



Life After High School Challenges, Options, and Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities

Prior to turning 18, individuals with special needs have gone to school, received an education and services tailored to their specific needs, been guided through IEPs, and utilized service providers and specialists who are committed to helping them succeed. As a parent, you and your child have had the benefit of an education infrastructure that has supported this process.

Graduation day comes and it's a glorious time for all. It's a day to celebrate and a day to look to the future. Then reality hits.

Routine ends. Structure terminates. Now what? It's time to start transitioning to adulthood. You are your child's most important advocate, and your role becomes that much more critical. The key factor here is to stay engaged and take advantage of the many wonderful programs and opportunities available to your child to lead a functional, productive, and happy life.

The challenge is sorting through what to do next and trying to ensure that you're identifying programs that provide your child with a healthy balance of work, social, and recreational opportunities. Here are six of the things to consider when planning for your child's post-high school life.

Routine

Daily routines play a crucial role in the lives of individuals with disabilities, providing structure and predictability and greatly benefitting overall well-being. By establishing and maintaining daily routines, those with disabilities may experience improved behavior, reduced anxiety, and enhanced communication skills. Structure sets the table for what's next.

Aligning with the right support agencies

During the transition, or the "hand-off" meeting when your child is about to leave high school, make sure you have a clear idea of the key contacts that will support you and your child going forward. Typically, an individual within your state's Health and Social Services Department will be assigned to your child and will be the key to unlocking potential opportunities entering adulthood. This step can be confusing and chaotic; however, it is critical. Without it, things can and will fall through the cracks.



Training/job preparation

Many high schools will allow your child to stay until age 21 for job training and internships to better prepare them for sustained future employment. For example, programs are typically available through local hotels in housekeeping and hospitality, hospital food service groups, local businesses looking for clerical support, and others.

After graduation, you may be able to partner with a local non-profit group to support your child with additional job training options, resume and interview preparation, job search help, and on-site supported employment once a job is secured.

Often culinary training is available for individuals with disabilities. For example, The Food Bank of Delaware offers “[Kitchen School](#),” a comprehensive and intensive five-days-a-week program over 12 weeks, that teaches adults with disabilities the ins and outs of working in food service using national industry-based guidelines and curriculum. At graduation, students receive a certificate of completion and a ServSafe® certification. It doesn’t stop there. Students then receive support and develop an individualized plan needed to enter a workplace, including transportation options and support in finding employment that matches their strengths. Students also receive on-job-site support from the school for one year following graduation.

Finances

If you haven’t done so already, work with your State Social Service Advocate to learn more about [Supplemental Security Income \(SSI\)](#), which provides monthly payments to people with disabilities who have minimal income and limited resources. SSI is intended to help defray the cost of daily living expenditures; the program is administered at the federal level, but additional state supplements may be available.

If your child has a job, the amount of the SSI payment may be adjusted depending on how much he/she makes. That’s where [ABLE](#) may be of assistance. ABLE accounts allow eligible individuals to save money without counting against their resource eligibility for certain federal benefits. Individuals with disabilities can save up to the amount of the annual gift tax exclusion (\$18,000 for year 2024) without putting these benefits at risk. While an ABLE account cannot help with income limitations, it is an excellent tool to be explored for maintaining asset eligibility.

Ongoing life skills development



It is always a hope that individuals with disabilities can lead a life of independence. While that is not always possible, there are programs available that give these individuals opportunities to see how far they can go. Talk with your state advocate about which programs can be tailored to specific needs. It can be as simple as having an aide or mentor take your child into the community to grocery shop, order food in a restaurant, purchase clothing, or learn other tasks that require multiple steps and interactions with others.

Social activities

As we evaluate opportunities available after graduation, of paramount importance is socialization. While in school, teachers looked for creative ways for students to engage socially. Now that they're out of school this may fall by the wayside unless you actively keep them involved. Seeing continued growth through programs such as Special Olympics is priceless – whether they are 10 or 35, when they make a basket, get a strike, or swim a 50-meter race. The friendships and social interactions are immeasurable benefits to self-esteem, and the look on their faces is priceless.

Post-high school life can be daunting yet filled with tremendous opportunities for individuals with disabilities. As your child's advocate, don't sit back. Stay involved, ask questions, take advantage of everything available to your child, and then watch your child flourish and grow into a productive, happy, and balanced adult.

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