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# Navigating Change Year 1 Report

Strengthening Pathways into Adulthood for  
Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental  
Disabilities and their Families

January 1 - December 31, 2025

**SDSU**

San Diego State University  
**Social Policy Institute**  
School of Social Work



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# Background



Through the California Department of Developmental **Services: Service, Access, and Equity Grant**, and in partnership with the **San Diego Regional Center**, the San Diego State University Social Policy Institute (SPI) strives to improve youth, family, and community well-being through Navigating Change, a program which supports **Transition-Aged Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (TAY I/DD)**. As part of SPI's broader mission, Navigating Change empowers participants by promoting self-determination, access to services, and individualized support during the transition into adulthood.

As an affiliate of San Diego State University's School of Social Work, SPI works at the intersection of academia, government, business, and the community to promote innovative program development and data-driven policy. By connecting these systems, SPI aims to enhance individual, family, and community well-being, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their aspirations. Navigating Change seeks to achieve this by connecting TAY I/DD youth and their families to a mentor, or Navigator, to help provide relational engagement and active support through the transition process.

In August 2025, SPI launched its first neighborhood-based cohort for Navigating Change with an English-speaking cohort, followed by a Spanish-speaking cohort in September 2025. Both cohorts were in North County, focusing on supporting families in the Escondido, San Marcos, and Vista areas so that TAY youth and their families would be in proximity to others also working through transition life planning. In 2026, SPI is expanding Navigating Change to San Diego's East County and to Imperial County. This expansion reflects SPI's ongoing commitment to equity, cultural responsiveness, and community-centered practice. Each cohort is designed with linguistic and cultural accessibility in mind, connecting families to navigators with lived experiences that reflects the communities they serve and to foster trust and belonging while ensuring that participants and their families feel seen, heard, and supported throughout their journey.

Informed by **community voices**, the program exemplifies SPI's mission to bridge academia with real-world solutions to create lasting impact at both individual and systems levels.

# Introduction

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At the end of what is more often than not a long and challenging day, many caregivers of TAY with I/DD ask themselves the question:

**Am I doing enough to support my child and set them up for success?**

The responsibilities of being a caregiver seem to be endless. Systems are complex, outside support is limited, and each decision can feel high-stakes. Over time, this constant pressure can deepen feelings of **isolation** (“I’m the only one not able to do this...”) and **hopelessness** (“No matter what I do, it doesn’t seem to work...”). One of the greatest challenges that caregivers encounter is not only with navigating services, but the absence of a strong **peer network** grounded in shared experience.<sup>1</sup>

Something powerful happens when caregivers are provided the space to engage directly with one another in an open and non-judgmental space. **Loneliness can turn into companionship, and decision fatigue can turn into collaborative strategy.** These are outcomes of a successful Peer Support Network.

*“Knowing that people are available to help us navigate this is a wonderful thing.”*  
*-Navigating Change Alumni*



# Introduction

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**“I am grateful to have been able to share my concerns about anxiety and receive advice.”**  
-Navigating Change Alumni

**Peer Support Networks** are essential for emotional support, collaborative problem solving, and long-term well-being.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true for those in under-resourced, multilingual, and diverse communities, where language barriers, limited access to culturally relevant services, and

economic challenges can intensify isolation and make building supportive peer networks even more difficult.

Alumni of Navigating Change’s Peer Support networks have shared “knowing that people are available to help us navigate this is a wonderful thing.” When reflecting on the impact of peer support on their mental health, another alumni shared “I am grateful to have been able to share my concerns about anxiety and receive advice.” These moments represent a shift from carrying the weight of caregiving alone to carrying it **together**.

In response to the challenges of caregiving, this brief examines peer support as a critical strategy for **reducing isolation** and **strengthening capacity** among TAY I/DD and their caregivers. The sections that follow define peer support within the context of the program, highlight key insights and outcomes that demonstrate its impact, and illustrate how peer connection serves as a foundational element of SPI’s approach to fostering belonging, empowerment, and long-term well-being.



