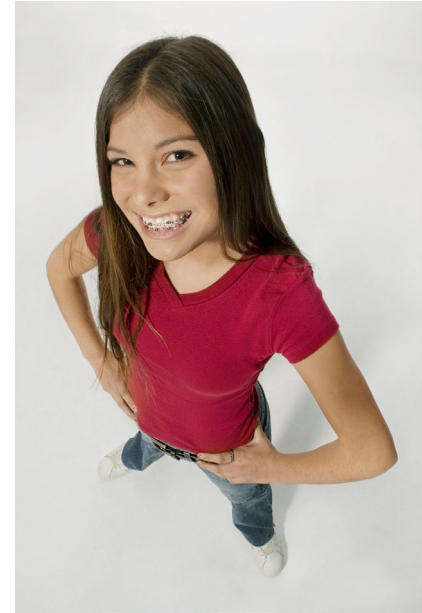


Summertime Growth & Discovery: Supporting Youth to be Self- Advocates



Formed Families Forward
June 24, 2026

Renee Myers and Joselin Cruz



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Formed Families Forward - who we are...

- A family-led resource center in Northern Virginia supporting foster, adoptive and kinship families who are raising children, youth & young adults with specialized needs, and professionals who work with our families.
- We offer free training, consultations to families, events, resources, and systems navigation. Also - peer support groups; Resource Directory; *Learning Your Way* self-paced classes; youth classes, videos and other resources.
- Family partner to Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS; a VDOE project)

www.FormedFamiliesForward.org

Renee.Myers@FormedFamiliesForward.org

Joselin.Cruz@FormedFamiliesForward.org

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Who I am...

Joselin Cruz

- 2025 Summer Intern
- GMU Alumni
- Pursuing a master's degree in CMHC
- Spanish and Youth Consultant
- Love to travel!



Who I am...

Renee Myers

- Mom to 4
- Content Specialist
- Kinship Navigator
- Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP)
- Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)



Support Groups

For Foster, Adoptive, and
Kinship Caregivers

In-Person Group Meets
3rd Wednesdays from 7-8:30 PM
(Aug 20 and Sept 17)

Virtual Group Meets via Zoom
1st Sundays from 7:30-9 PM
(Next meeting Aug 2)

[Register Here](#)

**Formed Families
Together**
Peer Support
Groups



INTERESTED IN JOINING?
REGISTER AT
[HTTPS://BIT.LY/FFTGROUPS](https://bit.ly/fftgroups)
OR LEARN MORE AT
[FORMEDFAMILIESFORWARD.ORG](https://formedfamiliesforward.org)

We provide a safe
space for foster &
adoptive parents &
kinship caregivers to
share their experiences,
concerns, frustrations,
& resources!

Formed Families
Together support
groups are led by
trained peer leaders
with personal &
professional
experience.

**VIRTUAL GROUP
MEETS VIA ZOOM
1ST SUNDAYS
FROM 7:30 TO 9 PM**

**IN-PERSON GROUP MEETS
3RD WEDNESDAYS IN
FAIRFAX CITY,
FROM 7 - 8:30 PM**

Hosted By
FORMED FAMILIES FORWARD

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Learning Opportunity

Virtual, interactive group meetings will be held on Mondays from 7-8 PM.

[Register Here](#)



Learning Opportunity



**Note: Access closes June 30, but
will reopen August 15!**

- Free, on-line, on-demand learning
- Self-paced & interactive
- Certificates of Completion
- 7 Courses Available:
 - Special Education 101
 - Constructive Communication & Collaboration
 - Special Education Dispute Resolution
 - Trauma 101
 - Kinship Care
 - Other Health Impairment
 - Positive Parenting

Upcoming Event



Family Summer Picnic

Friday, August 7

5-7 PM

Burke Lake Park

<https://bit.ly/FFFpicnic26>

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Agenda:

- What is self-advocacy?
- Why is self-advocacy important?
- What challenges do youth and young adults face in advocating for themselves?
- How do we help our youth become strong self-advocates?
- What can we do this summer?



Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is the ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert your own **interests, desires, needs, and rights**.

It involves understanding your strengths and needs, identifying what support you require, and **speaking up for yourself** to obtain it.



