



# Tips to Use Now for Your Child's Transition to Adulthood

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When autistic children start the process of moving from middle school to high school, their parents begin to hear about a transition plan during their child's yearly Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Transition planning brings with it a new series of decisions for parents and children. Starting in middle school, teens are often invited to their yearly IEP meetings and begin to self-advocate for their wants and desires.

Parents can find this phase of the journey both bittersweet and challenging. The transition to adulthood is fraught with many hard conversations for all families. There is no guarantee in life for any child. For families affected by autism, however, preparing children for adulthood is a different life experience. When their children are young, most parents fear for their children's futures. The best strategy for many parents is to put aside that fear in order to focus all their energies on interventions. Eventually, they will have to address that fear as it can function as a barrier to effective transition planning. Other negative emotions, such as sadness and shame, can also cloud their vision and cause some parents to miss opportunities to plan effectively or to see their children's emerging abilities, and help their children achieve acceptance.

As autistic children approach adulthood, their parents begin to understand that they may require support in different areas in order to reach their highest potential. This is where our autism community shines—parents helping parents, nonprofits providing resources, and special education providers guiding us through the process. As a parent, take advantage of any offer of help. The following steps can help parents set the stage for success as their children approach adolescence.

## Develop a New Mindset

First, unlock your child's potential by adopting the optimal mindset for yourself. All parents need to allow things to unfold, presume their children are competent, and keep plans fluid to capitalize on their children's strengths and interests in order to create a path for them.

Adopting a new mindset allows parents to serve as a model for their children. Let your child see you as someone who views mistakes as learning opportunities. This can be particularly important for an autistic child who struggles with anxiety. When your child does make mistakes, remember to note the growth you see in different areas. This will help you and your child.

## Focus on Soft Skill Development

As parents, we tend to focus too much on our children's academic achievements and ability to seek post-secondary education. We also need to keep in mind the need to develop their soft skills, which will likely continue to be a focus well into adulthood. Soft skills are often defined as interpersonal skills, and include communication, listening, time management and empathy. Autistic adults already struggle with many of these skills, but they can be specifically taught how to adapt to new situations, relate to others, and work on a team. The importance of soft skills in any career cannot be underestimated. No matter what job path your child ultimately chooses, from the service industry to office jobs, it will be vital to learn how to work with others and communicate effectively. The program at Inclusive Pathways to Success (IPS), our new trade school for young adults with differing abilities, emphasizes the importance of honing these important life skills in a workplace setting.

A key part of gaining soft skills also involves learning how to be a self-advocate. Working with your child's school team to build self-advocacy goals into your child's IEP or 504 plan can help at school. At home, teaching children to consistently ask for help when they don't understand what is being asked of them is another integral step to building these types of skills. If we can teach children to pause, ask for help and then use strategies they learn from educators, therapists and parents, it will ultimately help them build their soft skills and find success in their chosen work as an adult.

## Know Your Rights

Understanding the mechanics of transition planning early in the process provides parents with a broader perspective and a stronger foundation for making informed decisions during middle school and high school with regard to IEP goals and needed services. Depending upon your school district, your child may be able to take advantage of a variety of early career exploration opportunities or work awareness training. This can be key to your child's successful transition to adulthood. Real-life previews of jobs help children identify their likes and dislikes. A work experience where they receive scaffolded support in a low-pressure environment can also teach them that it is okay to fail and what to do to recover.

Transition planning helps students with IEPs prepare for life after high school. Most students leave high school at around 18 or 21 years of age, depending upon their educational needs. The IEP team will begin querying children when they are between 14 and 16 years old, depending upon your state, about their plans after high school. This can cover not just postsecondary schooling, but also their hopes and dreams to be independent.

## Person-Centered Planning

Children should have a voice in transition planning, depending upon the level at which they function. Person-centered planning is an approach to future planning that focuses on the preferences of a person with a disability, as well as his or her family.