# The Power of Peer Support in Navigating Change

Peer support plays a critical role in helping youth and families, including those within the I/DD community, navigate periods of transition, stress, and uncertainty. Individuals with I/DD and their families often face isolation, stigma, and complex systems of care. Peer support, grounded in shared lived experience, creates space for mutual understanding, validation, and connection that cannot be replicated through traditional service models.

Peer support differs from traditional professional support in that it is reciprocal rather than hierarchical. Families are not positioned as “clients” receiving help, but as individuals with knowledge, strengths, and insights that can support others. This dynamic reduces stigma, fosters trust, and helps individuals feel less isolated in their experiences. Peer support also reinforces hope, as individuals can see others navigating similar challenges and making progress, which can be both empowering and motivating.

Navigating Change intentionally centers peer support as a **foundational element** of the program, recognizing its unique ability to build community, strengthen resilience, and bridge gaps that formal services may not address. The program is designed to create spaces where families can connect, learn from one another, and feel less alone in their journeys. Peer support is woven throughout Navigating Change in ways that foster trust, belonging, and mutual support, allowing families to engage at their own pace while building meaningful relationships. Below are the core components through which peer support comes to life in Navigating Change.



### World Cafés

World Cafés are often families' first connection to Navigating Change and to one another. Held in person at the beginning and end of the program, these gatherings create welcoming, structured spaces for open dialogue, shared learning, and relationship-building, fostering an early sense of belonging and community. Discussions are facilitated by Navigating Change Navigators—many of whom are family members of a loved one with an intellectual and/or developmental disability—who build trust by sharing their own experiences, modeling openness, and normalizing families' challenges.



### Navigator Support

Navigators (also known as Family Transition Specialists when working with families, or Youth Mentors when working with youth) are intentionally paired based on shared lived experience and/or cultural background. This approach helps families feel seen, understood, and safe. Navigators authentically express and model empathy, normalize challenges, and walk alongside participants as trusted peers, offering practical guidance and consistent support throughout the program.



### Peer Support Groups

Weekly or biweekly virtual peer support groups provide ongoing opportunities for youth and families to connect, share experiences, and learn from one another. Facilitated by Navigators, these groups offer emotional support, affirmation, and collective problem-solving while strengthening relationships built earlier in the program. Peer support groups also invite professionals from a variety of organizations to share information about available programs and resources.

Navigating Change offers peer support groups for both families and youth, with youth groups creating space to discuss transition goals and receive encouragement and peer support. The following sections focus on the peer support groups and their impact on TAY-I/DD families.

# The Impact of Peer Support Groups

The increasing prevalence of individuals with I/DD<sup>3</sup> increases the necessity to assess our disability-serving systems and acknowledge the needs of the community through proactive programming and intentional service delivery. A significant component of services to support individuals with I/DD relies on both formal family and youth engagement as well as strong levels of support networks in order to create networks of care that families can rely on. The challenges that individuals with I/DD and their families face are often complex, and one-size-fits-all solutions do not tend to work. Families deserve to have their concerns heard by individuals who understand their needs and have shared experiences, which peer support groups create space for.

Recognizing the role of **intersectionality** for individuals with I/DD, particularly young adults who are transitioning from youth to adult services and possibly entering a college/university environment, new workplace, volunteer opportunity, or structured living environment, provides insight into the connection between social infrastructure and improved experiences. Students with I/DD from underrepresented ethnic groups may face additional life planning or career-related barriers or stigmas when seeking involvement or work experience during or after high school degree completion. It has been found that having strong social supports in place is connected to improved academic outcomes and resilience, and results in individuals feeling better prepared for dealing with challenges and getting involved.



## The Impact of Peer Support Groups

Peer support groups can be challenging to access and maintain due to time constraints of daily life, difficulty navigating services, and lack of connections to networks that hold peer groups. Additionally, individuals with I/DD often have diverse needs that can impact full participation, such as engagement preferences or challenges with communication or social expression.

Whether it is connection to services they were previously unaware of, or the camaraderie of engaging in with like-minded individuals who have shared understanding of one another, peer support groups can provide an outlet for families and youth to express their needs and get the support they need. Although their benefits cannot be understated, a crucial component of a successful group is its design and execution.

