

# Designing and Delivering Residential Immersive Life Skills (RILS) Programs for Youth with Disabilities:






An evidence-based guide for service providers



# About this Guide

Residential Immersive Life Skills (RILS) programs provide meaningful opportunities for personal growth for youth with disabilities and support them as they prepare to transition into adulthood. By providing experiences and opportunities that youth with disabilities might not otherwise get, RILS programs help transform how participants view their own capabilities, identity, and competence. Research in this area has shown that youth build new skills and knowledge, increase self-confidence, and establish new self-perceptions through RILS programs. These changes continue to impact the day-to-day lives of youth and their families once the program has ended and also foster more hopeful attitudes about the future. RILS programs can have a lasting positive impact into adulthood.

This evidence-based guide will:

-  Explain the structure and purpose of RILS programs
-  Outline how RILS programs may influence youth, parents, and service providers
-  Identify the essential components and approaches used in effective RILS programs
-  Showcase reflections from youth, parents, and staff who have participated in RILS programs
-  Provide tools and resources to support RILS program design and delivery

## What do we mean by parents?

When we say parents, we refer to all caregivers responsible for the primary care of a youth. This can include foster parents, grandparents, extended family members and others.

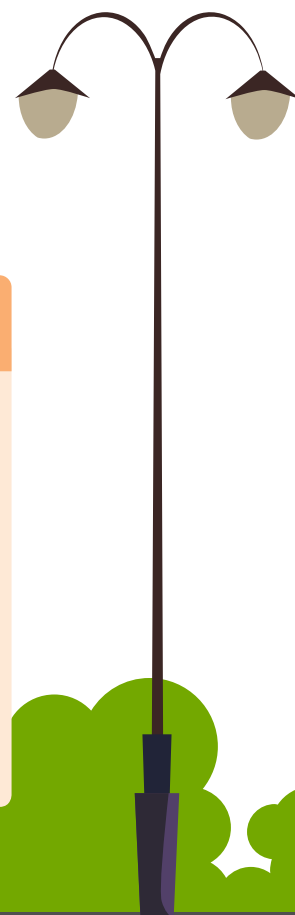
## Who is this guide for?

Individuals or service providers who design and/or deliver RILS and related life skills programs for youth with disabilities may find this guide helpful.

Service providers may include but are not limited to [1]:



- Occupational therapists
- Therapeutic recreation specialists
- Life skills coaches
- Physical therapists
- Social workers
- Nurses
- Personal support workers
- Caregiving attendants
- Youth mentors

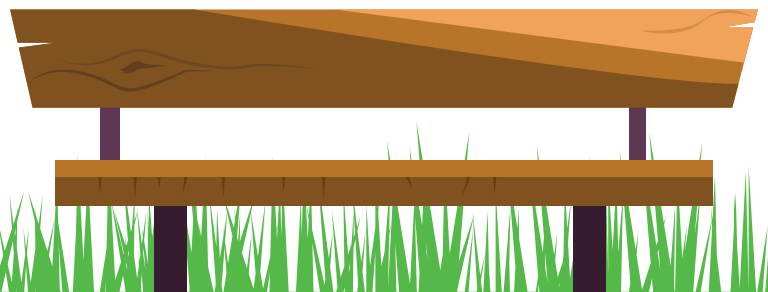
This guide may also be valuable for others including policy and decision makers.



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# 1.0 About RILS Programs

## 1.1 What are RILS Programs?

The journey towards adulthood can be difficult for young people with disabilities. One contributing factor is that youth with disabilities often lack critical opportunities to develop **life skills** and peer relationships.

RILS programs help youth with disabilities between the ages of 14 to 21 years old develop and practice life skills. These programs provide them with immersive, away-from-home experiences and opportunities. Young people typically stay overnight in a university or college residence for 1 to 3 weeks where they are part of a safe and supportive learning and social environment with peers. RILS programs employ a variety of opportunities and experiences designed to help youth develop life skills that they can use in their immediate and long-term futures.

The delivery of RILS programs can be flexible and adapted based on available resources. Important features of a RILS program [2] include opportunities to:

- Be away from home for multiple days or weeks, including overnight stays
- Develop skill and confidence in activities for independent daily living
- Share intense learning and social experiences with small groups of peers

Youth have the opportunity to experience a sense of community with others with disabilities, sometimes for the first time. This can provide mutual peer support and acceptance.



