



“YoungStar really provided a path to take a critical look at our program and see which areas needed improvement.”

- Jordan St. Clair, Early Childhood Specialist,  
Vision Forward Association, Milwaukee

## Our program “can be different, but still be quality.”

### Responding to Children’s Needs through YoungStar

The Vision Forward Association formed about 7 years ago when The Badger Association and The Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired Children merged to better meet the needs of the children and adults they served. Vision Forward’s mission states that they seek to, “empower, educate, and enhance the lives of individuals impacted by vision loss through all of life’s transitions.” As they do through the Vision Forward preschool program, serving children with visual impairment and various other needs. Tracey Stanislawski, Early Education Manager, oversees Vision Forward preschool, and supported the program’s transition into YoungStar. “We decided as a team we wanted to move it more towards preschool readiness,” said Tracey, stating that previously the program took more of a medical focus than early education. “[Programs like ours] are a real need in the world of children with visual impairments because there is a gap in early childhood supports. YoungStar really fit naturally into that.” Vision Forward preschool has some distinctly different practices from most early childhood programs, to meet the needs of their children. Class sizes are kept small, and include speech, occupational and physical therapy for children. Some children have multiple needs, and may need assistance eating or with mobility. All of this had to be considered as changes were made to meet YoungStar requirements, such as the child portfolios the program now maintains, environment rearrangement, and the integration of Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards into daily routines.

### Building Relationships with Quality Care

Since starting YoungStar, some of the most positive changes have been in the children Vision Forward serves. Prior to YoungStar, being more medically focused, the program separated differently functioning children. Now children of all abilities are integrated and there is a real focus on social emotional needs. “These children are whole children and they can learn from each other,” emphasized Tracey. She shared a story of two boys in the program who are visually impaired and nonverbal, whose families encountered one another at an event outside of the program. The boys recognized each other and were interacting. One of the boys’ mothers wrote to Vision Forward afterwards, thanking them for the opportunity, which grew from their program. “This is the first time my son has had a friend,” she wrote. Another parent, Andrea Spindler, whose 4-year-old daughter has been a part of the program in some capacity since she was months old, said that Vision Forward has been “a little light in the darkness,” for her family. She said they work as a community to know her daughter and work with her needs and personality. “It’s nice as a mom to feel so comfortable with who your daughter is with every day,” added Andrea. Jordan St. Clair, Early Childhood Specialist at Vision Forward, noted that their YoungStar Technical Consultant, Sarah Hernandez, and other YoungStar staff supported the program in getting to where they are by listening to what they needed to best serve the children in their care, while guiding them to meet YoungStar goals. “We were so happy and impressed...it really blew us out of the water seeing YoungStar staff so willing to work with a program with needs as unique as ours,” said Jordan. Vision Forward preschool recently reached a 4 Star after undergoing a Formal Rating, and will continue to work towards a 5 Star.

### Wisconsin’s Stars are Shining

YoungStar informs parents, recognizes quality providers and brings resources and support to programs committed to improving quality. But what it’s really all about is helping Wisconsin children shine bright.