Source: Understood.org

Young Adults Discuss What Self-Advocacy Means to Them



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Key Components of Self-Advocacy

- Understanding
- Knowing
- Communicating



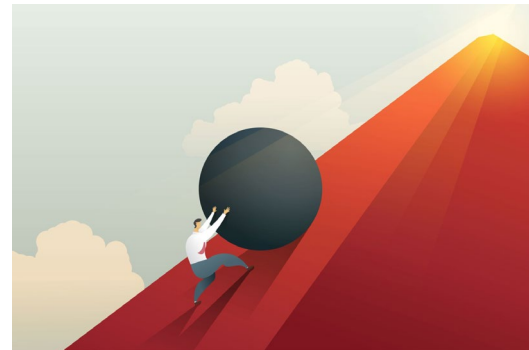
Benefits of Self-Advocacy

- Better outcomes at school or work
- Empowerment and confidence
- Improves problem-solving skills
- Improves relationships and boundaries
- Creates independence
- Self-determination (control of own life)



Challenges to Self-Advocacy

- Difficulty identifying and articulating needs
- Fear of being judged, labeled, or rejected
- Lack of knowledge/understanding of legal rights
- Communication gaps
- History of parents or professionals making decisions for them
- Transition from high school to college or workplace



ACTIVITY: Rate Your Youth's Advocacy Skills



Helping Youth Learn to Self-Advocate

*Communication
Skills*

*Be a Part of
IEP Meetings*

Goal Setting

Decision Making



Self-Awareness

Identify Help

*Disability
Awareness*

Know Their Rights

Help Youth Build Self-Awareness

Name: _____

Date: _____



One-Pager

Answer each of the four parts in this One-Pager. Your answers will help you create your **SPIN**, or your Strengths, Preferences, Interests, and Needs. Give it to your teachers and employers so you can help them understand you and your needs and you can be successful!

My Strengths

My Preferences

My Interests

My Needs

Source: VA's I'm
Determined Project

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DENNIS HS FRESHMAN

- I love the Seahawks and the Ducks
- Athletic - I have done 3 triathlons and play golf
- Volunteer at Snow Cap.
- I love hard rock!

STRENGTHS/ ATTRIBUTES

- Contributor - I like to help
- Sense of humor
- Empathetic, a good friend
- Very physical

I am a learner!
Teach me and I will
learn!



VISION AND GOALS

- I will graduate with a modified diploma
- I will get a job at my uncle's car shop
- I will have a house and a roommate
- I will keep active

I want a whole life!



WHAT WORKS

- Treat me like I'm 15!
- Peer/group learning
- Breathe through stuttering
- Clear instructions
- Movement breaks

WHAT DOESN'T

- Gluten /Dairy/ Soy
- Talking over me
- No sensory breaks
- Low expectations
- Rushing me



All About Me

Name: Jillian Smith

You will see me for: Math Studies, 2nd block



I am good at:

- Group activities, I like working with other students, especially other girls
- Fractions are easy for me.
- Talking out problems

I have trouble with:

- Getting started on work by myself
- Working with too many bossy boys in a group
- Writing long answers to things

You should know:

- I live with my aunt. It is OK to share this information with other students.
- My mom is in jail until 2023; it is not OK to share this with students.
- I have ADHD and depression; I have a harder time with depression after I visit my sister and brother the first weekend of every month.

What works for me at school:

- Being able to tell teachers my answers instead of writing it out long.
- Taking a break when I can't focus. I like to read Under the Moon and other books by Lauren Myracle when I get overwhelmed.

[Fillable template here](#)

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Help Youth Identify Where to Go for Help



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Help Youth Understand Their Disability and How It Affects Them



- Educate your child about their disability
- Help them understand how their disability affects daily communication, and social interactions
- Stress that everyone has strengths and challenges
- Discuss their learning profile/talk about what works? doesn't?

Talk to Youth About Their Rights

- ★ If your youth has an IEP or 504 Plan, let them know what their rights are. Students with disabilities are entitled to a free, appropriate, public education.

