

Ten Tips That May Help Your Child's Transition To Adulthood

Planning for your child's transition from adolescence to adulthood is one of the most important things you can do to pave the way to a successful future. In Minnesota, transition planning and services required by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) begin when your child with a disability is in the ninth grade or before if needed. You and your child will start learning new skills side-by-side. As your child begins to take on more responsibility, you will find new ways to provide support. Regardless of physical or cognitive ability, your child can play an active role in the transition journey, and in determining his or her own life, if you provide encouragement and guidance along the way.

This transition period can be a challenge. Depending on your child's disability, you may need to consider everything from postsecondary education and employment to housing and finances. As you and your son or daughter plan for the future, consider these tips to help build a successful transition.

You can help your son or daughter:

1. Develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

All young people need a strong sense of their strengths, abilities, interests, and values. If students have a disability, they should also be aware of how it might affect them at work, in the community, and in their educational pursuits, and should be able to explain it to others. Helping youth speak with understanding about their disability is one step to empowering them as they take on adult responsibilities of work, education, and independent living.

Many young adults know that they have received special education services but do not understand why. They may ignore the supports they need in employment or independent living, which may cause unnecessary frustration and low self-

esteem. It is important for young adults to have knowledge about themselves and their skills. If they do not know this, they can be at risk. Transition is a wonderful time to explore how youth will talk about their disability in different settings and ask for any support or accommodation they will need. You can make sure your child has a variety of opportunities to learn and practice advocacy and self-determination skills in the classroom, at student work sites, and in the community. The IEP could provide some of these opportunities. It is important for students to develop the skills to talk about their disability before they enter the workforce and postsecondary education. In order to be protected from discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the individual must disclose information about his or her disability to an employer or educational institution and explain the need for specific accommodations.

2. Expand social and community support networks.

Social and community networks are more than fun; they are important tools that help tie people into the community and provide a wider network of support. As children with disabilities become adults with disabilities, they may need support from a variety of sources. Start now to develop helpful social and community support networks for your child. Who do you know in your family, social group, professional circle, faith-based community, or other sphere who could help provide social, recreational, work, or volunteer experiences for your young adult? Transition planning that addresses opportunities for social relationships and recreation can build a bridge to new friendships, potential employment opportunities, and a wide range of natural community supports. Consider contacting adults in the community who have the same disability as your child to

learn what kinds of supports they use. Peer mentoring opportunities are sometimes available through disability organizations such as the Center for Independent Living (<http://www.virtualcil.net/cils/>). Parents may feel there is a risk in allowing their son or daughter to develop new relationships and friendships, but building natural and shared relationships is an important first step for all young adults.

3. Build a work résumé.

Many young people struggle to find work experiences that help them compete in the job market. Summer jobs, helping neighbors, and volunteering are great solutions. Traditional summer jobs such as mowing lawns or dog walking can be described on résumés as self-employment enterprises if your child creates business cards and flyers on a computer or demonstrates other business skills. By taking part in a variety of community activities, young adults can develop employment and social skills while building a résumé and increasing their network of potential employer contacts. Your son or daughter is more likely to find future paid employment if he or she demonstrates interests, abilities, initiative, and dedication to work through community and volunteer activities. The participation of a parent, friend, or group of peers may help enrich the experience. Many summer jobs and volunteering experiences can be found through your network of friends, family, and social organizations. Also check out The Community Living webpage for volunteering opportunities in Minnesota: www.c3online.org/commLiving.html

4. Learn “soft” employment skills.

In addition to the work skills people need for their jobs, they also need “*soft skills*.” These include such things as being able to accept direction, return from breaks on time, deal with conflict, have the confidence to make decisions, and engage in appropriate personal communication. *Soft skills* also include dressing properly for the workplace, focusing on the job at hand, asking for help when needed, calling in when ill, and using typical responses such as “good morning” and “thank you.” Many of the rules of the workplace are unspoken or assumed. An employer is more likely to be patient with an employee learning the technical aspects of a job if basic soft skills are in place. You can help your young adult develop these skills by teaching them at home, and then providing opportunities for practice at school and in social situations. Additional information on soft skills is available online at <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-28> and on a CD available from PACER Center, Top Secret Job Skills: Declassified, www.pacer.org/publications/transition.asp

5. Practice money management skills.

Financial education is an important part of transition. Children need the self-determination skills developed through saving, spending, gift giving, and budgeting. Parents can begin by opening a savings account and taking their son or daughter to the bank regularly to deposit part of his or her allowance, earnings, or cash gifts so that he or she becomes familiar with financial institutions. Learning how to use an ATM card for saving and withdrawals might be appropriate for many youth. Your child can practice their skills if you include him or her in budget decisions concerning birthday parties, holiday dinners, or family vacations. As youth transition to independent living and adult responsibilities, their previous experience with spending and saving will allow them to participate more fully in their own quality-of-life decisions. Additional information is available at www.pacer.org/publications/possibilities/

If your son or daughter qualifies (or may qualify as an adult at the age of 18) for State or Federal benefits due to disability and limited financial resources, planning ahead is important. The Minnesota Disability Linkage line at 1-866-333-2466 and the Disability Benefits 101 link at <http://mn.db101.org> provide information on benefit programs, work incentives and benefit estimators.

