The TSSUS Conference Youth Program Experience

**Purpose** The youth program's purpose is to provide a safe environment for conference attendees (under 19) to make friends, feel free to be themselves, and share their experiences about TS if they want to. The youth schedule alternates crafts, games, interactive discussions, and age-appropriate skill building.

**Group attendees often create life-long friendships** It's exciting to see them continue to support one another even years later at each other's weddings, adoptions, and everyday social media happenings.

**There are 6 youth groups** and the final age determination for each group is based on the number of kids that are registered one month prior to the conference.

- High School
- Middle School
- Grades 3-5
- Grades K-2
- Non-TS (Older siblings and children of those with TS)
- Pre-K Non-TS (Younger siblings and those in Pre-K)

**We include children of all abilities**, and the program has almost 100 attendees, limiting opportunities for outings inside and outside the hotel. Please keep in mind that if a child needs more attention than we can offer, we encourage the parent to help in the youth room or check them in/out as needed. The youth program consent form allows you to communicate special needs to your child's leader (our staff cannot change diapers or offer one-to-one support) because we aim to be prepared and allow you to enjoy the conference free of interruption.

*A parent or guardian must remain on the hotel property while a child is checked into the youth program.*

Our youth team leaders LOVE volunteering, and they are crucial to the success of the Conference.
Youth Activities (Tentative)

**Memory Books** - each participant will be given a folder to decorate and develop those all-important executive functioning skills by documenting the weekend in age-appropriate ways. These can be used for taking session notes or for contact information of friends.

**Improv with Maria Duprez** - Maria studied theatre throughout college and developed lessons about improvisation to help participants come out of their shells and work through social anxiety and fears in a fun filled, lighthearted way.

**Different Age Group Interaction** - Older groups visit younger groups and talk about all things TS, for instance “what did you do when someone called you short?” Bonds are created, the older kids feel important, and the younger ones feel heard. It offers individuals a sense of pride, responsibility, and someone they can relate to.

**Anxiety** - Learning to cope with anxiety through age-appropriate mindfulness lessons will help attendees to become the best version of themselves.

**Crafts** - Various age-appropriate crafts will be introduced throughout the two days.

**Self-Esteem** - Discussion about accepting and loving who you are, uniqueness and all.

**Nutrition** - age-appropriate presentations on healthy food choices. We will focus on how different foods make you feel better or worse depending on the nutrients it contains.

**Endocrinology Q&A with Dr. Michelle Rivera**
The middle, high school, and 11 years and up non-TS groups will be able to ask questions and receive age-appropriate answers.

**Snack Off** - Attendees will be able to create their own unique version of a healthy snack, show it off to others, then eat it and/or share.

**Chill Time** - free time will be available each day with time to relax, play a game or chat with friends.
Youth Program Leadership

Presenters

Natalie Portway, Group Volunteer Coordinator – I am a high school math teacher from sunny southern California. I have two adopted boys, Joe and Nico, and my days are filled with homework, sport and snuggles. In my scarce free time, I enjoy baking and working out, especially running and kick boxing. (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2013)

Youth Presenters

Mira Cohen
Mara Gittess, LPC
Michelle Rivera, MD

Pre-K and Children 5-10 without TS

Andrew Stephens, Leader – I love working with kids because my mother works in a special education classroom, and I’ve been around children with special needs most of my life. My sister, with TS is in her early twenties and my mother, Terra Williams, has volunteered as a TSSUS youth leader for years. When I’m not working, I enjoy spending time with my family and watching sports. (Group leader; brother of someone with TS and youth team member since 2013)

Becca Aye, Co-Leader – I plan to attend college to become a Sonographer. I’m a baby/toddler/young child magnet. I attended my first conference at 7 months old, and this year is my 11th conference; they have always been the highlight of my summers. I have volunteered as a 4-H camp counselor for grades 3-6 for the last two years and am a grade 1 and 4 elementary school classroom helper. (Young woman with TS and youth team member since 2024)
Kindergarten – 2nd Grade

**Brooke Kaczynski, Leader** - I'm a first-grade teacher in Nacogdoches, TX, and I have volunteered for the Society for many years (my mom is Cindy Scurlock). When I attended the conference as a child, the youth program was a highlight of my year and I have just as much fun being a leader. I enjoy spending time with my friends and family, walking, and my cat, Hunter. (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2018)

**Micaela Durant, Co-Leader** – I’m a Kindergarten teacher in Murfreesboro, TN and got married in June of this year! I have fond memories of singing in the conference talent show and attending the youth program myself, so it seems natural for me to give back by volunteering. (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2024).

3rd-5th Grade

**Megan Banfield, Leader** - I am an elementary school teacher in the Houston area. One of my besties has TS and I love traveling abroad. (Friend of someone with TS and youth team member since 2023)

**Natoli Barbera, Co-Leader** - I'm stoked to be back after several years away! I began my career as a teacher and then spent ten years working on Broadway in NYC. For the last five years, I've been living my best life living and working in Orlando, FL. (Woman with TS and youth team member on and off for over a decade).

Middle School

**Danielle Cignarella, Leader** – I love being a positive role for the children and showing them, they can do anything they put their minds to. As a teacher, I have worked with children and teens for much of my life and led service clubs such as Autism Speaks and Big Brothers Big Sisters. (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2017)

**Christina Guglielmo, Co-Leader** – I am an adamant crusader for spreading knowledge within the medical community to show that those with TS can do anything and everything. I’m a huge lover of Broadway and am employed with Broadway Across America. I live in sunny Florida. (Woman with TS and youth team member on and off for over a decade).
High School

**Terra Williams** – I've been a paraprofessional in the school system, working with students with special needs for many years. I love spending time with my three children and have enjoyed helping my daughter plan a wedding this year. (Parent of someone with TS and youth team member since 2013)

**Chris Portway, Helper/Floater** – As the parent of 2 young boys, I enjoy interacting with the kids at the conference as well as helping make the youth program fun and safe. For the last couple years, I have been helping my wife create the schedule and making sure it runs smoothly. (Husband of someone with TS and youth team member since 2018)

**Elizabeth Pawlik, helper** – I am from Manassas, Virginia (right outside of Washington DC). I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Biology from Bridgewater College in May 2024. I am working towards becoming a veterinarian and working as a kennel and vet assistant at a veterinary hospital. I have attended every TSSUS conference since 2013 except one. After transitioning out of the youth group, I wanted to continue my involvement in the conferences, so here I am! (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2024)

Non-TS, 11-17 Years

**Maria Duprez, Leader** – I teach at a community college in Delaware. I enjoyed living and teaching at an academy in China for many years. (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2016)

**Brianna Bertrand, Co-Leader** – I’m a management assistant with Ventura County in southern California. I’m a native of southern California and lived in New Orleans for a few years! I’m a devoted cat mom to Kasai and Tempest. I love all things true crime and am passionate about equality. (Woman with TS and youth team member since 2024)

**Ryan Cignarella, Co-Leader** – I’m a senior manager at GlaxoSmithKline working on key medicines for patients in research. I openly share the story of our reproductive health journey and we now have a son. The journey has taught us the value of flexibility and free thinking. I welcome every day of this journey as we prepare for a bigger family. (Husband of someone with TS and youth team member since 2023)