

Suggestions for Creating Successful Transitions from School to Adulthood

by Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

While this is not an exhaustive list of steps towards successful transitions, it represents a few of the things I've learned over the years.

Mind the gap. The subways in London remind you, as you step off the trains, to mind the gap—the space between the subway car and the platform. In the same way, mind the gap between the end of a school career and the beginning of adult services. We know that the longer the gap in services, the greater the likelihood that persons who are deaf-blind may not have meaningful employment, adequate housing services, and/or community access to recreational and social opportunities. For example, if you can find a permanent job placement for an individual a few months before that person would otherwise age-out of special education services, why not take it? If the IEP can be modified so that services can be provided in this new environment, all the better. But if it can't, don't regret the little bit of missed school. A seamless transition into adult services may be more important than those last few weeks of school. Of course, major transitions cannot be rushed but must be thoughtfully planned so the individual has time to prepare for the changes.

Plan early. The law states that at age 14 IEPs must include transition service needs and at age 16 IEPs must contain needed transition services. (Yes, even educators are confused by this wording.) Don't let this requirement be satisfied with the attachment to the IEP of a single sheet of paper with a few boxes checked. By this time in students' lives, educational programs should be leading to clearly defined outcomes. All components of educational programs should be preparing students for success beyond school—at home, at work, and in the community (see next paragraph).

Does every step lead towards the desired outcome? Ask yourself at IEP meetings: does each goal and objective move this child towards a concrete and functional outcome? If a student is 20 years old and hasn't mastered tying shoelaces after years and years of trying, let it go; the student will probably be just as relieved as you are. The same goes for writing a signature, spreading on bread, or any other skill that has been worked on for years with little or no success. There may be other things for the child to learn that are more important, such as personal hygiene skills. Employment and housing personnel report that this is one area they would really like the persons they serve to take care of themselves—if they can. And remember the importance of cleanliness when it comes to social interactions (see next paragraph).

The importance of social skills. Social skills are just as important—if not more important—than competence. People will put up with a lot of incompetence if you have good social skills. Think about your own experiences. Have you ever worked with someone who, although he or she wasn't the hardest worker at your place of employment, was

Fact sheets from California Deaf-Blind Services are to be used by both families and professionals serving individuals who are deaf-blind. The information applies to students 0–22 years of age. The purpose of the fact sheet is to give general information on a specific topic. More specific information for an individual student can be provided through individualized technical assistance available from CDBS. The fact sheet is a starting point for further information.

friendly, brought fresh-baked cookies on Fridays, told good jokes, or pitched in for the office parties? Imagine that same person, who wasn't the hardest worker, if he or she hadn't contributed positively to the work environment. Stopping at the donut shop once a week on the way to work to bring a box of donuts to the office may contribute more to longevity and social relationships than performing flawless work tasks day after day.

Document everything. It is important to document everything that might someday be necessary to know. This includes tasks at which the person who is deaf-blind excels, their expressive and receptive communication systems, preferences and dislikes, favorite leisure time activities, etc. This documentation will be useful as video resumes and/or personal communication dictionaries are compiled. Consider the following example. A student paddles a kayak across a lake at age 16, has a great time, is good at it, and then doesn't have the opportunity to do it again for years. By the time the student is 22 years old, will anyone remember this event and the fact that kayaking might be a great recreational activity for this person? They will if it has been documented. This can be accomplished with videotape, photographs, journal entries, or any other method that works for those involved.

The "readiness model" might impede success. There was once a belief that students had to prove they were ready for jobs, living situations, etc. by demonstrating readiness. Consider the following example. A student wants a work experience placement at a plant nursery watering plants. Under the readiness model, the student would have to prove his or her readiness by successfully watering plants in the classroom for a period of time, which would then be followed by a trial placement watering plants on the school grounds. If all of this goes well, the student would then graduate to watering plants at an actual nursery. The problem with the readiness model is that the student may never get past watering in the classroom for reasons that have nothing to do with the ability to water plants. Perhaps the student is bored with the classroom because he or she has spent too many years there. The student may be loud and unfocused while watering in the classroom, and the assumption is that the student will behave in a similar way out in the real world. But given the opportunity to do this job in a natural environment, the same student might very well succeed. The student's behavior might have been saying "I'm sick of the classroom", but in a real environment with natural motivators and consequences, the student may pleasantly surprise the doubters.

It's all about who you know. It's true that much of what we have in life, e.g., jobs, apartments, significant others, we got through someone we know, or through someone who knows someone we know. For example, when considering work experience placements for students, think about people you know who have small businesses such as restaurants, hair salons, offices or warehouses. When looking for apartments, think about people you know who live in desirable buildings and may know of unpublished vacancies, or people you know who work as property managers or real estate agents. Even if it's a friend who knows someone, have him or her make an initial call on your behalf. It will make your subsequent call much easier and will probably make the person more interested in what you have to say because they know you're a friend of a friend. This is something we need to learn from people in the private sector who practice this well: never underestimate the power of personal contacts and connections.

Get the relevant facts. Make sure you know everything there is to know about the individual who is deaf-blind: likes, dislikes, activities in which he or she excels, dreams, fears, social connections, and anything else that might impact future success. Gathering this information might be accomplished through processes such as personal futures planning, MAPS, person-centered planning, etc. Parents, siblings, extended family members, neighbors, and former teachers are all vital sources of useful information. These same people are also vital sources of information about interpreting the individual's wishes if the person has limited formal communication skills.