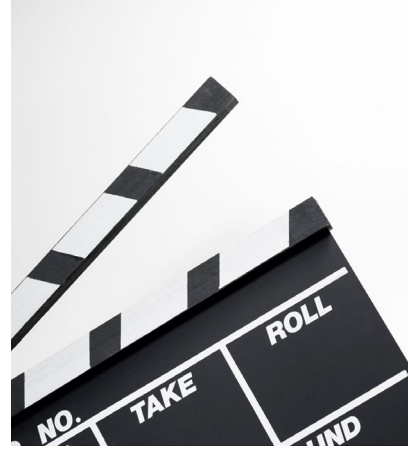
Explain that it's not cheating or unfair to get support or accommodations they need!



Practice Communication Skills

Youth should know how to:

- Explain their disability to someone else *and* know what accommodations they receive and what they look like in the classroom or training environment
- Ask for help clearly & confidently
- Have a conversation with a teacher
- Write an email to a teacher
- Set up a meeting



Role-Play!
Scripts!
Templates!

Sample Scripts



When you don't understand:

- “Can you slow down and go over that step again?”
- “Could you show me how to do one more example?”
- “I don’t understand. Can you explain it a different way?”
- “Can you check if I’m on the right track?”

When you need an accommodation(s):

- “Can I have extra time to finish this?”
- “Can I do this in a quiet place?”
- “Can I use my technology (computer, iPad, magnifier) for this?”
- “Can the text be read aloud for me?”

Your Turn!

Develop scripts your youth can use:



When they want to email a teacher to ask about a low grade....

When they feel frustrated and want to ask for a break.....

When they want to ask their boss for a day off.....

Provide Opportunities to Make Decisions

- Boosts confidence and self-worth
- Fosters independence and control
- Improves problem-solving skills



Tips for Offer Choices:

- Provide frequent opportunities to make choices
- Start with small daily chores (what to wear, eat, do)
- Start by giving 2-3 options

Help Youth Develop Competence Through Goal-Setting and Taking on Challenges

i'm determined! Goal Plan

Name: _____

Today's Date: _____

My Goal

Next Steps to Reach My Goal

Outcomes

People Who Can Support Me to Reach My Goal

Resource provided by I'm Determined, a state-directed project funded by the Virginia Department of Education. © 2006–2018 I'm Determined. All rights reserved. Last updated 01/2018

Source: VA's I'm Determined Project

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Have Youth Participate in IEP Meetings

Ways Youth Might Participate:

- Make a list of strengths and challenges
- Create a presentation
- Introduce IEP team members
- Share plans for the future
- Write thank you notes after the meeting

[Taking a Leadership Role in Your IEP](#)



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Student Rubric for IEP Participation

Area	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
 IEP Awareness	I don't know what IEP stands for.	I know what IEP stands for.	I know what IEP stands for and the purpose of an IEP meeting.	I know what IEP stands for, the purpose of an IEP meeting, and I can tell others about these meetings.
 IEP Participation	I don't participate or attend my IEP meeting.	I attend a pre-conference IEP meeting and/or my IEP meeting, but I don't participate.	I attend and contribute information about myself for my IEP in a pre-conference or at the actual IEP meeting.	I lead parts or my entire IEP meeting.
 Knowledge of IEP Content	I don't know what is in my IEP.	I know that I have accommodations and goals in my IEP, but I don't know what they are nor do I have a voice in developing them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, and I have a voice in developing them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, have a voice in developing them, and advocate for them.

POLL

On average, how would you rate your student's IEP participation?

- Level 1 (doesn't attend meetings & doesn't know what's on it)
- Level 2 (knows they have an IEP but doesn't know what's on it)
- Level 3 (attends IEP meetings and knows what's on their IEP)
- Level 4 (leads parts of the IEP meeting & has a voice in developing the IEP)

Dude, Where's My Transition Plan?



Dude, Where's My
Transition Plan

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What can we do this summer?

- Have your youth complete the One-Pager or All-About Me
- Help your youth set summer goals (3-5 SMART goals)
- Provide opportunities to practice making phone calls, asking for help, & interacting with adults
- Explore work or volunteer opportunities
- Set up mock interviews & practice talking about their disability and any needed accommodations



Resources & Questions

- [FFF Resource Directory](#)
- [PEATC Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [WAZE to Adulthood](#)
- [I'm Determined Project](#)



Formed Families Forward – Stay in Touch!

PLEASE COMPLETE THE EVALUATION

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