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HIGH SCHOOL

The Bittersweet Transition: Preparing Your Teen for Life After High School

BY ANNE FORD

Most parents begin the process of [transitioning their child to college or life after high school](#) long before graduation day. Some start as early as middle school.

For parents of a young child with a learning disability — including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) — especially one recently diagnosed, looking so far into the future may seem an impossible feat, especially when his or her present problems are so overwhelming.

In the years following my daughter Allegra’s diagnosis, I was weighed down by all the doctor’s appointments, tutors, [school meetings](#), and, most of all, by the realization that my child’s life had taken a drastic and unexpected turn. I went through the same phases of denial and anger and sorrow we all experience, and I could barely think about the coming year, much less a future far down the road.

But the future came, and soon after reaching a level of acceptance about having a young child with a learning disability, I faced the new reality of having a teenager with a learning disability. I could no longer focus only on the day-to-day.

I had to start thinking hard about the future, and the early years that I once thought were so traumatic and difficult now began to take on a glow of nostalgia. I didn’t have to worry about college or careers or marriage back then, because things were going to change, everything would be different, and I had plenty of time.

The Bittersweet Transition

Every parent goes through it to some degree. Some mothers tell me how it saddens them to see their son or daughter pass from 12 to 13 years of age, knowing childhood is at an end. Others look upon this as a hopeful time, a new phase in their continuing adventure as a parent. Those of us with children with LD rarely view the transition from childhood to young adulthood as an exciting adventure.

For us, this time is so fraught with emotion that Kristy Baxter, the head of The Churchill School, in New York City, calls it a “second grieving process.” “At Churchill,” she told me, “we have a meeting with the parents of every student to discuss the child’s future after graduation. We meet at the end of tenth grade if the parents are anxious, or the beginning of the eleventh grade if they’re not.”

“Some students already know they want to apply to college, get accepted, and then take a year off. Some know they want to go to an art school. Some know they want to go directly to work and not go to college at

all.”

All students need to transition when high school ends. Their world changes, as does the way they make their way through the world. Until now, the parents have made all the major decisions. In school, the demands were teacher-based. Very soon, the students themselves will need to make decisions and choices.

If students don't show up for classes in college, what happens? A truant officer doesn't come looking for them. The school doesn't call their mothers to find out where they are. Overslept? Too bad. They get an F. The same goes for work. Yes, an employer might give a warning or two, but the responsibility for showing up and performing a job rests on the shoulders of the employee.

Transitions are a way to help students ease into their new reality as young adults. It's an anxious new reality for parents, too. I can tell you that, even though things might appear bleak from where you now stand, it's not as bad as you might expect. Here are some important points that will make your child's transition — and future — a lot less bumpy.

A Simple Plan

All high-school students with LD are covered by the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) — until they leave high school. After graduation they are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The greatest difference between the two laws is that IDEA guarantees the right to an education, while ADA guarantees the *right to equal access to education*. IDEA also has direct bearing on the transition to college, because part of its stated purpose is to “prepare [students] for further education, employment, and independent living.”

How is this done? Through the use of an Individualized Education Program, or IEP. I can hear it now: “Oh, no, not this again!” Most parents whose children have been diagnosed with LD are all too familiar with the IEP. But those whose young adult children have only recently been diagnosed (and are still in high school) may not yet understand the importance of this document, which summarizes your teen's academic records and achievements, and school evaluations to develop a plan for success.

High School — and Beyond

When a student is 14 (or even younger), it's important to start looking at long-term goals based on the student's preferences, needs, and interests. In fact, administrators are required under IDEA to recognize and begin planning for the student's eventual transition to adulthood at the beginning of high school.

When the student turns 16, his IEP must be formally revised to include a section called a Transition Plan. This reflects the overall plans for the student's life after graduation, beginning with a “diploma objective.” An IEP Diploma, for example, is earned by students with more severe LD who are not focused on academics as much as on learning skills for daily living.

Once the diploma objective is decided upon, the IEP team then determines the best transition services to meet that objective. Essentially, a Transition Plan helps the student move from high school to the next phase of his life.