### What are 'Life Skills?'

Life skills are adaptive and positive behaviours that help people:

- Make informed decisions
- Solve problems
- Think critically and creatively
- Communicate effectively
- Build healthy relationships
- Empathize with others
- Manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner

(page 8 [4])



Many youth with disabilities have not consistently had opportunities to develop skills or to be autonomous. The barriers youth face [5] include:

- Limited opportunities to participate in summer camp, after-school activities, and other programming
- Lack of accessibility and opportunities to develop independence in community settings
- Societal stigma, ableism, and lowered expectations about capabilities and aspirations
- Relational dynamics, e.g. parents or caregivers who are accustomed to helping with all tasks

For many youth, carefully designed RILS experiences lead to changes in life skills, and to increased self-confidence, self-understandings, and self-advocacy. These changes empower youth, offer new possibilities for their future, and introduce youth to supports they can use to assist their independence in adulthood.

“

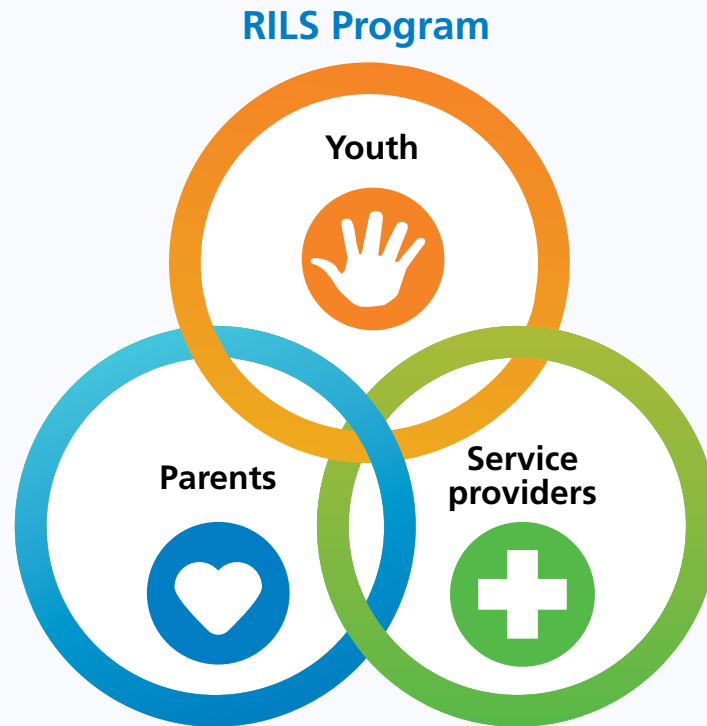
*In my family, being independent always meant having to do everything by yourself. . . my father's vision of what independence meant was that I had to physically do everything. . . I didn't even know one could live by themselves in an apartment like I do, and have [attendants] that come in and out when you need them. . . I had no idea I could live independently and not have to struggle every morning to get dressed.*

(Elsa, page 78 [5])



## 1.2 What do RILS programs accomplish?

RILS programs have been shown to have a transformational impact on youth. Parents and service providers also experience indirect positive benefits. The following section showcases the experiences and perspectives of youth, parents, and service providers.



### Youth

In the short term, RILS programs promote a sense of belonging, foster participation in activities that support skill and confidence building, and develop self-understanding through challenging experiences [6].

In the long term, RILS programs can act as a 'turning point' for youth by changing how they view themselves and their outlook for the future [7].

“

*I did actually end up going to a movie theatre alone. And I was a bit nervous but...everything worked out fine...I did that because after [RILS program] I just wanted to see how it goes and it went well, so I know I can continue doing these things outside of [RILS program].*

(Amar, page 77, [5])

“

*I knew that there were things that I had never done in my life, some that I was able to do now. So it gave me some confidence in myself that I wouldn't have had in any other way.*

(Sonja, page 76 [5])



Youth who take part in RILS programs are highly motivated to attend and set their own goals. Youth may experience many immediate benefits [2]. Program activities and environments are strategically designed to:

- Build confidence and **self-efficacy**
- Let youth make their own choices, which supports **autonomy** and **self-determination**
- Help youth understand their strengths and capabilities
- Motivate them to overcome future obstacles
- Develop new notions of independence and **interdependence**
- Encourage youth to ask for help and advocate for their needs
- Establish a greater awareness of what is possible for their future

### What do we mean by self-efficacy?

A person's beliefs about their ability to cope with challenges and to be successful [8].

