

Transition: Charting a Course for the Future

Parents of students with disabilities can act early when their son or daughter transitions from high school to adult life. It is important to be ready because public school services for children with disabilities end by age 21 or 22 in most states. “It’s as though you’ve been a passenger on a ship for many years, then someone tells you that you are being promoted to captain,” said one mother of a young adult with disabilities about this time of change. It will now be up to your youth to use what he or she has learned to steer the ship as much as possible and chart his or her own course! It can really cause problems if you and your young adult are not ready for the transition from high school to adult life. Here are some suggestions to help you prepare:


- Make sure that your son or daughter’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) includes transition planning. The plan should include transition assessments based on academic and functional performance, and your youth’s interests, preferences, and needs.
- When planning your youth’s transition IEP, consider what transition services he or she will need in the areas of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living skills. You may also want to include goals for your son or daughter in community activities, recreation, and leisure. Each area of need should be addressed in the IEP with an annual, measurable goal or other specific services to meet the goal.
- Help your son or daughter become an effective self-advocate by engaging in open discussions of how his or her disability impacts daily life. In order to advocate for your young adult’s needs and legal rights, parents should encourage role playing, social interaction, job interviews, and practice explaining needed accommodations. Attendance at IEP meetings can offer your youth an opportunity to develop and

practice needed skills while building confidence and self-determination.

- During your child’s junior and senior years of high school, begin to identify appropriate adult service providers. It is important to plan ahead because each adult provider has different guidelines and requirements and may have a waiting list. Adult service providers you may want to consider include your state’s vocational rehabilitation agency, county services, American Workforce Centers, disability service offices in a college or technical school, regional agencies, residential services, in-home support agencies, and employment agencies.
- Before your son or daughter turns 18, consider applying for the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. SSI is a federal income support program administered by the Social Security Administration that provides monthly cash assistance to individuals with disabilities who have limited income and resources.

Applicants for SSI benefits need to meet both disability and financial criteria. Family income is no longer considered in eligibility determination when a student with a disability reaches age 18, so many students become eligible at that time. There are also excellent incentives to help young adults with disabilities gain work experience, such as the Student Earned Income Exclusion and the Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS). An in-depth look at program rules is highlighted on the Social Security website (socialsecurity.gov). A good resource to help families explore SSI includes the Supplemental Security Income application process (NPC-25), available at pacer.org/transition/resource-library/

When your son or daughter receives a high school diploma, IEP services will end, and it is important to ask the IEP case manager for your child’s Summary of Performance



(SOP). The SOP summarizes academic achievement and functional performance, and provides recommendations to help your son or daughter meet postsecondary goals. Topics that might be summarized include information from work experience (school, community, summer jobs, volunteer work); vocational assessments (interests, aptitude, formal assessments, and situational assessments); and career and employment ideas (jobs your youth enjoyed or would like to try).

The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is one example of an adult service provider. VR is a federal program that works with agencies in each state. VR works with individuals who have physical or mental disabilities to help them prepare for, find, or retain employment in meaningful careers. Financing for postsecondary training and education, assistive technology, job placement, and job-seeking skills training may be available.

Vocational Rehabilitation services may also include career exploration. During high school, a VR counselor might conduct a career assessment or provide career exploration services to help your son or daughter develop future employment goals. You have a role in encouraging your youth to take advantage of, and actively participate in, offered services. While career exploration is a focus for some youth involved with VR, you may have to request these services. The VR counselor can work with the IEP transition team to create an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) and connect the student to vocational rehabilitation services upon graduation from high school.

In some states, a VR counselor is assigned to each high school and may be involved in IEP meetings during the last two years of high school.

PACER Center has a variety of transition planning resources for families of youth with disabilities. For example, information on what happens when your child becomes 18 is available in the handout *Prepare Your Child for Age of Majority and Transfer of Parental Rights*. To access these resources, parents may call PACER at (800) 537-2237 or visit the National Parent Center on Transition and Employment ([PACER.org/transition](https://www.pacer.org/transition)). Many booklets and materials are free for parents of children with disabilities.