

Stories of Active Volunteering

Working with younger people with a disability

Usually when volunteers work with young people and young adults with a disability, it is to give the family or carer a break. This service is called 'respite'. Volunteers might work with one young person, or they could be one of several volunteers working with a group of young people.

What is important when volunteering with young people?

The Home and Community Care Program for Younger People (HACC PYP) aims to assist people to be as independent and active as they possibly can. These services are for young people and adults with disabilities.

When you are working with young people, it is important to understand the disability they live with, but more importantly to focus your support on assisting them to do the things they want to do. Find out about the young people you are working with and what's important to them from staff or from family members and carers if you have contact with them.

Some young people you work with may require support services all through their life. Others may require support as a young person but will be able to live independently as they reach adulthood.

In either case, your role in fostering the young person's abilities and independence is really important for their life path.

How can volunteers support young people's independence?

- > Give recognition and praise when you see the young person 'having a go'. Break tasks down into steps. It may be that the young person can only do some steps, but let them know you have seen that – 'you picked up those toys really well and really quickly' – even if they can't physically place the toys in the hamper.

- > As a volunteer, you may think that you are helping a young person by doing something for them, but this can mean they don't learn how to solve problems for themselves or develop their abilities. Of course, you need to know the capabilities of the young person you are working with but be ready to wait and give them time to do things for themselves. Be there to guide and support them as they have a go.
- > Using prompts is a great way to let the young person do things for themselves, while you are there making sure they are safe and they are coping.
- > Prompts can be verbal, such as talking the young person through a task step by step. It is important to allow the young person time to complete each task before you move on to the next step.
- > Gestures can be used to show the young person what you are asking them to do. Be sure that you work with them, and their family and other carers, to develop a shared set of gestures that the young person understands.
- > Physical prompts can include placing your hand over the young person's hand to guide them in a task. It is important if you are using any physical contact that you check with the family and with the young person if appropriate if they are comfortable with physical contact. If they are, let the young person know, for example, that you will put your hand on their hand and, where possible, ask if that's OK before doing so. You can lighten this touch by just tapping on the back of a hand or holding an elbow.
- > Try not to use more than one prompt at a time to avoid confusing the young person.

For further discussion

- > What are some prompts and communication methods you have used successfully when working with young people with disabilities?
- > What is your understanding of the disability or disabilities experienced by the young people you work with?
- > What are some of the successes that you have seen in the young people you work with?
- > How do you see past the disability and get to know each young person you are working with?