### What do we mean by self-determination?

The ability to make choices and have control over one's life [9].

### What do we mean by interdependence?

The notion that every individual depends on others to some extent [10].

### What do we mean by autonomy?

The opportunity to make meaningful choices [11].

Although each youth has different strengths and needs, RILS programs create a foundation of new skills for participants. After the program is over, additional benefits may emerge for youth over time [2, 12].

These outcomes vary for each youth, and can include:

- Greater comfort in new situations
- Increased motivation and initiative
- Greater responsibility and maturity
- Increased community involvement
- Enhanced social relationships
- Changes in identity and empowerment



## Parents

Parents of RILS participants often report changes in their child's behaviour and skills immediately following participation in RILS programs.

Many parents observe that youth have a broader worldview because the program increased their awareness of supports, amplified their strengths, and prompted them to think about the future [6, 12, 13].

“

*Without that program, I don't think she would be, you know, where she is right now in her mindset...I think it opened up doors, I think it opened up her eyes. And made her stop and think...and I think it had everything to do with the fact that for [X] days she wasn't living with her Mom and Dad. So it's definitely something that...has opened her eyes and shown her that she can have a different life than what she thought about before.*

(Megan's mother, page 6 [12])

“

*The [RILS] program is a starting point for us to back off with our hand holding a little bit and get him doing a little bit more than he can and should be doing on his own. I think we kind of overprotect and over parent. We want to back off and just let him find his own level.*

(Joyce, page 142 [13])

In response to changes in their child, parents themselves can also develop new expectations for their child's future. Seeing youth develop new skills can demonstrate to parents—sometimes for the first time—that they do not need to do everything for their child [13].

Many parents also feel relief when they see their child gain new and valuable skills. Some experience a sense of hope that their child may be able to live a more independent life [2, 13].

RILS programs provide parents with the opportunity to:

- Realize youths' capabilities
- Reflect on and consider adapting their parenting practices
- Offer youth greater responsibility

“

*We were already beginning to realize that we were doing too much for him. [RILS program] was like a wakeup call, a springboard to encourage us as parents to help him become independent. I was quite a profound enabler; I was almost seeing him as incapable. I'm trying to pull back on that. [RILS program] has encouraged us to be more aware of knowing when we are doing too much for [name].*

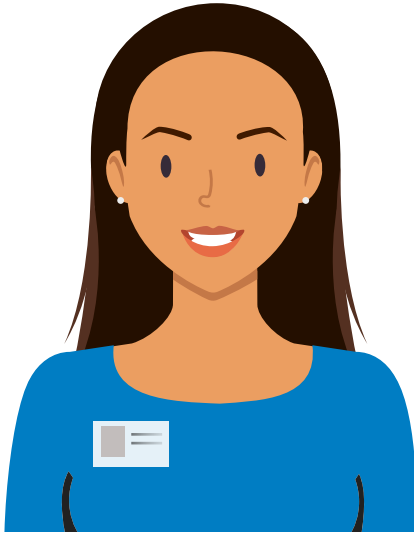
(Teagan, page 142 [13])





## Service providers

Service providers, staff, and others who spend extended time with youth during RILS programs also witness the youths' day-to-day lives and develop a richer understanding of both the challenges and strengths they live with.



“

*I just realized...that my job [is] as a facilitator and not as a problem solver, but to help people...empower themselves...to solve their challenges, and to find their inner strength to do so. So I...absolutely apply that in my everyday world here...*

**Dignity of risk** ...[If] you want to risk doing something, then you should be allowed that opportunity to take a risk and then fail, or not, but learn from that.

(Coordinator, page 976 [2])

Immersive experiences away from home help service providers view youth in more holistic ways [14]. As a result, service providers may shift their practice approach from directly meeting therapeutic needs to empowering youth. Service providers can offer practical support to youth and focus on real-world learning as part of therapeutic goal setting to prepare them for the future.