For the college-bound student, a Transition Plan could include researching several colleges' learning

disability services and documentation requirements. Note: High schools are required to identify *only* the student's current educational needs — not to provide the actual documentation for college. Some colleges may require new or supplemental testing, such as a psycho-educational test. Parents may need to look outside the high school for this.

Transition Plans also include practical steps that the school will initiate with the student, including community integration. The school may suggest, for example, that the student volunteer in the community to gain experience outside of the school environment. TPs also help students match their strengths and interests with realistic career options — and can include a plan on preparing a teen to tackle such basic tasks as personal grooming and hygiene, shopping, and banking. We might not associate these skills with school, but they are vital for students with more severe forms of LD.

Time for Your Teen to Step Up

Once a student leaves the public education system after twelfth grade, there is no IEP — the responsibility for requesting and arranging for services falls completely on your young adult. If students need documentation of a learning disability, it is now up to them to get it. This means that students should take ownership of their high school IEP. Parents can help with this by suggesting they ask the following questions:

- What is contained in my IEP?
- How has this made a discernible impact on the quality of my life in high school?
- What do I need to do during this transition time to preserve the benefits provided by my IEP until I graduate?
- How do I arrange for the same type of support when I leave high school and head off to college, work, or a combination of both?

Sounds like a plan. But how is a parent supposed to get a rowdy teenager to focus on these questions?

“Together with the school personnel, parents need to initiate an honest and ongoing dialogue with their child, ideally during the middle-school years, but surely no later than tenth or eleventh grade,” says Dr. Sheldon Horowitz, of the National Center of Learning Disabilities.

“Begin by setting the stage for the conversation, provide some background about the importance of the IEP during the K-12 school years, and let your child know how important it is for him to play an increasingly active role in arranging for the services and support he needs in order to succeed.”

“Going over every detail in the IEP is not necessary and, for some students, might be boring or even intrusive,” continues Horowitz. “On the other hand, you should not make any assumptions about the student's interest in these details. In fact, some students are relieved to see ‘proof’ of their struggles as reflected in their IEP.”

Long-Term Benefits of an IEP

All students with LD can benefit from understanding their IEP, no matter what their eventual goals. If the IEP indicates weak math skills, these weaknesses will carry over into life after high school, whether the student goes to college or directly into a job. For instance, your son doesn't leave LD behind when he heads to the bank or goes bowling. He has to keep score. He has a hundred things he does every day that can be affected by his skills — or lack thereof.

Transitioning into young adulthood also presents challenges for parents. Rules, regulations, legal language, acronyms you have never heard of, and long strings of numbers referring to bills and laws all conspire to leave you feeling more lost and confused than ever. But take heart. Teachers and administrators, and especially LD and vocational counselors, are there to help you. Don't expect, or try, to do it alone.

Remember that you are also in a state of transition, and your child is not the only one facing an uncertain future. Your job now is to help in any way you can and to make sure you do not become an obstacle to independence. It is all too easy for parents to foster "learned helplessness" in their children. This transition for your child is a good time to shift your intense day-to-day focus to the broader view of helping your young adult child as he or she takes the first steps along the path to independence.

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ABCs of the IEP

Every school-age child with a diagnosed learning disability has the legal right to get evaluated. This evaluation can be conducted within the school or by an independent testing center. If the evaluation team determines that the student qualifies as having a learning disability, then all the data, test scores, recommendations, and anecdotal information from the evaluation are contained in a working document, called the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The raw data in the document isn't that helpful. To say that a student is two years below grade level or scores at the 6th percentile is all well and good, but it doesn't tell us what to do about it. The IEP takes the next step and leads to action — and that's the best way to think of the IEP, as a plan of action. The IEP should be reviewed at least once a year by teachers and administrators.

FYI: Learning Disabilities

The National Center for Learning Disabilities recognizes a parent's need for information during this crucial time, and has created a brief called *Transition Under IDEA 2004: Statutory Requirements and Strategic Planning for Transition to College*. Found on the NCLD website at ld.org, it includes a checklist that focuses on transition issues. It is meant to supplement the wide range of materials available to students in planning for college.

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