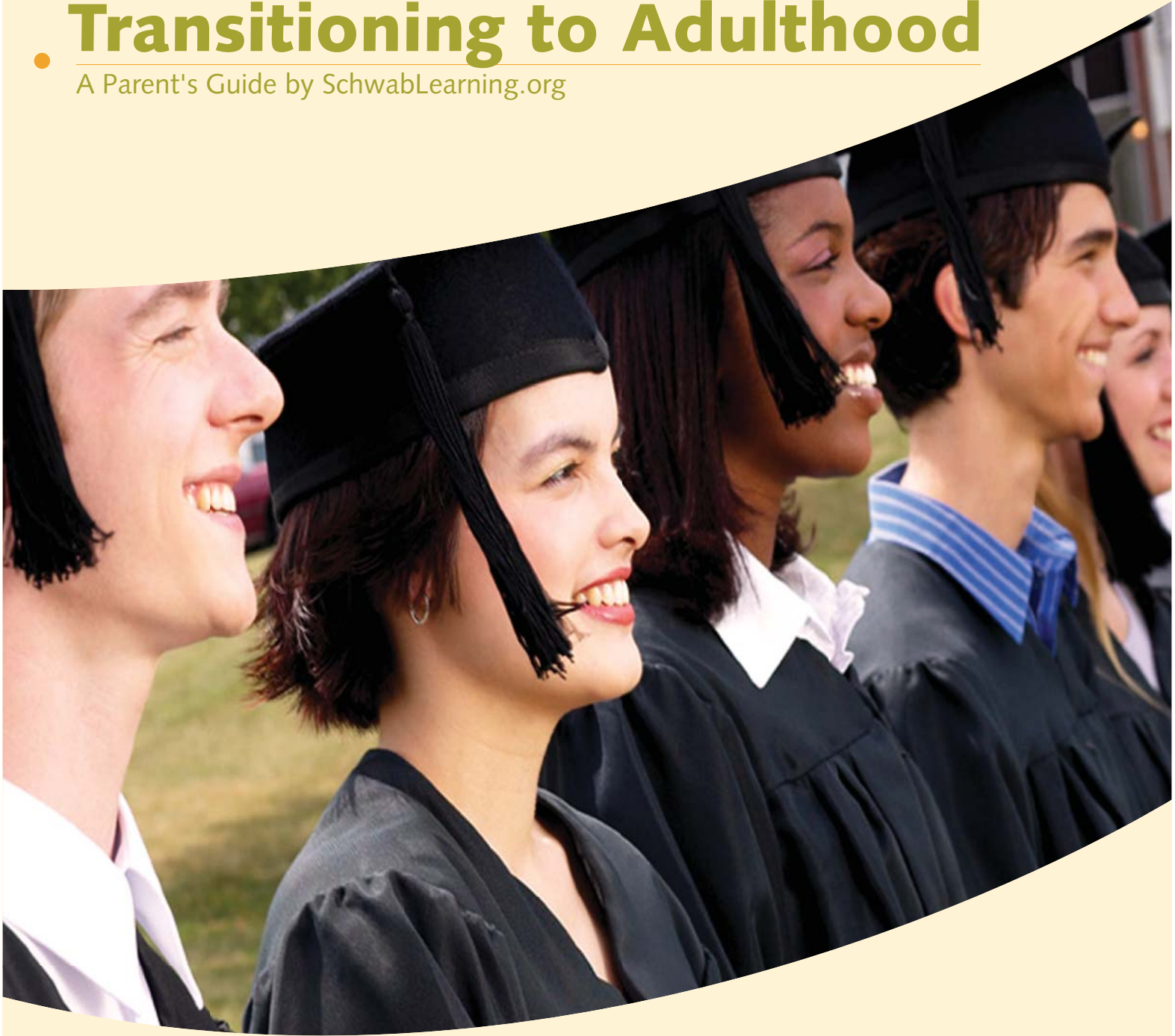


Transitioning to Adulthood

A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org



Transitioning to Adulthood A Parent's Guide by Schwablearning.org

Our *E-ssential Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood* will help you and your teenager with LD and/or AD/HD plan early and thoughtfully for his future. This collection of articles — all written especially for SchwabLearning.org — provides expert advice on planning for college, career, and daily living skills. You'll also find a list of suggested resources on this topic.

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A Parent's Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood

Focusing on Life after High School

Finding a stable, satisfying job and learning to live independently is challenging for all young people making the transition to adulthood. But it can be especially daunting for those with learning and attention problems — and their parents. Because of this, developing specific transition goals and plans can be one of the most important efforts you and your teenager undertake together.

