

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 Mississippi, transition planning and services required by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) begin when your child with a disability turns 14 years old. You and your son or daughter will start learning new skills side-by-side. As your youth begins to take on more responsibility, you will find new ways to provide support. Regardless of physical or cognitive ability, your youth 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.

As you and your youth plan for the future, consider these tips for 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 they 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 not have realized the supports they need in employment or independent living to be successful, which may cause unnecessary frustration and low self-esteem.

Transition is a 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 youth has a variety of opportunities to learn and practice self-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 postsecondary education and the workforce. In order to be protected from discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the individual must disclose information about his or her disability to an employer or educational institution and explain the need for specific accommodations.

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2. Expand social and community support networks

Social and community networks are more than fun; they are important tools that help connect people to their 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 youth. Who do you know in your family, social group, professional circle, faith-based community, or other area 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 son or daughter to learn what kinds of supports they use. Peer mentoring opportunities are sometimes available through disability organizations including Centers for Independent Living. 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 resume

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. Many summer jobs and volunteer experiences can be found through your network of friends, family, and social organizations. Traditional summer jobs, such as mowing lawns or dog walking, can be described on resumes as self-employment enterprises if your youth 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 resume 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.

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

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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.” 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.

5. Practice money management skill

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 may be appropriate for many youth. Your child can practice his or her 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.

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.

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 process and eligibility standards. Governmental programs, such as vocational rehabilitation services, supports for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, public mental health services, and supplemental security benefits, all provide some services to people with disabilities who meet their requirements. Young adults, to the extent they are able, and their families will have to take responsibility for evaluating, applying for, and coordinating these services. Confidentiality policies and age of majority (age 18 in Mississippi) may establish a barrier between parents and service professionals. The IEP team can help families determine what adult services are available, anticipate eligibility issues, and initiate connections. It is important that these connections are established before graduation whenever possible.

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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 your young adult's life. The choice of housing is often dependent upon the community, the family's resources, 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 other 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.

8. Plan for health care needs

Like most people, young adults with disabilities need to begin managing their own 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, speak directly with their doctor, and 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 medical 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.

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 Mississippi's 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 inquire about what accommodations are available or could be considered.

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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.

10. Prepare for change

Helping your child plan for the future can lead to success, as long as you are flexible. Plans will change no matter how carefully they are developed, and life includes challenges and stumbling points. To mature, the adolescent brain needs to experience 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 their 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 that are so important for adult life.