Navigating Your Way

Ages 14-21

During these years that your family member is immersed in school, make the most of the support they have to focus on emerging independent living skills, employment opportunities, and connections to your community. Typically, after age 21, school activities and school based services end. It is important to learn as much as you can about the road ahead so that you can to prepare your family member for a full life after school.

Although transition planning officially begins at age 16, you can start planning for life after school early as 14. In fact, many families recommend this as early as possible. Even with state and federal laws to ensure your family member’s right to an education, it’s important to speak up and ensure that their needs are being met.

To help you get the lay of the land, Informing Families offers a free High School transition toolkit that includes a timeline and checklist for identifying specific goals to include in the student’s individual education program, or IEP. If it’s not written in the IEP, the school does not have to provide services to support it.

Be sure to include employment-related goals in the student’s IEP, such as: identifying career interests and abilities; learning self-advocacy and social skills; riding the bus; improving communication; and using assistive technology.

In addition, your family member may want to consider pre-employment services, which provide job exploration and work readiness for students with IEPs and 504 plans ages 16-21—or as young as 14 if included in the IEP. Pre-employment services are offered by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Talk to your IEP team or contact DVR to learn more: dshs.wa.gov/dvr.

Now that your family member is reaching adulthood, it's increasingly important that their voice be heard. As their transition plan is developed, be sure that they are an integral part of the process. Help them become an active participant in IEP meetings. Work with them ahead of time to identify their interests, abilities and goals for school years and beyond. Include them in filling out My Life Plan, a free online planning tool that asks questions related to every area of life. It’s a great way for your family member to participate in voicing their goals and preferences. Visit mylifeplan.guide to get started.

Help your young adult identify opportunities to build social connections that will follow them into adulthood. Look for school and community-based clubs where they share a common interest with other students, such as Scouts, local recreation programs, and Special Olympics Unified Schools programs.

Unified programs bring students with and without disabilities together to participate in sports and other school events that promote an inclusive school environment.

For more ideas, the Family Community Connections Guidebook, a free publication of The Arc of Washington State, offers valuable tips and worksheets for identifying people, places and ideas to help broaden your family member’s social circle and community connections. Visit informingfamilies.org to download a free copy in English or Spanish.

Look for ways that your family member can build their self-advocacy skills. Create opportunities for them to pursue their goals, make room for mistakes, include them in decision making. Consider joining a self-advocacy group. People first of Washington promotes self advocacy in all areas of a person's life in many parts of the state. They are creating Self Advocacy chapters in high schools. For more information, visit peoplefirstofwashington.org.

At age 18 your family member becomes a legal adult, with the right to make their own decisions in all areas of their life, just like anyone else. In the past, many parents sought legal guardianship as a way to ensure their child’s health and safety, however that comes at a price for the individual who may lose many of their rights, such as the right to vote. Supported Decision Making is an approach that offers less restrictive alternatives, such as Powers of Attorney for medical and financial decisions, Representative Payee to manage Social Security benefits, and a trusted relationship with family or others who can provide good advice. Learn more about Supported Decision Making, as well as different types of guardianship, at informingfamilies.org.

When a student with an IEP turns 18, they have the option to graduate OR walk the stage with their peers and continue on to a transition program until age 21. Staying in school until age 21 helps build independent living skills, and provides a guided transition to adult life and services— such as long term employment supports, which don’t begin until age 21.

Transition programs vary by location. For example, some county DD programs partner with the school district, DVR and others, with the goal of helping students to leave school with a job and make a seamless transition into adult life.

Not all counties have funding to provide this type of wraparound service, so it’s important to ask your school what kinds of activities and support its transition program offers. Some schools may even have more than one program to consider.

Transitioning to life as an adult includes changes in health care providers and coverage. The Child Neurology Foundation has information and tools for transitioning to adult health care. Visit gottransition.org to learn more.

Support from other parents and professionals is available to you during these educational years. Organizations such as Parent to Parent (P2P) and Partnerships for Action, Voices for Empowerment (PAVE) can help you learn how to advocate for your family member. Visit arcwa.org/getsupport to find a Parent to Parent office near you. For assistance from PAVE, visit wapave.org.

The Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) resolves complaints, disputes, and problems between families and public schools. The OEO is independent of the public school system and provides an alternative to costly lawsuits and administrative hearings. For more information, call 1-866-297-2597 or visit oeo.wa.gov.

Contact the Social Security Administration to apply for disability benefits when your family member turns 18. Call toll-free 1-800-772-1213 or visit online at wwws.ssa.gov. After applying, be sure to call the Social Security Administration monthly to follow up. They will not call you if there are problems with the application.

Anyone eligible for SSI is also entitled to receive services paid through Medicaid, such as Apple Health. It also entitles eligible individuals to in-home personal care through Community First Choice. Personal care services provide assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, eating, meal preparation and housework. To apply for Apple Health, visit wahealthplanfinder.org. To apply for Community First Choice, contact the Developmental Disabilities Administration, also known as DDA.

DDA is the state agency that provides case management and supportive services for children and adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Washington State. Most DDA services are not an entitlement, however, which means that enrollment is dependent on available funding and openings created as people move or change services. If your family member is already a client of DDA, you should be contacted prior to their 20th birthday to review his or her eligibility. Check with his or her case manager to learn more.

Typical services available through DDA include long-term supported employment services, personal care, respite, therapies, assistive technologies and learning independent living skills. Most of these services are offered through a Home and Community Based waiver program. A waiver is an agreement to receive services in your own community rather than a state institution. To learn more, visit: dshs.wa.gov/dda. You can also sign up for DDA news updates by clicking the box on the right of the homepage.

Paid services are just part of the picture. Support can come from relationships with family, friends, and others in the community; as well as assistive technology, local resources, and a person’s own strengths and abilities. The Star Form can help you identify sources of support to help reach any goal. To learn more, visit informingfamilies.org/star.

If you haven’t already done so, start planning for your family member’s financial future. A special needs trust, such as the Developmental Disabilities Endowment Trust Fund, shelters and protects assets that would otherwise disqualify your child for government benefits, such as SSI and Medicaid. Visit ddetf.wa.gov to learn more.

ABLE savings accounts are also available in this state, allowing individuals with disabilities to save money without losing financial eligibility for government benefits such as SSI. Visit [washingtonstateable.com](http://washingtonstateable.com) to learn more.

There is a lot to navigate and plan for during these years, but take heart: the road ahead is well paved by others who have come before you. Reach out. Connect with other families and resources in your community and encourage your family member to work toward realizing personal goals trust and know that their dreams can come true.

Find links to all of these resources and more at informingfamilies.org, a program of the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council.