



VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth)

www.viacharacter.org

**Supplement for Use When Supporting Youth with
Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to
Complete the VIA-Youth**



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Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities (KUCDD)

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The creation of this document was supported by a grant

from the VIA Institute On Character in Cincinnati, OH, USA.

Suggested Citation:

Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Forber-Pratt, A. J., & Palmer, S. B. (2015). *VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth): Supplement for use when supporting youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities to complete the VIA-Youth*. Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities.

VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth

VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth):

Supplement for Use When Supporting Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to Complete the VIA-Youth

Researchers at the Beach Center on Disability and the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Kansas have been engaged in efforts to validate the VIA-Youth with young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The VIA-Youth consists of 96 short statements that assess 24 character strengths (humor, creativity, social intelligence, etc.) and 6 virtues (wisdom, courage, etc.). Youth rate the degree to which each statement represents them on a five-point scale. After completing the VIA-Youth, youth get information on their highest rated character strengths and virtues. This information can be used to build strengths-based interventions based on character strengths. The VIA-Youth was originally developed for adolescents without disabilities, and it is important to be sure the tool can be used effectively with youth with disabilities. Our work with students and teachers has suggested that the VIA-Youth is valid and reliable for use with adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are able to, with supports, answer questions that require self-report ratings.

To enable teachers and other support providers to meaningfully use the VIA-Youth with adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities, we have developed a guide that provides some key issues to think about when working with adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The purpose of this document is to provide general suggestions for teachers and other support providers as they complete the VIA-Youth with adolescents with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Below we provide recommendations for possible adaptations, ways to effectively provide support, and suggestions for simplifying the cognitive demands of the measure, when needed. Ultimately, considering these supports can enable people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to access and gain meaningful information from the VIA-Youth that can be used to guide instruction and supports planning.

“Students found it eye-opening to delve into information about themselves.”

– Special Education Teacher

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Ways Teachers and Support Providers can use the VIA-Youth

Schools and communities play important roles in promoting positive character development for youth. Educators and other support persons we have worked with to validate the VIA-Youth used the scale in multiple ways to understand and begin to explore the character strengths of adolescents students with intellectual and developmental disabilities they support. Information from the VIA-Youth has been used by teachers to begin conversations with students about their “signature strengths” (i.e., their highest rated strengths), as well as how those signature strengths can be used to guide goal setting and future planning. Some teachers used the VIA-Youth results to guide the identification of goals and future planning centered on strengths (e.g., considering these strengths when thinking about college and employment options or when thinking about social and recreational activities and leadership roles). Other teachers used the VIA-Youth in the context of instruction related to social-emotional learning and engaging in critical reflection on character development. Special education teachers in our research found that students began to engage in more conversations about their strengths and future goals after completing the survey and reviewing their signature strengths. They also used this information to engage students in problem solving about ways in which they could use their strengths. As students had opportunities to engage in this process, they became more confident and aware of their own strengths, and could also identify strengths in their peers which in turn helped to create a more positive learning environment for all.

General Recommendations

When you support anyone, and specifically when you support adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities, to complete the VIA-Youth, you want to take steps to ensure it reflects the perspectives of the young person who is completing the survey. It is important to:

- Let the youth answer the questions – do not provide or fill in answers for him or her. If the youth is unable to, or does not want to answer a question, it is okay to skip it, rather than completing it for him or her.
- If a youth does the VIA-Youth by themselves, look over his or her responses and make sure one response was not marked for all of the questions. If this is the case, the student may not have understood the rating scale, and may need more supports to answer the questions meaningfully. Possible supports are described below.
- Make sure you stay as neutral as possible, sometimes youth can pick up on subtle facial expressions or gestures. Even if you do not necessarily agree with a youth’s response, remember it is his or her response and perspective that we are seeking. If you think the youth does not understand the question, feel free to provide a definition or example of the character strength that the question is assessing to provide more meaningful opportunities for responses that reflect the youth’s perspective.

There are also some specific accommodations and cognitive supports that may be useful, depending on the support needs of the youth taking the VIA-Youth. Adolescents can take the VIA-Youth at www.viacharacter.org.

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Accommodations

- **Use a place marker** to help the youth keep track of the line he or she is reading and responding to on the paper or the screen (i.e., hold a pen over the word and line to be read, use a blank sheet of paper to hide the additional questions below the one being answered).
- **Write or Click the youth's answers** as he or she says the response aloud, if this is what the youth completing the measure wants you to do and this makes responding easier.
- **Create a larger text version** of the questions and/or Likert scale (or zoom in on computer screen) for ease of use when youth are taking the survey at www.viacharacter.org.