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”

# Overview

## Navigating Change

### *Peer Support Groups*

During the first two cohorts, a variety of virtual peer support groups launched. One for English speaking families and one for Spanish speaking families, along with one combined English and Spanish speaking youth group, as all youth interested were bilingual and indicated a preference to meet together. Each group was structured intentionally with the goal of providing an **open, nonjudgmental space** for families to attend at their own pace and engage in any manner they prefer. Meetings were held for an hour with each group beginning with **relational connection** by getting to know each other, sharing their hopes and goals for engaging in the group, and setting up group agreements.

Each meeting focused on the specific needs and interests **identified by participants**, with Navigators centering discussions around those priorities. Based on participant input, a **session schedule** was developed so families could reference and attend meetings aligned with their interests. Guest speakers from community organizations were invited to provide in-depth information about services and programs available to youth and their families, and sessions were recorded to offer flexibility for those unable to attend live. Throughout the process, families built **relationships** and **trust** through the sharing of lived experiences, leading to meaningful moments of peer encouragement and support.

## Navigating Change Peer Support Group Overview

Group	Format	Frequency	Group Agreements	Focus
Family	Virtual*	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate however is comfortable (chat/verbal, camera on/off);</li> <li>• Honor confidentiality to support safe space for vulnerable, honest sharing;</li> <li>• Respect each other’s unique experiences and decisions;</li> <li>• Speak from own experience (“I/we”).</li> </ul>	<p>Topics ranged from</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service navigation</li> <li>• Goal setting</li> <li>• Personal growth</li> <li>• Parent panels</li> <li>• Coordinated Family Support and Independent Living Services</li> <li>• SDRC Day Programs</li> <li>• Self-Determination</li> </ul>
Youth	Virtual*	Bi-weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing is forced – participants are invited to take breaks or turn their camera off as needed;</li> <li>• Respect and support one another by using kind words;</li> <li>• Give new things a try by being open and willing to listen to others and make changes.</li> </ul>	<p>The primary goal of the youth group is to support relationship building while creating opportunities for learning. Topics included</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future Planning</li> <li>• Coping Skills</li> <li>• Stress management</li> <li>• Finances and Budgeting</li> </ul>

*\*a stated preference by the majority of participants, due to transportation and timing limitations*

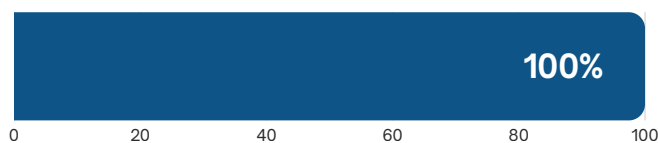
The **Spanish-speaking** family peer support group, though similar in structure, was adapted to focus on, and respect, unique aspects of a primarily Hispanic culture. By offering a Spanish speaking peer support group, families were able to build out connections in their preferred language, which helped create a greater sense of comfort and trust when discussing the complex, emotional, and often unknown topics related to their youth’s transition to adulthood. This foundational level of shared language allowed families to engage more openly and confidently with the facilitator and their peers. This linguistic familiarity also helped amplify the cultural values brought into the groups by the facilitator, like the importance of family-centered decision making and informal support that families often take advantage of. Through the acknowledgement and recognition of these values, the peer support groups were able to help foster culturally relevant environments that promoted connections.

Navigators were intentional in building **sustainability** for a robust peer support group, and parents and youth who met each other through the program were invited to continue supporting each other long after the formal program ended.

