



Envisioning an Authentic Transition to Adult Life: Information for Families

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In the disability **world**, “transition” is the time when students with disabilities get ready to leave high school and move to adult life. Families often find the transition process confusing, with rushed meetings and limited choices offered for their loved ones. The transition process can seem especially unfriendly to those where English is a second language or who have limited experience with navigating systems. It does not have to be this way.

Transition should be a time of excitement and exploration, when young people begin setting future goals and building the skills they need to achieve those goals. In short, transition is not about staying in a program for a certain number of years or accepting limited choices, but about helping students express what a good life looks like for them and supporting them to get there. This document will help you think beyond traditional options and forge a new vision for what adult life can look like for your loved one with a disability.



Old Ways and New Thinking



You may get information on options for life after high school that are based on what is available in an existing “system.” Some systems are built on outdated ideas about what people with certain types of disabilities can accomplish, instead of what is the best for individuals. This type of “system thinking” can lower expectations and limit life choices. For example, students with significant intellectual or developmental disabilities might get routed into restrictive day programs instead of being given opportunities to explore real jobs in the community. It is up to the entire IEP team, including students and families, to recognize this limited way of thinking and advocate

for goals and support options that encourage personal growth through new experiences. This is especially important for students from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The grid below provides some examples of old ways and new ways to think about common transition options.

Old Idea	New Perspective
Transition is a specific service and there is no need to worry about it until their teenage years.	Families can create high expectations and encourage goal-setting beginning during the early childhood years. Starting early makes the transition process easier.
Educators know best and will take care of formal transition planning. All families have to do is attend IEP meetings.	Nobody knows the student better than the student and their families, and families play a valued and essential role in making sure transition plans reflect a student’s interests and future goals.
It is better to be realistic about what people with disabilities can do. That way nobody gets their hopes up.	Failure is an option and are opportunities to grow and learn. Students should not be restricted by what other people think they will be able to do. Allow the dignity of risk.
It is always best to get full guardianship over your student with a disability.	Families should be given information on alternatives to guardianship so a student’s individual rights can be maintained whenever possible.
Formal, eligibility-based services are the only source of supports for adults with disabilities.	There are not enough funds available for formal state services to support all who may need it. Families need to plan creative ways to support their loved one’s meaningful life.
Transitioning directly into a day program is the best option for students with significant disabilities.	All students should be given the opportunity to explore real employment and experience the benefits real employment brings people. Having a significant disability does not mean having a life void of new experiences and responsibilities.

Never Too Early, Never Too Late

As a parent or caregiver of a youth with a disability, you may feel overwhelmed thinking about what life will look like for your loved one after the school years. This is not an uncommon way to feel, but it is important to begin thinking about transition as early as possible in your child’s life. That may feel difficult with all of the pressures of day-to-day life, not to mention the added responsibility of having a child with support needs.



It may be helpful to think about transition in terms of “preparation.” Ask yourself: “what can I do during each life stage to prepare my loved one for success as an adult?”

Consider the strategies in the grid below:

Life Stage	Transition Message/Activities
Pre-School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great life is possible for people with all types of disabilities. • High expectations are key. • The path to adulthood is the same as with any child. There just may need to be some additional supports. • Start giving choices early on.
Elementary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin communicating high expectations to your child. Having a disability will not define what they can achieve. • Begin conversations about employment. “What type of job do you think looks interesting?” • Get in the habit of teaching real skills, such as understanding money and using technology. • Help your child participate in or lead their IEP meeting.
Middle School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin making the connection to interests, jobs and skills/education needed to work in desired job field. • Understand and try to get on current wait list for services in your state. Not everyone needs formal services, but getting on the list does not hurt.
High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help your loved one have a clear vision for what a good life looks like - including where he wants to live, whom he wants to spend time with, and what he wants to do for work. Communicate this vision to all educators and service providers. • Advocate for as many community-based work experiences as possible. This provides the opportunity to practice the jobs they are interested in. • Connect with other families who have gone through the transition years. They will be a wealth of information and support. • High school students should be participating and/or leading their IEP team meetings. This is a great place to practice letting others know what supports they need.

Life Stage	Transition Message/Activities
Post High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All placements or programs are flexible. Make sure your loved one has a voice and opportunities for growth. • Plan for what will happen once you are no longer able to support your loved one. • What makes a good life are the things that don't often get planned for, such as new experiences, hobbies, and relationships. Help your loved one do more of the things they want to do.

Competitive Employment

People with disabilities often are placed into situations that look like real employment, but are not. “Competitive employment” means having a job in the community, alongside people without disabilities, making minimum wage or prevailing wage, doing a job of a person’s choosing. Having a real job with real wages brings multiple benefits, and should be part of a student’s transition plan.



Meaningful Day Services

Day programs are common options for people with significant disabilities who qualify for a certain level of support. Not all day programs are created equal, however. Families should advocate for day programming that includes activities driven by individuals, and skill building that leads to opportunities for employment in the community.





Summary

The transition to adulthood for students with disabilities is an exciting time, and the goal is clear: to help students identify what a good life looks like and help them build the skills and get the supports needed to achieve it. Families, who are crucial partners in the process, may get information that is system-focused and rooted in low expectations. To combat this, families can start early to prepare their loved ones for adult life, and advocate for transition goals that help students fulfill their potential.



Key Resources

[Open Doors for Multicultural Families' series of multicultural/multilingual transition guides](#)

The Life After High School: A Guide for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families of Youth with Disabilities is offered in multiple languages. The guide is organized into five sections that includes an introduction to transition planning, self-advocacy, transition daily living, safety and security and community living.

[Charting the LifeCourse Tools](#)

Charting the LifeCourse is a framework developed to help individuals and families of all abilities and at any age or stage of life, develop a vision for a good life. The tools are a guide to think about what individuals need to know and do, identify how to find or develop supports, and discover what it takes to live the lives they want to live.

[Family Employment Awareness Training \(FEAT\)](#)

Family Employment Awareness Training (FEAT) was designed to help transition-age youth (ages 14–22) with significant support needs bridge the gap between secondary school and adulthood. It is a two-part training for youth, their families, and support professionals with the goal to raise expectations about competitive integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities and to increase their knowledge of how to access local, state, and federal resources.

[Hire Me South Carolina Family Resources Page](#)

Hire Me SC is a campaign that promotes a culture of inclusion across the state of South Carolina, one in which employment for every individual, disability or not, is the norm rather than the exception. The family page of the website provides resources and information on supported decision making, goal setting, finding a support network and answers key questions around competitive integrated employment.

[I'm Determined](#)

The I'm Determined project focuses on providing instruction, models, and opportunities to practice skills associated with self-determined behavior. On the site you will find tools, videos, resources and success stories for youth, families and educators.

[PACER's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment](#)

PACER, a National Parent Information and Resource Center, provides materials and resources to parents, youth, and professionals on ways to engage families around transition.

About the Authors

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About TransCen - transcen.org



TransCen, Inc., is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving education and employment success of youth and young adults with disabilities. TransCen provides employment services to youth and adults with disabilities by identifying their passions, skills, and talents, and developing them into career opportunities. They also provide training

and consultation around the country to families and professionals within state agencies, school districts, adult service organizations, and employers who work with or employ people with disabilities.

About RAISE - raisecenter.org



In 2014, SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN), a parent-led and family-centered non-profit parent training and information center (PTI), was funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to provide support to individuals with disabilities through the transition from secondary school and into competitive employment and independent living.

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