



## Youth Track at a Conference

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by Naomi Ortiz

Every year Wisconsin holds the Circles of Life conference. It is a time when families, and children with disabilities can come together and share stories, and experiences. There was a suggestion to add a youth track, where youth above the age of 13 could come together to share their own stories, and experiences.

At first it was like most conferences, no one knew anyone else, and everyone was a little shy. However, we took care of that. Some of the sessions we had planned were known as "get to know you" sessions, where every person had a chance to introduce themselves. As the conference continued everyone began to really open up. The youth had a chance to learn about opportunities after high school, resources around Wisconsin, as well as nationally, that would help them to advocate for themselves, and helping them to realize that they are not alone. It was their time to be heard. They could share stories about their school, their family, and ask any questions they had to others who had already gone through middle and high school transitions. The youth had a chance to try out technology geared towards youth with disabilities, and give suggestions about future items that would be useful.

At one point during the conference the youth were able to "kick out the adults" and just hang out. After that everyone was really comfortable talking. At all times during the conference youth were allowed to get up and walk around, no one was forced to stay seated, if it helped a person to think or get involved it was encouraged. On the first night of the two-day conference, there was "Family Fun Night". Bucky badger was there; we had pizza, face painting, movies, and an auction.

It was great to have youth from around the state come together and have some fun, while also learning about their future options. Everyone shared their hopes and dreams for the future and had a chance to feel independent!



If you have additional tips you would like to share, send them to [Julie@fvkasa.org](mailto:Julie@fvkasa.org). Feel free to distribute widely, with attribution. Thanks.