6. Connect with adult service providers.

Upon graduation from high school, IDEA special education services end. This means that the IEP team will no longer be available to coordinate disability-related services that your child may need, such as accommodations, transportation, physical or speech therapy, and job development services. All of these services and others, if available, will very likely be provided by different agencies, each with its own application processes, different eligibility standards, and definitions of disability. No one piece of legislation defines services to youth with disabilities after IDEA services end. Governmental programs, such as vocational rehabilitation services, developmental disabilities administration, public mental health services, and supplemental security benefits, have legal requirements and eligibility guidelines. Young adults, to the extent they are able, will have to take responsibility for evaluating, applying for, and coordinating these services. Confidentiality policies and age of majority (age 18 in Minnesota) may establish a barrier between parents and service professionals. The IEP team can help families determine what adult services are available and initiate connections. It is important for the future success of young adults that these connections are established before graduation whenever possible.

7. Explore housing options.

While some young adults may stay on in the family home at least for the short term, others may live in residential housing with services, cooperative housing, a dormitory at an educational institution, an apartment with or without roommates, or they may own a home. Different types of housing and supervision oversight might be appropriate during different periods of an adult's life. The choice of housing is often dependent upon the community and family's resource and support system. There are both federal and state subsidized housing programs. If your son or daughter receives county services, your social worker can help you explore options. Networking with other families may provide valuable suggestions and contacts. When evaluating possibilities, it is helpful to start with a list of desired criteria that matches your vision for your young adult's future. Does your son or daughter need housing that is close to employment, public or private transportation, a food market and shopping stores, or a medical clinic or facility? Depending on your young adult's needs and desires, you might consider if the area is safe for walking, if pets are allowed, or if family and friends or recreation and social opportunities are nearby. The PACER Housing webpage (PACER.org/housing/resources) has links and updated information on a variety of Minnesota housing options.

8. Plan for health care needs.

Like most people, young adults with disabilities need to begin managing their health care, prescription drug use, and insurance issues. Parents can help youth take on more responsibility as they get older by encouraging them to make their own medical appointments, to speak directly with their doctor, and to take their prescription drugs as directed. Youth may need to learn strategies such as using a pill organizer, starting a filing system for medical records, and keeping a calendar specifically for doctor appointments and prescription refill alerts. When planning for life after high school, it is often helpful for the IEP team to consider how health might affect employment choices, education, and independent living. The lack of attention to health needs and management can jeopardize goals for learning, working, and living safely in the community. For more information, refer to "What Does Health Have to Do with Transition? Everything!" from the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition at: www.ncset.org/publications/parent/NCSETParent_May06.pdf

9. Visit postsecondary training and education programs.

Visiting a college or training program can help your son or daughter visualize the future. Simply call one of the

Minnesota state colleges, universities, technical schools, certificate programs, or other schools and ask for a tour. Include a meeting with the school's Disability Services office to find out how to document your student's disability and to inquire about what accommodations are available or could be considered. Postsecondary programs are not required to locate, evaluate, or serve students with disabilities, or to modify course work if it would substantially change program requirements.

Students who receive academic programming and support in high school through their IEPs will not automatically have the same support after they graduate. Although postsecondary institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities, it is the student's responsibility to provide appropriate, updated documentation of their disability. The exact accommodations provided in high school may not be available. Postsecondary programs are not required to follow past IEPs, write new ones, or provide student grade information directly to parents. Learn more at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities website (www.mnscu.edu/collegeforme/youcan_doit.html) and find more resources in PACER's handout, "Start Now to Chart Your Youth's Career Path After High School" at www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c162.pdf

10. Prepare for Change.

Helping your child plan for the future can lead to success, as long as you stay flexible. Plans will change no matter how carefully they are developed, and life includes challenges and stumbling points. To mature, the adolescent brain often has these bumps in the road, which are actually opportunities to make decisions and recover from mistakes. As families help their youth establish healthy living guidelines and values, prepare back-up and safety plans, and provide advice and support, they should also be ready for surprises. Young adults are likely to make multiple changes in their goals, at times confusing family and support people; this is normal. Allowing your son or daughter to be flexible with future plans helps him or her develop the self-determination and self-advocacy skills so important for adult life.

Call PACER Center for information and resources. The staff at PACER Center can help you prepare your son or daughter for the adult world. Trained advocates can help you understand your rights and find resources to help with all aspects of transition. Call PACER at (952) 838-9000 or visit www.PACER.org/publications/transition.htm for online transition resources.