“

*I think it helped me see the youth more as a whole person because you are with them sometimes from 7 in the morning all the way till they go to bed. So to see someone's full life like that is a really powerful experience as a clinician because sometimes I think as an OT, we focus a lot on motor skills, or very specific independent living skills. And sometimes you might not think of this huge social piece as much or ... self-advocacy.... So I think it opened me up to all these other pieces of people's lives that are so important that I may not have thought about as much before.*

(Occupational Therapist, page 976 [2])



### 1.3 Life after RILS

Youth, parents, and service providers all emphasize the important and diverse set of life skills youth acquire from participating in RILS programs. These new skills, combined with increased self-confidence and self-awareness, provide a foundation for change that allows youth to continue their growth after the program is over [12].



“

*We didn't have staff right beside us, watching everything. If we need them, they could support us, but the responsibility was on us to take charge.*

(Xavier, page 5 [3])

Some youth also experience changes that emerge over time in the months after their RILS experience ends. These benefits are different according to each participant's strengths and needs, but may include greater:

- Comfort in new situations, e.g. making new friends
- Motivation and initiative, e.g. learning to drive
- Maturity and responsibility, e.g. completing household tasks
- Community involvement, e.g. finding a job

These benefits emerge when youth build on their foundation of new skills and confidence to realize their potential. In this way, RILS programs can support youth with disabilities to open doors and kick-start new life trajectories [5, 6, 12].

“

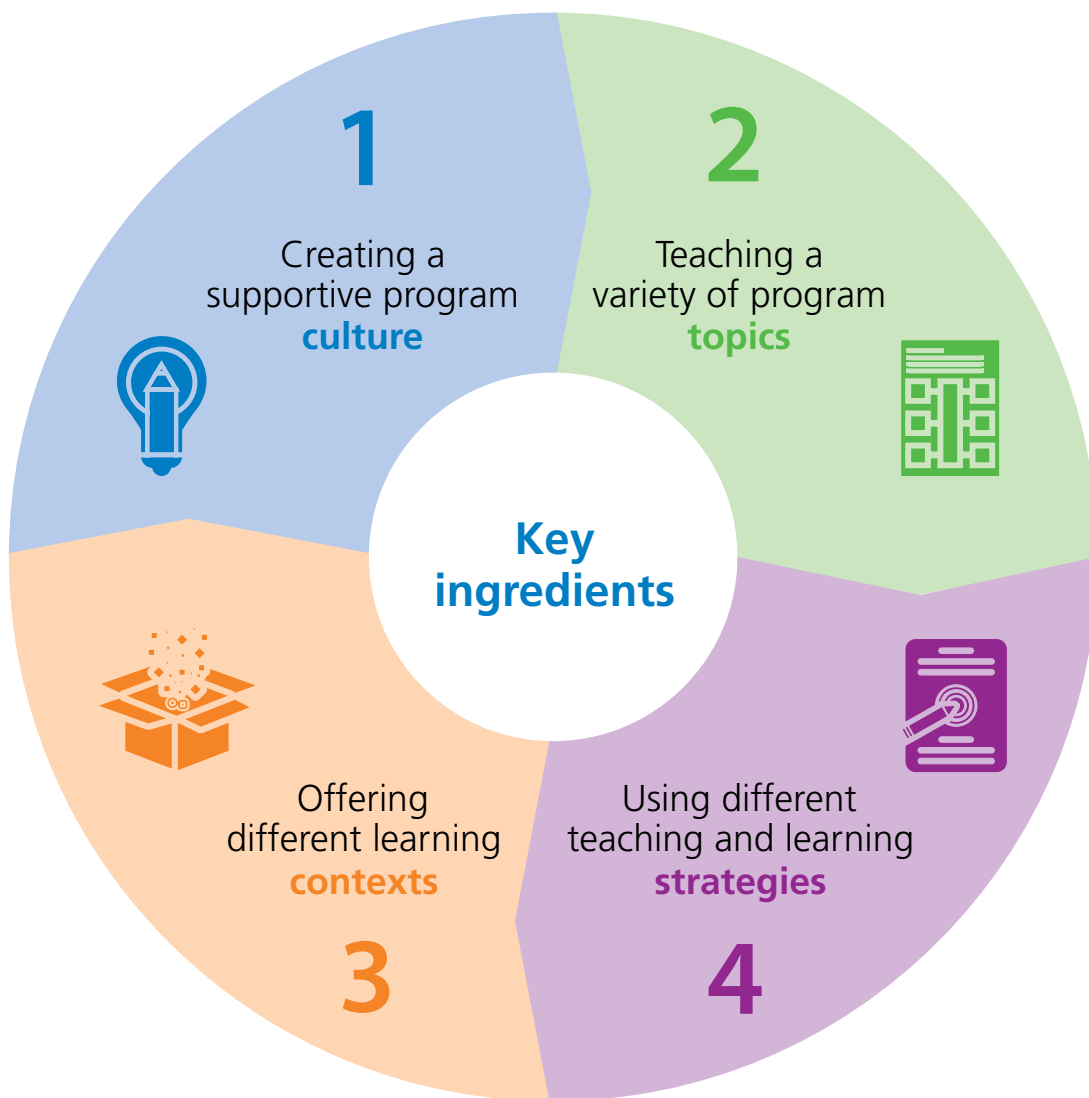
*To actually hear [him] step up and...take control and be involved in his own life...I was thrilled. [Before RILS] he didn't really have any direction, and he didn't have any passion, and he didn't seem to be engaged in anything and then, when he decided that 'yes' he was going to college and this was the program that he wanted and...he's put, you know, heart and soul into it... he's done really, really well. Because [he] had never really seemed to have any fire under him to what he was going to do with the rest of his life...And I think the experiences from [RILS program]... gave him a bit of a boost.*

