

The TOP 10 Ideas Families, Professionals and Self Advocates Need to Know about Transition

by Cathy Healy and Catherine Burzio

Life is full of transitions. Families who have children with disabilities are often overwhelmed and may not want to look too far into the future. However the lack of long term planning may create unneeded additional stress.

The following suggestions are the top ten ideas PEATC and a panel of experts have developed in response to the question “What is the most important thing people need to know about transition?” We hope this list will encourage families, students, and transition professionals as they work toward the successful transition of youth with disabilities.

1 - Start Early

As soon as students are identified as having a need for services, people need to look ahead. As young children, how many times were we asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The dreaming begins early. “But wait!” you say, “My child doesn’t talk, sit or move on his own...what dreams can he have?” At the moment, he may have none of his own; this is where our dreams, as families and caregivers begin, until our children dream their own futures. Establishing good relationships with caring adults early on will aid in more effective transitions down the road.

To accomplish great things we must not only act but also dream, not only plan but also believe - Anatole

2 - Use a Common Language

In a job interview, an employer asked a young adult about his diploma. The applicant replied, “Yes, I received a diploma.” Not convinced, the employer asked to see it. Upon asked to see it. Upon review, the document inside the leather diploma cover was a “certificate of completion” and not a true diploma. So what is a diploma? What is an assessment? For different agencies, these mean different things. When looking at the maze of transition possibilities, it is confusing enough without the “language barrier.” Building a foundation of common language and making sure that all understand the words being used will help to ease understanding of roles, reviews and responsibilities.

Two monologues do not make a dialogue - Jeff Daly

3 - Ask questions. Then ask them again! (Continual Self Assessments)

While IDEA requires that a formal organized approach to transition be put into place by age 16, it is important to remember there are a number of diploma options. Decisions about diplomas are often made before a student goes to high school. Yet, the discussion about where a student is headed is not a one time deal. Though students may not know where they want to go in the future, the adults in their world need to help direct them to academic outcomes that are both ambitious and realistic. On an ongoing basis, key adults support students as they conduct their own reality checks about their futures. Encourage the student to take the lead on this discussion. These continual assessments empower students to build self determination skills, enabling them to move forward with confidence.

Great things are only possible with outrageous requests - Thea Alexander

4 - Be clear on entitlement vs. eligibility

The lines between entitlement and eligibility can be confusing. Students who are eligible for services under IDEA, are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). This is the most profound entitlement afforded to children in our nation. However, once students leave the safety net of IDEA funded services, accessing publicly funded adult services may be elusive. Though young adults may be found eligible for services under the requirements of adult serving agencies, there is no entitlement provision mandating those services be provided. “Eligibility” does not equate actual “availability” of service. Many services have waiting lists and limited funding streams.

The rude awakening comes when our kids turn 21 and age out of the school system. Mandated services come to a screeching halt. Most of our children don’t drive. All of a sudden we wish we had ANY kind of bus available to get our young adults from here to there or anywhere - Linda Picci

5 - Find out what exists and what doesn't exist

Parents need to be savvy about what help will be there when IDEA services end. When they look honestly at services to help facilitate a smooth transition into life for their children, there may be gaps. There is not much they can do individually to ensure community services are funded. So they need to make sure the student is acquiring skills that will carry into adulthood, while still in school.

If you don't ask, you don't get - Mahatma Gandhi

6 - Is transition a time of crisis or opportunity?

Transitioning from high school is a time of great opportunity for a young person. It is a time to explore strengths and interests and begin to piece together a life that enhances personal fulfillment while contributing to the greater good of society. Transition is a time of terrific change and growth for the whole family. Fear of the unknown may make parents reluctant participants in the process, but transitioning youth with disabilities need encouragement to seek post secondary education, or apply for a job, or even dream of a future that is independent from their family. It can be a period where old dreams are retooled and new dreams are imagined.

When written in Chinese, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters -- one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity - John F. Kennedy

7 - Take a look at what has worked (and what hasn't)

Met with the obstacle of providing positive experiences for their children in transition, many parents and educators have created incredible opportunities for skill acquisition and life preparation. Matching what has worked in the students school career and what has worked for adults with disabilities currently living in the community may be the key to opening doors for successful transitions to adult life. What is the recipe for success? Thomas Edison once said; "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." What makes the student tick? What successes has he or she accomplished in school and life? How can we blend those successes with practical experiences to create a foundation of knowledge and skill development to successfully transition to adult life?

The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think -- rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men - John Dewey

8 - Redefine the concept of seamless transitions

The ability to transfer experience and information from one place to another without any "hitches" seems unachievable. For students with disabilities who are in the transition process, there are some things that can be done to ease the way. An effective transition team will support a student in developing strong self-advocacy skills. They can ensure that the student enjoys a rich learning environment based on state standards, with continual and measurable assessments that guide the student's progress. Though a seamless transition may be impossible, ensuring students are prepared is not.

Great thoughts reduced to action become great acts - William Hazlitt

9 - View families as assets

Families are valuable members of the team having the most fundamental information about their youth with disabilities. Families motivate and encourage their children to become self-advocates and directors of their own futures. They tap into their own personal and professional networks, expanding the opportunities for learning and employment. Until the youth with disabilities learns how to take the lead, families are THE experts on their youth with disabilities. Their active involvement can make the difference between success and failure.

The family is the nucleus of civilization - William J. Durant

10 - Youth with disabilities are not the only ones who are in transition

As I stood at my oldest son's high school graduation, a film reel of flash backs ran rampant through my mind. Didn't I just enroll him in preschool? Where did the time go? As the student takes the reigns, parents

and professionals need to learn how to let go. Parents may only see a child though they are peering into the face of a young adult. Though acceptance may come easily to some parents, it may take a lifetime for others. Transition is a time of change for the whole family.

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced - James Baldwin