Cognitive Supports

- **Divide the VIA-Youth into smaller sections** that can be completed over time. The student may take breaks as needed since the VIA-Youth does not have to be completed in one sitting.
- **Read the items aloud to the youth**, if this helps understanding. Be sure and ask the youth if this is all right for you to do.
- **Provide words of neutral encouragement** (i.e., "Your best guess is fine.", "We have a few more pages left," "What do you think?").
- **Define words within or Give context** about items, without hints about how to answer. Provide examples that are relevant to the youth's life. For questions about the character strength of honesty you might define honesty and provide an example in the following way (based on a recent experience the student had).
Example: "Honesty means telling the truth, like when you returned \$5 you found in the bathroom that wasn't yours."
- **Check to make sure the youth is not just responding with the last answer he or she heard.** If you think this is happening, you can change the order of response options and see if the youth answers the last option most of the time.
- **Watch to see if a young person responds using one consistent response**, without really thinking about the item. If you suspect this happening, stop the assessment and ask the young person to talk about the item and his or her response. This may be a sign the youth needs a break, or more supports to understand the rating scale.

"My students benefited from having the scale reworded so that they better related to it. This matched their needs and helped me get better responses."

– *Special Education Teacher*

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- **Think about modifications to the rating scale, if there are issues with consistency or inconsistency in responding. Ways that teachers have done this include:**

- a. **Creating a modified version of the rating scale** to help youth better understand the response choices (i.e., having a picture of a smiling face as in “yes” to demonstrate the “Very Much Like Me” response to a frowning face as in “no” to demonstrate “Not At All Like Me” response). Be certain however, that such icons or graphics are age-appropriate for the youth.
- b. **Creating a modified text version of the rating scale** with larger font for “Very Much Like Me” and smaller font for “Not At All Like Me”. When explaining this continuum, gesture with two hands to indicate the size differences.
- c. **Changing the response format of the Likert scale responses** to yes/no and then carefully supporting the youth to identify a rating on the five-point scale. We recommend trying the strategies mentioned previously first, but in some cases, a youth may be able to respond more reliably using a yes/no format. It may be important to re-read the item if altering the response format to yes/no as well, so that the youth remembers what is being asked.

If this is needed:

- » **Read the item:** For #2. *I think that life is very exciting.*
- » **Divide the response** into a two-part decision.
- » **Ask:** Is this like you or NOT like you?

If the response is “Not Like You”, then mark the fifth response from the left and move on to the next item.

If the response is “Like You”, you will go through each of the positive responses to see which one is most descriptive:

- › Ask: Is this *very much* like you? (Wait for yes/no response)
- › Read the item: 2. *I think that life is very exciting.*
- › Ask: Is this *mostly* like you? (Wait for yes/no response)
- › Read the item: 2. *I think that life is very exciting.*
- › Ask: Is this *somewhat* like you? (Wait for yes/no response)
- › Read the item: 2. *I think that life is very exciting.*
- › Ask: Is this *a little* like you? (Wait for yes/no response)
- › Read the item: 2. *I think that life is very exciting.*
- › Ask: Is this *not at all* like you? (Wait for yes/no response)

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Item-Specific Recommendations

- Some items may be worded in a way that can be confusing for some young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Often items that contain negatives such as “not” or “don’t” can be difficult. You can reword the items to make them easier to understand. If you do reword the items, make a note that these items were reworded, so that the scoring can be adjusted. For the online version, mark the opposite response (if the students responds 4, score this as a 2) to enable the computer scoring to effectively identify the highest rated strengths.

Here are some examples of items teachers often had to reword.

Original Item	Reworded
4. I am not a show off.	I am a show off.
17. I often don't feel thankful.	I am thankful/grateful.
31. I don't boast about what I achieve.	I boast/brag about what I achieve.
58. I don't give less than 100% when I am working on something.	I give 100% when I am working on something.

Some items may contain specific words that may be confusing to understand. These words tend to be less concrete, and teachers found some of the following rewordings helpful.

Original Item	Reworded
5. I am less than honest if it will keep me out of trouble.	I lie to get out of trouble.
25. I have a lot of enthusiasm.	I am excited about many things.
31. I don't boast about what I achieve.	I don't brag about what I have done.

When youth have difficulty with items that call for making a judgment about a general character trait (e.g., one item says “I don't give less than 100% when I am working on something), you can make this more concrete as well by reading the item, then saying, “Think of the last time you worked on something, did you work really hard?”

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Ultimately, each young person with intellectual and developmental disabilities may need different supports to complete the VIA-Youth. It is important to remember that the main goal is to get the **young person's perspective** on their strengths so this information can be used in intervention and support planning. It may be necessary to try a variety of options to support a young person with intellectual or developmental disabilities to complete the VIA-Youth. It is useful to think about what strategies you use to support the youth currently, and consider using the same supports and accommodations as a starting point for completing the VIA-Youth. In some cases, even after trying a number of different options, the person administering the survey may not feel that the answers he/she is getting are valid or may not be representative of the youth's perspective. In this case, one option would be to check with a reliable informant who knows the youth with disabilities well regarding some of the responses. Or, the person administering the survey might simply decide that the individual's responses will not be a good reflection of their abilities and discontinue use of the VIA-Youth. In this case there are other options for gathering the perspectives of reliable informants on character strengths. Ultimately, however, gathering information on strengths is a great way to enable students to better understand themselves and understand how they can leverage the things they are good at to further their growth and development across many areas.

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“My students loved being able to share about themselves...it was neat to see them identify how they perceive themselves compared to how others perceive them. It was a lot of fun to do this work!”

– *Special Education Teacher*





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