(Gary's mother, page 7 [12])



# 2.0 Designing and Delivering RILS Programs

There are many elements to consider when designing and delivering an effective RILS program. Each of the key ingredients are described in the following sections, along with examples of how they can be combined to create a successful program.





## 2.1 Creating a Supportive Program Culture

As a service provider, you play an important role in creating a supportive learning environment (i.e. the 'culture') within RILS programs. How you interact with youth can influence their experiences during and after participating in a RILS program. Using a holistic and realistic approach is important for delivering an effective and impactful RILS program [2]. Here are key considerations and tips that can help you create an optimal environment:



### Building trust and rapport

Use strategies like collaborative problem solving to build rapport and connect with youth.



### Using non-intrusive strategies

Let youth make mistakes and learn from them. Give youth time to figure things out for themselves.



### Coaching and guiding youth

Support and engage youth by using techniques like listening, prompting, and encouraging choices.



### Fostering new experiences

Facilitate youth learning new skills, negotiating relationships, and feeling pride in their accomplishments.



### Empowering youth

Provide youth with a sense of control and support opportunities to practice new skills through choice making, risk taking, and problem solving.

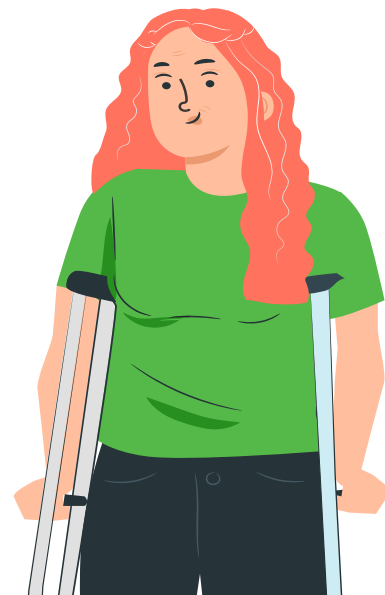
### Setting and pursuing goals

Goals are an important part of RILS programs. Youth are usually encouraged to set the goals they want to work on before they arrive at the program.