## Participant Feedback

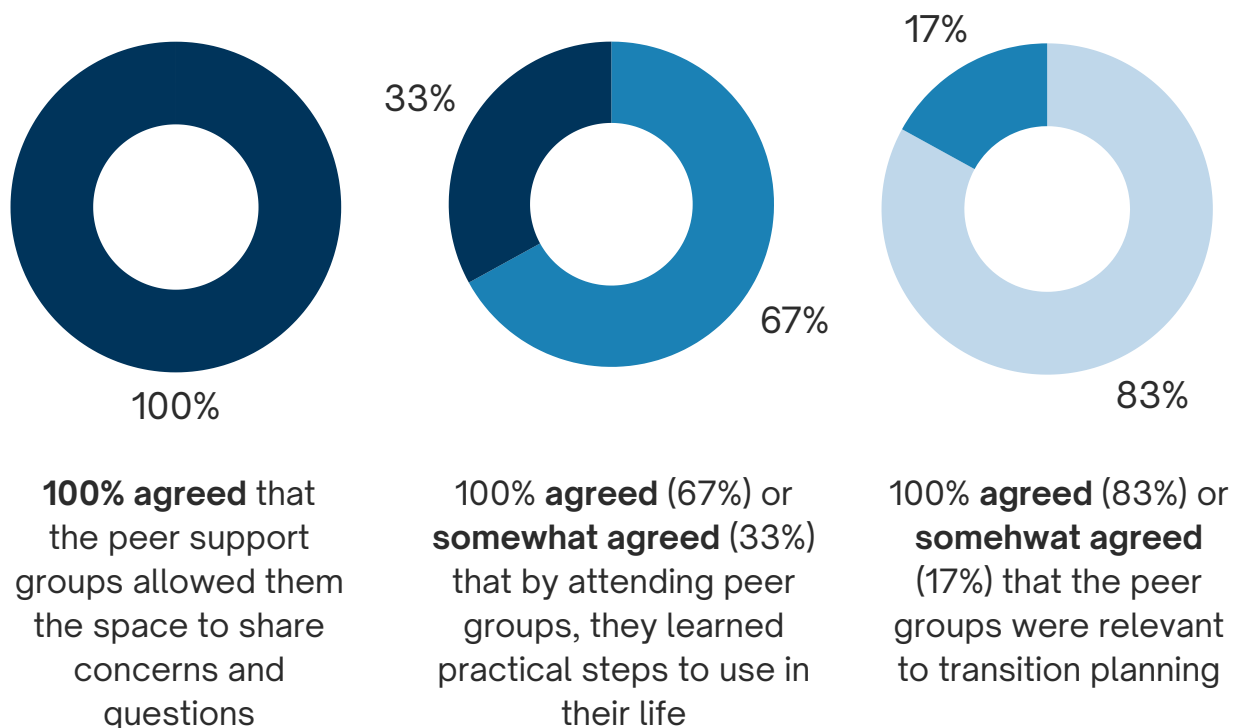
A majority of participants showed evidence of positive outcomes from engaging in the Navigating Change peer support groups, particularly valuing the opportunity to connect with others who understood the emotional, financial, and logistical challenges of supporting a youth with I/DD.

Percentage of participants who felt satisfied with the quality of the peer groups



Many parents expressed that the groups provided a **safe space** to be honest and vulnerable with others who could relate to their experiences and appreciated hearing how other families balanced caregiving responsibilities with caring for themselves. A majority of the respondents stated that by attending the peer support groups, they were able to learn practical steps they could use in their life and that the peer support groups were relevant to the transition planning. In the final program survey, **all respondents** who completed the survey felt satisfied with the overall quality of the peer support groups and all agreed that the peer support groups provided the space to share their concerns.

When participants were asked for additional feedback, one respondent suggested that a survey on preexisting knowledge about SDRC programs or services could help minimize potential information overload. Taking this feedback into account will continue to support the development of the peer support groups and their benefit to the families attending.



# Highlights

## Navigating Change

### *Family Peer Support*

Both the English and Spanish-speaking Family Peer Support groups provided participating families with the opportunity to connect with other families navigating the transition to adulthood alongside their youth with I/DD. While most participants were parents, one sibling regularly attended with her parents and shared that her participation helped her better understand what adulthood would look like for her sister and herself.

Although specific topics varied between the English and Spanish-speaking groups, both focused on increasing families' awareness of available **community resources**, such as recreational services to support social engagement and financial management information to promote youth independence. The groups also emphasized building families' resource navigation skills through guided sessions on how to search for community resources and navigate larger resource documents, contributing to increased confidence in identifying appropriate and suitable programs.

