

SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSITION PLANNING FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES AND JUVENILE JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT



Transition Challenges for Youth with Disabilities Who are Also Involved in the Juvenile Justice System

Becoming independent is part of a process that all young people go through. Many youth have adults in their lives who mentor and coach them through the process. Others gain independent living and workplace readiness skills through different experiences at home, school and unpaid and paid work experiences. The transition to adulthood can have unique challenges for youth who have experienced juvenile justice involvement, especially those who have been incarcerated. Studies indicate that these youth face greater risks of unemployment, homelessness and poverty than their peers.

Gaps in independent living skill acquisition

Youth with juvenile justice system involvement, especially those who have spent time incarcerated, may not have had the same experiences as their peers who grew up in more stable family settings. Youth living in more traditional home settings may have been exposed to and mastered things like shopping for groceries, preparing a meal, doing laundry, buying toiletries or new clothes, setting an alarm clock, opening a bank account, using and paying for a credit card, paying bills, or driving a car. For youth who have had their teen years disrupted by frequent moves, homelessness, foster care placements, or incarceration, these experiences may be unfamiliar territory. Keep in mind that these gaps in independent living skills might be even harder to bridge for youth who also have disabilities.

Coping with extraordinary social and emotional stressors

Youth with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system may need even more support to successfully navigate the social and emotional stress of returning to the community after a period of incarceration. Uncertainty about where to live or go to school, fear for safety, stigma related to the incarceration, or family conflict can be more difficult to deal with for youth with emotional, cognitive or other health issues. Recognizing these challenges can go a long way in supporting young people with special needs.

What is Disability?

Disability can mean a lot of different things to different people, but it is a natural part of our everyday lives. Laws define disability in different ways, and those definitions are used to determine things like whether a person is protected from discrimination or has access to support and services, including financial assistance. In the 1970's, the United States Congress passed several laws creating protections and supports for people with disabilities. One of those laws is the Rehabilitation Act of 1974. In that law, Congress stated that

disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers; and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society. 29 USC § 701.



Congress included similar language when it passed the federal special education law now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. The IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 are the two main federal laws that guide states and schools in how to provide special education and related services to students with disabilities. Each law use very different definitions of disability and need in order to determine eligibility for protection and services. The most important thing to remember is that youth may have a special need that arises from a mental health, physical or cognitive difference. Sometimes those differences and needs will trigger eligibility for services and protection. Youth may need your help in recognizing the need and advocating for help.

Tips for Talking with Youth About Disability and Giving Them the Tools to Get Help When it's Needed

- **Go beyond labels.** If you work with a youth with a disability, find out what it is and means for him or her. Do your homework. Learn what it means to have a diagnosis of fetal alcohol affect or post traumatic stress disorder. Dig deeper and find out about what a learning disability or attention deficit disorder might mean for a particular young person.
- **Dispel myths and negative associations.** Check in with youth about their level of understanding about what disability is. They may have a limited understanding, misconceptions or even negative impressions about people with disabilities.
- **Don't judge.** Affirm that disability is a natural part of life and doesn't mean that there is something wrong with a person or that he or she is being judged.
- **Be positive and forward looking.** Explain how people with disabilities can do as much or more as others if given the tools and support. Use concrete examples of how support can help people – we build ramps for people in wheelchairs to get from one level to the next, we provide people with learning disabilities with tools to read and learn, etc.

Special Education Law and Transition Planning for Youth with Disabilities

Youth with disabilities who qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are entitled to a range of assessment, planning, and educational support services to help them prepare for life after high school. These services are called **transition services** and can include a wide range of support and educational experiences for students. Transition services are based on the student's needs, strengths, preferences and interests. Some students may need independent living skills like managing money, paying bills, cooking, cleaning or even basic self-care. Transition services could include vocational education if appropriate. Vocational education might be anything from learning pre-vocational skills, like preparing a resume, interviewing for a job, or getting along with co-workers, to a supported work experience.

Transition plans are part of a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). They should have measurable post secondary goals and objectives based on age appropriate transition assessments in the areas of training or education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills.

Transition planning and services can start any time. If it hasn't started earlier, the law requires that transition planning begin when the student turns 16 and that transition services be offered until the student has met high school graduation requirements and earned a regular high school diploma, or until the student's 21st birthday, whichever occurs first. Students with juvenile justice involvement, and especially those who are incarcerated, will benefit greatly from an IEP team that is thinking realistically and creatively about their transition needs.

Leveraging Partnerships to Support Youth with Multiple Barriers

Good transition planning for students with special education needs can make the difference in a youth's ability to be successful after high school. Giving youth with multiple barriers a thoughtful, concrete and practical transition plan can keep youth on track and engaged in their education and hopes for life after graduation. Transition planning should include community agencies that are likely to or able to support a student after high school. Public and state agencies like the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), Work Source, and if appropriate, the local mental health agency should be invited to join the student's IEP team so that services and transition can be coordinated. Keep in mind that for students under 18, parental consent is required before the agency participates. Consent from students may also be needed if mental health counselors or other health professionals are invited to participate in IEP and transition planning.

The **Division of Vocational Resources (DVR)** is a part of the Department of Social and Health Services. DVR helps people with physical and mental disabilities in getting and keeping a job. People eligible for DVR have a disability that results in a substantial barrier to employment and requires vocational rehabilitation services to get or keep a job. DVR offers a wide range of services like training, job search help, resume writing and interview training, job placement assistance and support in keeping a job. DVR partners with the community and businesses to develop jobs for people with disabilities. DVR counselors can participate on IEP teams for special education students needing vocational support after high school. For an interactive map with a listing of all DVR school liaisons, see <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/dvr/QuickLinks/SchoolTransition/Transition.aspx><http://www.dshs.wa.gov/dvr/>

Tapping into Community Based Support for Independent Living, Social and Emotional needs, and Employment

You don't have to recreate the wheel in terms of mapping out where to find services and support. The Center for Change and Transition Services has a web-based interactive map that provides local contact information for health and emergency services, employment, housing, post-secondary education, transportation and recreation and leisure. Go to <http://www.seattleu.edu/ccts/connections.aspx> for the interactive "Agency Connections" map.

Find an interactive map listing support services and agencies in Washington State at <http://www.seattleu.edu/ccts/connections.aspx>

Ways to make a difference

- Assess where the youth is in his or her education (age, grade, credits, extracurricular activities and interests) and what goals he or she has after high school.
- Talk to youth about disability. Help them understand their challenges and the support they may need to be successful.
- If eligible for special education, find out what kind of assessment, planning and services have been considered and offered. Get a copy of the most current IEP and find out when evaluation and testing last took place.
- If the youth is involved in foster care, find out what kind of assessment, planning and services have been considered and offered. Get a copy of the youth's most current Individual Service and Safety Plan.
- If not currently receiving special education, but you are aware of a disability that is interfering with the student's ability to be successful in school, make a referral for special education testing. Remember, students are entitled to education and special education until 21 years old if they haven't graduated.
- Make referrals to state and local agencies that provide support to youth with disabilities. Be sure to invite them to IEP planning meetings and ask that the IEP team to include the services of community partners and agencies in the IEP and transition plan.



TeamChild is an equal opportunity program. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities.

LEAP

Learning, Employment and Achieving Potential for Youth with Juvenile Justice Involvement

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