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Tools for Inclusion: Moving On to High School: A Tip Sheet for Parents of Children on Individualized Education Plans

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MOVING ON TO HIGH SCHOOL. A TIP SHEET FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN ON INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS

Families get some of their best ideas, information, and insights from talking to other families. Everything from the best durable equipment supplier, to the best place to get socks that fit under leg braces, to which dentists are the best with our kids–they all get passed on by word of mouth.

Time spent in school is probably the single greatest feature of our children's lives, at least until age 22. So it only makes sense to make sure our sons and daughters get what they need from school. There have even been studies looking at which approaches result in the best school experience for students with disabilities. Even though families don't have much influence over how general education and special education courses are structured in schools, there are things that families **can do** to make the most of what their schools have to offer.

This tip sheet is based on the experiences of students with disabilities in public schools age 14-17, and their families. All the students had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and all were moving on from the middle school grades to high school (9th grade).

Using these Tips: You may find many of these tips apply to students in settings other than public schools. While we have assigned steps to certain stages in the transition process, we recommend you read through all the tips and decide what makes the most sense for your family.

BEFORE HIGH SCHOOL STARTS...

The transition from 8th grade to high school is a very important one. Make sure that people who will be part of your teenager's high school experience are present at the 8th grade IEP meeting. Also include other important people in your adolescent's life.

- A member of the high school's special education staff should be present at the 8th grade transition meeting. Make sure your IEP team leader invites a high school staff person. Having a chance to meet and get to know each other outside of the commotion of high school's hectic first days is a big help.
- Make sure that your adolescent attends IEP meetings. It's not just the law—it's also important that they be part of planning their own learning and life goals.
- Encourage your teenager to bring a friend to this and future IEP meetings. This will help them feel supported, and another student can share inside information about the school and its courses that even teachers may not know.

Become familiar with your teenager's high school and staff before school starts. Take time to arrange an appointment and go in to the school.

- Many principals are not familiar with students with special education needs. If you introduce yourself and your teenager, the principal will become more aware. Talk to the principal about what your teen needs and what you can expect from the school.
- Find out who will be your initial contact person at the school and meet them. This contact person might need to change once your teenager is at the school and their course of study and related supports are better defined.

WHEN HIGH SCHOOL IS JUST BEGINNING...

Attend orientation meetings and open houses at school; they are not just for "regular" education parents. This is how you learn about new programs, new teams, and any other opportunities that can help, such as community service, vocational programs, and electives.

- Schools are always making changes and adjustments to their programs, structure, and courses. As a parent, you need to be up-to-date about any changes because they might include some good new choices for your adolescent.

THROUGHOUT THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARS...

COURSE SELECTION

Take high school course selection very seriously. State and federal laws require that students' course planning relate to their long-term plans starting at age 14. Course selection should match the ***vision*** that the student with their family's input have for the future (post-secondary education, training, employment). A vision statement should be part of the IEP.

- Students need to explore their interests well before graduation!
- Schools offer multiple versions of most academic classes. Be sure that the course selected for your teenager is going to be what they need. For example, will the English class selected prepare students for any state assessment tests? Also be aware of course requirements for high school graduation and post-secondary programs.
- Request that a guidance counselor be involved in the course selection process.
- Don't forget the role that electives, internships, community service programs, and vocational programs can play to support the vision for your student.

Find ways to ensure that your teenager gets included in all the high school has to offer. For example, if your teenager is in classes with only special education students, talk with his educational team about making sure there is time in his schedule for inclusive activities. These could include lunchtime, gym, electives, clubs and other extracurricular programs.

- Think about the accommodations and/or assistive technology your teenager needs for the courses selected. This might include books on tape, extended time for tests, or computer devices, among other possibilities.

Learn about person-centered planning and make it happen at your teen's school. Person-centered planning is a very powerful process, and the work it takes to make it happen is well worth it.

RESOURCES

Whole Life Planning for People with Disabilities. Manual and video, $109 for set. Available from TRN Inc., www.trninc.com, 1-866-823-9800. A useful reference for implementing a person-centered planning approach to assist young adults in making the transition from school to adult life. Key aspects emphasize the involvement of family, friends, and community members, with the student driving the process. The video illustrates whole life planning in action by depicting key aspects of the process and the experiences of three students.

Starting with Me: A Guide to Person-Centered Planning for Job Seekers. Tools for Inclusion, Vol. 10 No. 1, July 2002. Available from the Institute for Community Inclusion, www.communityinclusion.org, 617-287-4300. This brief reviews a three-stage career development process to help individuals with disabilities make satisfying job choices.

Websites on Person-Centered Planning: http://ici2.umn.edu/pcplanning/info/sites.html

THROUGHOUT THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARS...

COMMUNICATION

Request a meeting at the end of each school year to focus on accommodations or other elements that will be needed next year.

- The more high school staff working with your teen who attend these meetings, the better because it will give more people a chance to understand your teenager's needs. At a minimum, an education team liasion and special educator should meet with you and your teenager.
  - At this meeting, decide who will be the best person for you to keep in touch with so you can be sure your teenager is getting the accommodations, services, and supports she needs. It might be a special educator, guidance counselor, or even a teacher.
- Ask to meet again at the beginning of the year to see how things are going. You want to make sure from the get-go that arrangements fall into place.
- Stay in regular touch with your contact person, even setting up a schedule (for example, the first Monday of every month at 9 a.m. by phone). Email and voicemail are other ways to stay in touch.
- Work with your contact person to set up planning times when you will be able to meet with individual teachers as needed. If there is any sign that your teen is not doing well (for example, struggling with homework), do go in and meet with the teacher.

Don't wait for progress reports and teacher conferences to find out how things are going. Take the initiative to check in with teachers.

- If there are problems, waiting until later in the term will only make it more challenging to make changes or adjustments. It's better to turn the situation around earlier rather than later.

Remember, good teachers want more parent involvement and encourage families to come in to the school to meet.

- Don't let yourself get "out of the loop."
- Stay up-to-date about opportunities at the school, remembering that they can change from year to year. This includes accommodations, school-to-career programs, and service-learning.

Moving on to High School: A Tip Sheet for Parents of Children on Individualized Education Plans is a publication of the **Institute for Community Inclusion** (**ICI**), written by **Linda Freeman**.

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