At the same time, some participants expressed a desire for the peer support groups to focus more heavily on **practical education** related to specific services and supports rather than spending extended time on stress reduction and self-care. Additionally, nurturing meaningful connection in a virtual setting presented challenges. Future family cohorts will benefit from a more formalized schedule that **alternates** between educational presentations and sessions focused on social support.

One of the most notable strengths of the **Spanish-speaking cohort** was the depth of peer-to-peer support that emerged within the peer support groups. While facilitators initially guided families in reflecting on moments of progress and success, families quickly began to assume this role themselves. Participants supported one another in recognizing and naming meaningful achievements that might otherwise have been minimized or overlooked. Rather than centering conversations on persistent stressors or unmet needs, families encouraged each other to pause and acknowledge **progress**, no matter how small. These shared reflections reinforced a collective sense of **resilience** and helped families recognize the strengths they have developed throughout their individual journeys.

### Family Transition Specialist Insights

Aside from the direct one-on-one support, the **Family Transition Specialists** felt the peer support groups were the most beneficial element of the Navigating Change program for the families. In addition, many said they learned a lot about families through participating in and facilitating the groups. For example, it became clear how much the mental and emotional stress of the parents can affect their ability to support their youth. This sometimes required establishing healthy and professional boundaries while allowing for time for parental emotional support before they had the capacity to process decisions to be made for and with their youth about educational, vocational, recreational, and living options. The group facilitators made an effort to include both **formal** presentations and **informal** discussions about self-care. One powerful discussion prompt had the parents talk about *their* goals and their vision for their future before discussing the goals they had for their youth. Another challenge for Family Transition Specialists involved the need to create their own systems for communicating with their assigned families that accommodated various communication preferences, availability, and needs.

# Highlights

## Navigating Change


### *Youth Peer Support*

The Youth Peer Support Group provided Navigating Change youth with the opportunity to connect with others who have similar lived experiences. The groups were facilitated by Youth Mentors and centered on youth-led conversations and topics. While Youth Mentors came prepared with a **weekly topic**, they allowed flexibility within discussions to respond to youth interests and needs. Topics discussed in the group were easily carried into , allowing for continued reflection and open discussion, if desired.

The Youth Peer Support Group was experienced by participants as a supportive space to share concerns, ask questions, and practice life skills. Youth reported that the group allowed them to connect with peers while developing practical strategies they could apply in their daily lives. End-of-cohort survey responses reflected positive experiences with both the peer support group and Youth Mentors, with the majority of youth identifying their mentor as the **most impactful component** of the Navigating Change program.

Attendance was higher at the beginning of the group than at the end, as some youth found virtual engagement in a larger group setting less aligned with their preferred level of individual connection. Youth demonstrated a range of communication preferences, including verbal participation, chat-based engagement, and listening without active participation.

