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# Preparing for the Future

## Part 1

### **Graduation – Are You Ready?**

By Charlsie Armstrong

Are you a teenager in special education or the parent of one? Is high school graduation still a few years off? If so, fast forward to the future for just a moment. Graduation day has arrived, and caps and gowns surround you. You celebrate with photographs, presents, and maybe even a party. And by the end of the day, the familiar world of school has been left behind as the adult world lies ahead. Are you ready?

### **Take Part in Planning**

It is often difficult for young people with disabilities to realize the importance of taking an active role in planning for their own future. It is also hard for some parents to let their children assume responsibility and control. Research has shown, however, that young people with disabilities who experience decision-making, choice and control in their lives are more likely to be successful as adults.

### **Accept the Future**

For many parents and students, just the thought of this transition from school to adult life is a scary one. Whether our sons or daughters plan to go into the workforce, a supported community environment or on to post-secondary education, many of us cannot imagine how they will manage without the structure and support that special education has provided.

### **Know the Regulations**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) now requires that preparing for adult life start while students are still in school. By the time a student turns 14, he or

she must start preparing for life after graduation. By age 14, the IEP must include a plan for the courses he or she will need to prepare for the future. By age 16, each student must have a transition plan. A transition plan is the part of the IEP that describes the services and activities needed to prepare for life after graduation. It includes other agencies that will help make the plan work. This transition plan must be updated every year. The student must be invited to any IEP meetings where transition services are being planned. In most states the right to make decisions about a student's educational program transfers from the parent to the student when he reaches the age of majority (unless the student is determined incompetent). In VA the age of majority is 18.



### **Know Your Service Providers**

During transition planning, students and their families learn that there are many community agencies and programs that provide services to persons with disabilities after high school. Some of these services include job training and placement, assistance in getting housing, and programs on health care and independent living. Unlike the special education system, however, a person with disabilities is not automatically entitled to adult services. A person must meet certain qualifications, and some agencies also charge fees for their services. Because there is no central system of adult services like there is for special education, a student and his family must prepare to deal with a complicated

assortment of adult services and government programs.

### **Develop Self-Advocacy Skills**

For these reasons, it is very important for the student to be actively involved in planning for adult life. For the same reasons, it is also important for every student to learn and practice self-advocacy skills in whatever ways they are capable and comfortable. Being a self-advocate means knowing your rights, standing up for those rights, taking responsibility for your life, and asking for help because you want or need it.

### **Create Working Partnerships**

Being a good self-advocate does not mean planning for the future alone. Good transition planning happens when students, their families, educators, and adult service providers work as partners. Each member of the partnership brings special knowledge to the process. Each member has different roles and responsibilities on the team. For example, the roles and responsibilities of the student may include sharing information about himself—his feelings, goals, interests and needs. For the parent, it is providing guidance and support as well as allowing opportunities for risks and mistakes. The adult service provider may teach skills and help open doors to different opportunities.

### **Attend a NEXT STEPS Training**

One great resource for self-advocates and their families is *NEXT STEPS: The Transition Series*. PEATC's two latest workshops — #7 and #8 — help members of a transition partnership work together effectively to access adult services that a student self-advocate needs. The workshops include person-cen-

tered planning in which each member of the partnership helps the self-advocate identify goals and plan for the future.

### **Check Out PEATC Workshops**

Trained teams in VA, IL, WV, and MD will offer these two workshops. You can access workshop information, including the "Guide to Future Planning," by visiting the PEATC website.

### **Get More Information**

If you have questions or want more information about self-advocacy, transition, and person-centered planning, please call PEATC or visit our website at [www.peatc.org](http://www.peatc.org).

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