*If I was in the city again, I would definitely budget better next time. I had no money. I couldn't do some of the things I wanted to do. Like, I couldn't go to a movie when I was in the mall. I had freedom to make good and bad choices. I had freedom to mess up and I did.*

(Frankie, page 4 [3])





## 2.2 Teaching a Variety of Program Topics

As part of a well-rounded RILS program, it is important to use flexible approaches and embed activities that allow youth to experience choice making, facilitated goal setting, trial and error learning, and supported risk taking in everyday tasks. Programs cover a variety of topics addressing necessary life skills [15]. These topics may include:

### Leisure and Physical Activity



- Planning and engaging in leisure, social, or recreation activities (e.g. outings)
- Playing or learning adaptive sports (e.g. wheelchair basketball, seated volleyball)
- Trying non-sport physical activities (e.g. disabled sailing, gym fitness)

### School and Employment



- Preparing for post-secondary education (e.g. applying to schools, setting up accommodations)
- Exploring career options (e.g. looking and applying for jobs, interview and résumé skill building)

### Financial Management



- Making and following a budget
- Managing money (e.g. going to the bank, using a bank card, tipping, using financial terminology)

### Time Management



- Learning and practicing time management skills (e.g. planning and scheduling daily activities)

### Laundry



- Learning and practicing laundry skills (e.g. looking for laundry facilities, watching a demonstration on how to do laundry, doing their own laundry)

### Meal Planning and Cooking



- Planning and preparing meals (e.g. making a grocery list)
- Going to the store to buy groceries
- Cooking and food handling

### Communication and Social Skills



- Learning and practicing strategies for effective communication with peers and others in social situations

### Housing



- Exploring housing options (e.g. listening to housing experts, planning for future housing)
- Touring housing (e.g. visiting options)

### Driving



- Exploring accessible driving options (e.g. independent driving, vehicle adaptations)

### Safety



- Preparing for community safety in public and in online spaces

### Directing Care



- Learning about attendant care support
- Working with attendants for personal care and daily activities

### Transit Navigation



- Learning to get around in the community by walking or navigating transit (e.g. learning how to read street signs, transit signs, and maps; finding accessible services and routes)



“

*I would say the moment that kinda changed everything for me was ... we all went to the movies as, like, an outing, and we all watched movies and had dinner together, and then we talked outside while we were waiting for [accessible transit] for just over an hour and... It's crazy how much you get to know people in just an hour, like I saw everyone in a whole different light. ... I just talked to people on a whole other level than I've talked to anyone else in my whole life.*

(Melissa, page 5 [16])



## Selecting topics and activities: Key considerations

When developing your program, it is important to think about what type of learning context and activities are most helpful and appropriate for addressing youth goals and priorities. Consider the following:

- Type of life skills you are helping youth to build
- Topics of interest and relevance
- Number of participants you are working with
- Abilities and learning styles of participants
- Length of your program
- Available staff, community, and budget resources



“

*[Staff member] showed us how to use online interactive maps, like, putting in the address, but after that he stepped back and let us find the bus.*


(Jordan, page 5 [3])





## 2.3 Offering Different Learning Contexts

It is important to provide both structured and unstructured learning opportunities in RILS programs to encourage skill development and growth [17]. Below are examples of varied approaches that can help you build your RILS program:

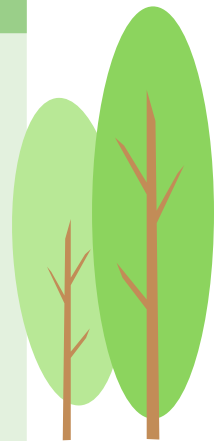
Learning Context		
	Structured activity	Unstructured activity
<b>Type of Learning</b>	 <b>Instructional learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal teaching and learning techniques are used to provide information about specific life skills and topics to youth.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e.g. classroom lectures, demonstrations, and guest speakers on topics such as budgeting, nutrition, and internet safety</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Real-world' excursions and outings where youth have freedom to explore, make choices, and self-direct.</li> <li>Accompanied by staff who provide non-intrusive support and enablement.</li> <li>Youth have freedom to make decisions and try new things, which increases self-efficacy and confidence.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e.g. grocery shopping, meals in a restaurant, movies</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	<b>Experiential or situated learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities outside the classroom to get hands-on learning in real-world settings.</li> <li>Organized by the program, often for the entire group.</li> <li>Youth try out new activities and practice applying skills they have learned.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e.g. visits to the bank, taking public transit</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During unsupervised after-hours activities, youth have a chance to make decisions, navigate conflict, and solve problems.</li> <li>Peer-to-peer learning fosters personal growth.</li> <li>Youth develop friendships, have meaningful conversations with their peers, socialize, and have fun.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e.g. evening conversations, roommate relationships</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Pairing activities and strategies

Pairing different learning contexts with the right combination of activities and evidence-based strategies will help youth:

- Understand, develop, and apply life skills
- Become confident with their skills
- Learn to work and cooperate with others
- Bond with their peers
- Establish a sense of empowerment and control

Taking this varied approach will keep youth engaged and help you to deliver information more effectively [1, 15].