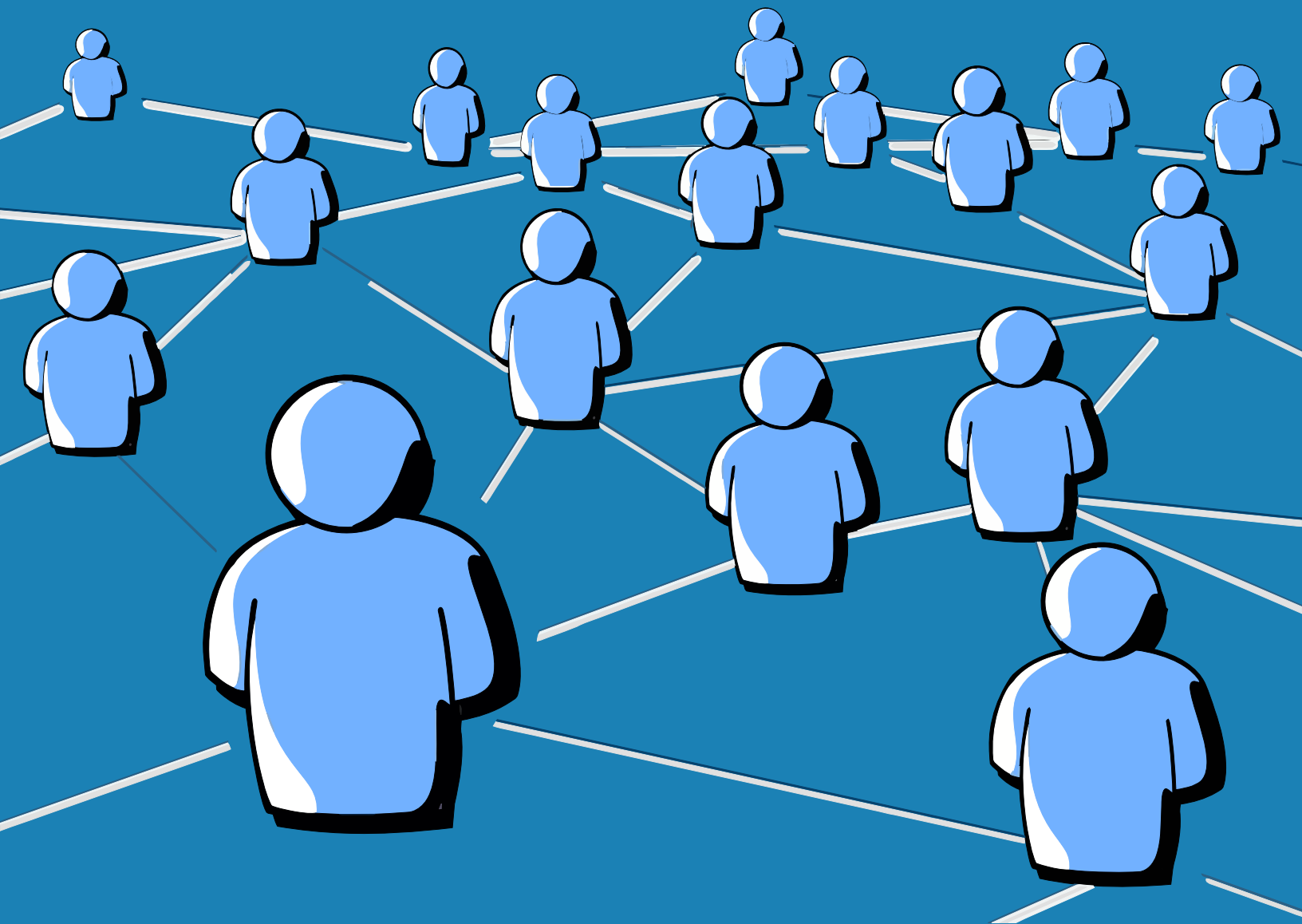




**Recognizing and honoring different communication styles supported stronger connections among participants.”**

A key lesson learned was the importance of designing activities and sharing information in ways that accommodate diverse communication styles, recognizing that not all youth will engage in every component of each session. Recognizing and honoring different communication styles supported stronger connections among participants. For example, two youth who regularly attended but participated less during group sessions were provided with space outside of the group to connect over a shared interest in arts and crafts. This individual-level interaction provided the opportunity for deeper connection and engagement that can be difficult to foster in virtual settings.

Notable differences emerged in the Spanish-speaking cohort related to challenges in establishing consistent and accessible communication with youth participants. These barriers limited the ability to fully establish a Spanish youth peer support group for this cohort. Despite these challenges, the family peer support group within the Spanish-speaking cohort was successfully established, showing that **family units** play a significant role in keeping youth engaged and experiencing opportunity for connections.



# *The Power of Connection*

By intentionally fostering meaningful connections, Navigating Change demonstrates the power of relational interactions to transcend our differences and create organic experiences that formal systems often struggle to find the time and opportunity to do.

## Navigating Change parents shared repeatedly about their anxiety of “not knowing what we don’t know.”

In today’s increasingly virtual world, building meaningful connections can be challenging, but they are more important than ever. For youth with I/DD and their families, navigating the complex care environment of services can be daunting, especially for Transition-Aged Youth (TAY) who must adjust to a new landscape of services while managing changes in their care. With so many programs available and limited guidance on how to choose the

most beneficial services, it is easy for families to feel uncertain and overloaded. Navigating Change parents shared repeatedly about their anxiety of “not knowing what we don’t know.”