According to the National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, "person-centered planning is an ongoing problem-solving process used to help people with disabilities plan for their future. In person-centered planning, groups of people focus on an individual and that person's vision of what they

# Useful Soft Skills

## Listening Skills



## Digital Communication



## Communication Skills



## Time Management





would like to do in the future.” A disabled adult directs this process, which allows that individual to maintain control over his or her own life while receiving support from family members and participating in the community.<sup>1</sup>

## Working Toward Independent Living

As parents of autistic teenagers, we may feel anxiety when we think of our children one day soon living independently. However, it’s our responsibility to make sure they are learning the necessary skills to do so. We are still going through the process ourselves, but we believe that the first steps towards achieving this goal must be taken in childhood. Consider taking the following steps to help promote independent living.



If you have not done so already, give your child chores, and teach basic cooking and safety skills related to the kitchen. If your child is able to understand such concepts, teach basic financial responsibility.



Show your children how to interact with fire and public safety officials so that they can be prepared in a dangerous situation. Teach them basic safety skills, such as knowing how to call for emergency help, and how to navigate relationships with strangers, such as the importance of not giving out personal information.







As you teach independent living skills to your child, avail yourself of technology to take such measures as setting reminders on electronic devices

## Health and Fitness

Keeping our children healthy is our number one job as parents. As they move to adulthood, however, they need to actively prepare to take over this role themselves. Many autistic teens struggle with hygiene and do not always pay attention to social cues. They benefit from visual schedules in which activities such as showering, teeth brushing, and using deodorant are shown on a schedule and checked off throughout the day. Diets for children on the spectrum are often a challenge. As youth grow into their teenage years, a focus on healthy eating habits and regular exercise can help with self-regulation and mood.

# Daily Hygiene Schedule

	 Brush Teeth	 Shower	 Apply Deodorant	 Comb Hair
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

## Sexuality and Friendships

Sexual awareness and health are areas in which our teens benefit from dedicated instruction tailored to their educational needs. These can be tough topics for any parent to tackle, but it is especially so for parents of autistic kids. Open communication about the topics of dating and sexuality is critical to help them successfully navigate their adult years.

Many adults on the spectrum date and have active love lives. With the right information and detailed instruction, autistic adults can enjoy healthy relationships with their significant others. Arlene Lechner and Melissa Hochberg, educators and co-owners of a Northern Virginia venture called Empowerment, Advocacy and Sexuality Education (EASE) that offers human sexuality training, assert that all people have the right to receive knowledge about relationships and sexuality in a way they can understand. According to both women, "accurate and age-appropriate education about relationships, sexuality, and advocacy skills give people with intellectual and developmental disabilities the ability to make informed and healthy choices, advocate for themselves, prevent abuse, enjoy healthy relationships, and see themselves as sexual beings."<sup>2</sup>



Autistic adults may struggle to find and keep friends, just as they might have during childhood. As a result, they may need active support in this area from professionals. Finding an adult social group facilitated by disability organizations, such as Best Buddies or community centers, is one way for your adult child to find a social group. Special education professionals like Trish Adams, Director of the Options program at Paul IV High School in Chantilly, Virginia, agree and assert that keeping social connections with friends and finding activities to fill non-working hours is essential for adults and an ingredient in finding fulfillment.

Many young parents might find going through these steps daunting. While it may not be an immediate action item on your list, it helps to always be aware of the big picture and to continue learning. This helps you gain greater clarity and an awareness of options as you make decisions at each phase of the process for your child. Remember to also take care of yourself! Take deep breaths, give yourself and your child grace, and keep the plan flexible. You can do this!

### References:

1. PACER's National Parent Center of Transition and Employment™. Person Centered Planning. 2022. PACER Center, Inc. <https://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/independent-community-living/person-centered.asp>
2. Lechner, A. and Hochberg, M. (2022). Human Sexuality 101 for Teens. Empowerment, Advocacy & Sexual Education for People with Intellectual Disability, their Families and Support Staff (ease).



*Naina Narayana Chernoff and Hope Hohmann are mothers of autistic teenagers and founders of Inclusive Pathways to Success (IPS), a nonprofit trade school for young adults with differing abilities based in Northern Virginia. For more info, please visit the IPS website ([ipstradeschool.org](https://ipstradeschool.org)).*

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IPS is a nonprofit trade school in Northern Virginia that will help bright, young adults with differing abilities find new career paths in the skilled trades. To find out more about IPS please visit: <https://ipstradeschool.org/>

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