## 2.4 Using Different Teaching and Learning Strategies

As a service provider, you can use a variety of different evidence-based strategies to help deliver your RILS program. The Service Provider Strategies-Checklist (SPS-C) [18] is available to help guide your programming [19]. Examples of strategies and techniques from the SPS-C are presented below:



Choose methods and techniques that meet the needs of youth and of your program. For a longer list of strategies, download the complete [SPS-C](#).

### Socially-mediated strategies

Using relationships and being in a group environment to create learning opportunities

#### Examples:

- Having a youth who is familiar with the skill explain and model it to those who are not
- Encouraging youth to interact with peers and support one another

### Teaching/learning techniques

Using strategies and techniques to enable youth learning

#### Examples:

- Praising and acknowledging youth for successfully completing a task
- Showing youth how to complete a task and encouraging them to imitate the task

### Cognitive strategies

Assisting youth with using their mind (cognition) to solve a problem or a task

#### Examples:

- Helping youth to break an activity into smaller steps or tasks
- Teaching youth a task step-by-step, and allowing youth to master each step before teaching the next

### Non-intrusive strategies

Supporting youth without intervening

#### Examples:

- Refraining from intervening until the youth asks for help
- Using teachable moments to create a rich learning experience

### Physical interventions

Physically assisting youth

#### Examples:

- Providing “hands-on” help, at the youth’s request, to ensure successful performance
- Guiding performance through a slight touch

Be creative with how you put these strategies into action to support youth in your RILS program. Tools you can use include:

- Creating tip sheets
- Role playing
- Leveraging technology (e.g. smart phones, tablets)
- Using apps and online tools (e.g. transit, maps)





# 3.0 Conclusion

The aim of this evidence-based guide is to offer service providers information and tools to help them design and deliver RILS programs. The guide has:

- Explained the structure and purpose of effective RILS programs
- Outlined how RILS programs influence youth, parents, and service providers
- Identified the essential components and approaches used in effective RILS programs
- Showcased reflections from youth, parents, and staff who have experienced RILS programs

The guide also provides strategies and tools that are actionable, evidence-based, and can be tailored to enhance program design and delivery in your context. This is especially important as practice settings and the needs of the youth and families being supported will differ across organizations.

We hope that this guide provides practical support to individuals who design and deliver life skills programs targeting youth with disabilities. This guide aims to impact the work of all those who help youth with disabilities develop critical life skills and transform how youth and their families navigate the transition to adulthood.

“

*I would say out of the whole experience, she came back a different kid. She came back confident... Like almost like a take charge kinda personality.. I didn't think anybody could change in [X] days like that, but they can... Yeah, she's definitely got more confidence, she's got more... just direction.*

(Megan's mother, page 8 [12])





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- Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital
- ErinoakKids Centre for Treatment and Development
- McMaster Children's Hospital



## Conflict of interest declaration

The academic leads of the RILS Guide development team (GAK, ACM, SK) authored most of the publications cited in this resource. The knowledge translation leads (KME, CP, SRK) have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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## User Consideration

This Guide is a compilation of research evidence for individuals who are developing residential immersive life skill programs for youth with disabilities.

The Guide is provided for educational purposes only. It is not intended as medical or professional advice or opinion. Individuals are required to exercise their own judgment in using this Guide. You assume full responsibility for how you choose to use this information. Application of any information contained in this Guide should be based on individual/patient needs, the relevant circumstances, and the local context.

Neither Holland Bloorview nor any of the contributors to/authors of this Guide are providing medical, diagnostic, or treatment services through the information contained in this Guide.



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## Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital is Canada's largest children's rehabilitation hospital dedicated to improving the lives of children with disabilities. As a fully affiliated hospital with the University of Toronto, we are home to the Bloorview Research Institute and the Teaching and Learning Institute, allowing us to conduct transformational research and train the next generation of experts in childhood disability. For more information please visit [www.hollandbloorview.ca](http://www.hollandbloorview.ca)



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