Although peer support groups are often formed around a specific disability or experience, Navigating Change focuses on **family advocacy** and **youth development** and is applicable to any youth. An overarching goal of creating meaningful opportunities to exchange lessons learned while emphasizing individual growth through learning and resiliency is what drives Navigating Change peer support groups. Parents and youth have shared that just being in the same space to hear each other’s success stories, or how their peers have learned new skills, has encouraged them to persevere through challenging times. By intentionally fostering meaningful connections, Navigating Change demonstrates the power of relational interactions to transcend our differences and create organic experiences that formal systems often struggle to find the time and opportunity to do.

Having access to community knowledge and expertise – through relationship building, resource sharing, and shared stories – can make a world of difference. It is through community engagement that social cohesion and trust are built. Through this trust, “effective communication and collaboration among community members... creates an environment that enables both individual and community progress”. This progress leads to the collective sharing of resources and information.

## The power of connection is most vividly seen through:

### Shared Experience

Many parents expressed that participating in the group made them feel less alone. Knowing that other people are struggling through similar experiences, and being able to connect over those shared experiences, creates strong bonds and relationships that can help alleviate burdens and struggles.

### Navigating Complex Systems

Moving from child to adult services is difficult for any family. Add on top of that multiple diagnoses, new referrals, and new challenges presented to young adults. Families must navigate through all of these complexities in a fragmented system to help their young adult gain the services they require, all while juggling the day-to-day caregiving for their child with disabilities alongside their own personal needs. Doing this in community with others can alleviate the burden and struggles of finding the right resources and expedite their search for appropriate care.

### Skills Development (particularly for youth)

Empowerment and self-determination are important issues for any youth. Being in community with others learning to voice their concerns and wishes about their care can aid in empowering each other and provide empathy and support for their needs. For parents, the discussions provide an opportunity to share successful strategies for advocating for their youth and for their own self-care and stress management.

### Emotional & Social Well-Being

Isolation can lead to a decline in mental and physical health. Peer support combats this isolation by fostering a sense of belonging. It helps youth and families build a supportive network that understands and empathizes.

### Improved Outcomes

Transition-aged youth with I/DD have goals similar to their peers without I/DD. These youth strive to be as independent as possible, working jobs and engaging in their community. The services provided to these youth can help them attain their goals and help them lead successful, independent lives.

# Conclusion

In response to the challenges of isolation, complex systems, and limited access to culturally responsive support, this report has examined peer support as a **critical strategy** for strengthening capacity and connection among TAY I/DD and their caregivers. The experiences shared throughout Navigating Change demonstrate that peer support is not a supplemental service, but a foundational approach that fosters belonging, empowerment, and resilience for both youth and families during periods of transition.

Through intentionally designed peer support structures, Navigating Change created spaces where participants could share lived experiences, learn from one another, and build confidence navigating complex systems of care. These connections reduce feelings of isolation, supported skill development, and reinforced families' and youth's sense of agency as they planned for adulthood. Importantly, the program's adaptability across English and Spanish-speaking cohorts highlights the value of culturally and linguistically responsive peer support models that meet communities where they are.

The insights and outcomes shared in this report underscore the power of peer connection to bridge gaps that formal systems alone cannot address. As SPI continues to expand Navigating Change into additional regions and other languages, these findings affirm the importance of centering peer support as a core strategy for promoting well-being, strengthening networks of care, and supporting transition-aged youth with I/DD and their families in achieving their goals.

# Acknowledgements

The family peer support groups offered by Navigating Change were informed by the San Diego Caregiver Connections (SDCC) peer support framework developed by the San Diego State University Center for Excellence in Aging & Longevity (CEAL).<sup>7</sup> SDCC is an inclusive model designed to strengthen caregiver well-being through training, resource access, and peer connection, with a focus on reaching diverse and under-resourced populations. Central to this framework is the role of peer networks in fostering emotional well-being, resilience, and problem-solving through shared lived experience. Navigating Change adapted this framework to address the distinct needs of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families, applying cross-disciplinary peer support practices to support system navigation and sustained engagement.



# Endnotes

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