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Transition: Preparing for a Lifetime

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(BBB Autism; printable article #39)

Each year, multitudes of students prepare to leave school in search of the perfect job, place to live, relationships, and lifestyle. For a person without a disability, this dramatic change from the secure world of school to the uncertainty of adulthood can be stressful and challenging. For a person with autism, Asperger's syndrome, or other pervasive developmental disorders this shift can seem even more complex and demanding. Across the nation, a strategy called "transition planning" is being used to ease the move from school to adulthood for students with autism spectrum disorders. Faced with similar fears and building on the experience of the special education system, the general education community has adopted the school to work movement. Unfortunately, despite years of mandated transition planning and a continued interest in preparing students for real life, many continue to experience high drop-out rates, high unemployment, low wages, few job choices, limited relationships, and restricted living options. In addition, some leave school unprepared to handle simple daily routines such as paying bills, balancing a budget, and maintaining an orderly living environment. This bleak outlook requires that those who are involved in the education of students with autism spectrum disorders begin to systematically and seriously pursue effective transition planning.

So what exactly is transition planning? According to federal regulations, students who are beneficiaries of individualized education programs (IEPs) must have transition services outlined beginning at the age of 16. According to Osborn and Wilcox (1992), transition planning serves several important functions:

-  Introduces the family and the student to the adult service system;
-  Determines support required by the student to live, work, and recreate in the community as an adult;
-  Identifies adult service system gaps and inadequacies, enabling transition team members to advocate more appropriate services;
-  Provides information to adult service providers about individual needs so that providers will not assume all people with disabilities have identical needs when planning services and implementing programs; and
-  Provides information critical to determining appropriate IEP goals. Through the IEP, parents and educators can target skill development necessary for a smooth transition.

In many states, individual transition plans (ITPs) are used as the mechanism to guide activities related to transition. Interestingly, the general education community has developed a parallel format, referred to as Individual Career Plans, which focuses on helping students without disabilities move from school to work. In some states, school districts write both Career Plans and ITPs for students with disabilities. The Career Plan focuses solely on work, while the ITP document becomes the mechanism to begin to discuss the following issues:

-  Work/Post-School Options
-  Income Support/Insurance
-  Residential Options
-  Transportation Needs
-  Medical Needs
-  Community Recreation and Leisure Options
-  Maintenance of Family/Friend Relationships
-  Advocacy/Guardianship
-  Trusts/Wills and Long-Term Planning
-  Graduation or School Exit Date



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Quite simply, the ITP should address a job, a home, friends, family, leisure and recreation opportunities, and long term life planning. The desired outcome is that young adults with autism spectrum disorder will enjoy a good quality life. However, how one defines a quality life is subject to individual interpretation. To avoid determining a life, which does not reflect the individual's goals, the most important participant in the planning process is the person with autism spectrum disorder. Each person should have the opportunity to choose leisure activities, job opportunities, personal schedules, living arrangements, and so on. Involving the person with autism in his/her own transition planning is called self-determination. Self-determination refers to the obvious step of making one's own life choices, setting personal goals, and initiating a plan of action. As simple as this seems, determining one's future requires certain skills including the ability to:

- Communicate preferences;
- Set achievable goals;
- Make choices;
- Manage one's time;
- Identify and solve problems;
- Learn how to access resources; and
- Self-advocate (Wehmeyer, 1993/94).

A method for assisting in designing a vision and plan of action with the individual is referred to as person-centered planning. This process provides the person's support network with the opportunity to articulate a future vision with the person, and to clearly develop a plan of action for achieving this vision. Once all involved have a common understanding of the person's desired path toward adulthood, it is time to begin the formal process of planning and programming for the shift to adulthood. The individual transition plan (ITP) should focus on current and future goals, identify strategies for achieving identified goals, present a time line for follow-up, identify responsible persons or agencies for each objective, and clarify how various roles will be coordinated. Vocational goals and objectives must be further articulated on the IEP. To promote the movement of students from school to post-school options, vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors in Indiana receive student information beginning the freshman year of high school. This practice differs across states.

While the ITP document provides the format for careful planning and program development, there is still much to consider when preparing a person with an autism spectrum disorder for adulthood. Below are a few considerations:

When choosing a curriculum or course of study, encourage the person to make choices, which both peak their interest and lead to a real job. Many times, areas of interest may not lead to feasible job options. In these cases, people are being prepared for a lifetime of dependency on social services or jobs, which are not good matches.

During the school years, there are skills, which can be taught within the context of the school curriculum, which will promote future success. Competencies such as being organized, being prepared, completing assigned tasks, following directions, and interacting with others are important work skills. Involve the person in curriculum options, which will teach other important life skills, such as cooking, repairing items, and handling personal finances. Encourage the involvement of students with autism spectrum disorders in extracurricular activities, school clubs, and other social events in hopes of building a network of support for the person that can assist in accessing employment later.

During the school years, pursue apprenticeship programs, volunteer positions, or other options that will allow the person to gain experience in a real work environment. Begin to build a resume for the individual. These can be done in various formats by using video, computer, or portfolios that portray competencies. Gradually prepare the individual for the nuances and social demands of the work place. Some behaviors are clearly against the rules of most work environments. Other behaviors will serve to annoy co-workers and may result in termination. Teach behaviors appropriate to specific work sites while in the natural setting.

Begin to teach the individual appropriate hygiene and dress for specific work settings. It may be important to teach the person a menu of social interchanges around appropriate topics that can be used to assist with office small talk and



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during job-related discussions. Initial preparation of the job site can avoid unnecessary difficulties and promote long-term success. Present information in a manner that is respectful of the individual and of his/her co-workers.

Although co-workers will serve as the most efficient and effective method of long-term support, a job coach or other support personnel may need to be available to problem-solve difficult decisions and to assist the individual in adjusting to his/her work environment. Once on the job, it may be helpful to identify a mentor whom the person can readily turn to for assistance and advice.

When examining job options, consider safe and efficient means of transportation. If public transportation is preferred, supply the person with routes, schedules, and other relevant information. If not, creative options such as hiring drivers, arranging taxi service, or sharing travel expenses with co-workers in exchange for transportation can be pursued.

People with autism spectrum disorder can make an important contribution to society. Unfortunately this contribution is not capitalized on when the person is not prepared or supported. As family members and professionals, our job is to guide the person in determining a future, which is both meaningful and realistic. With careful planning, people can leave school prepared for a lifetime of struggles and successes.

References:

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