In this article, we offer an introduction to the transition process, including the roles of parents, the teenager, and the school, some essential components of transition, and what the research tells us about adults with learning disabilities who are successful. In future transition articles, we will explore the topic more deeply by asking experts in the field to share their knowledge and ideas on specific types of transition, including:

- **Transition to employment** (including the military)
- **Transition to college** (two-year or four-year) or **vocational training**
- **Transition to independent living** (managing money, managing time, maintaining a living space, taking care of health needs, etc.)

“A young person’s career path may not always be as direct or smooth as parents would like.”

No matter what path your child plans to pursue after high school, you can help set the foundation for a successful transition by:

- Starting the transition process early
- Encouraging your child to participate as much as possible
- Adopting an attitude of high expectations, balanced with openness and flexibility about your child’s transition goals and strategies
- Helping your child learn his rights under federal law and how to advocate for himself in higher education and employment
- Helping your child to become increasingly independent in transition tasks

Why Transition Assessment, Goals, and Plans are Important

The importance of assessing transition needs, setting transition goals, and planning how to reach those goals becomes clear when we look at research on the performance of young adults with learning and attention problems in high school, post-high school training or education, and employment.

- A 1999 report indicated that 14 percent of all youth in the country 18 years old and over had not graduated from high school. However, an estimated 36 percent of those high school dropouts were students with learning disabilities. Not surprisingly, unemployment rates among those who drop out of high school are as much as 40 percent higher than for those who completed high school. (Source: *National Center for Education Statistics, 1999*)
- It is predicted that, by the year 2006, 18 of the top 25 occupations with the largest and fastest employment growth, high pay, and low unemployment will require at least a bachelor’s degree. (Source: *Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999*)

Focusing on Life after High School

- Although the percentage of students with learning disabilities enrolled in public and independent four-year colleges and universities increased from just 1 percent in 1988 to 2.4 percent in 2000¹, this is still a very small proportion. “While college admission rates for students with LD are low, the number of such students admitted each year is increasing steadily,” says Loring Brinckerhoff, Ph.D., Director of the Office of Disability Policy at Educational Testing Service. “I think that college admissions personnel are less apprehensive today about accepting an ‘otherwise qualified’ student with LD than they were just five years ago.”

Whether your child pursues vocational training, higher education, or employment (or some combination of these) after high school, three essential factors determine how well he'll be able to deal with life's daily challenges, according to James R. Patton & Caroline Dunn²:

- **Knowledge** of an array of facts, procedures, and events that are part of his environment after high school
- Mastering specific **skills** required to function in the many settings in which he must function
- **Identifying, accessing, and using a variety of supports and services** that can help him deal with daily events

Whether your child is in a public or private school, and whether or not your child receives special education services or accommodations under federal law, the quality of transition services varies widely from school to school, affecting how well the school:

- Assesses your child's **career aptitudes and interests**
- **Identifies your child's transition needs** in areas of higher education, vocational training programs, or employment, as well as daily living skills
- Helps your child **develop transition goals, plans, and skills**

In a 1996 article on transition planning, Dr. Dunn³ reported that **models for transition planning for students with LD have lagged behind** those for kids with other types of disabilities. Until the early to mid-1990's transition planning was provided principally for students with severe physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities. Learning disabilities were regarded as “mild” disabilities that didn't require a young person to have transition support. Extending transition services to kids with learning disabilities over the past 10 to 12 years has required schools to adopt new approaches, and has increased the demands on staff and resources. For all of these reasons, you will probably want to play an active role in overseeing your child's transition process.

Legal Rights in High School and Beyond

If your child is eligible for special education services at a public school under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the law requires that when he turns 16, his annual Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting will include a discussion about transition service needs. A statement of those needs, based upon his transition assessment and future goals, must then be written into his IEP. IDEA mandates that the annual IEP meeting focus on specific planning for the necessary transition services. Factors to be included are: academic preparation, community experience, development of vocational and independent living objectives, and, if applicable, a functional vocational evaluation.

The agreed upon plans must then be documented in the student's IEP. If the IEP team hasn't begun to focus on transition planning, it is important for you, as the parent, to initiate that process. If your child has a 504 Plan, he is entitled to accommodations such as preferential seating and extra time on tests, in order to access to the general education curriculum. However, there are no explicit provisions under Section 504 for transition services.

Focusing on Life after High School

Legal protections change drastically after your child graduates from high school. IDEA does not apply to higher education, and there is nothing equivalent to an IEP in college. Two important pieces of federal legislation, Section 504 (of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protect the education and employment rights of people with disabilities, including those with “specific learning disabilities.” In order to qualify for protections under either Section 504 or ADA, the disability must “substantially limit” performance in a “major life activity.” In general, these relevant laws, which are anti-discrimination laws, provide equal access to education or employment.

Section 504 made it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities in activities funded by federal subsidies or grants, which includes all public elementary and secondary schools, as well as nearly every post-secondary institution in the country.

“There is nothing equivalent to an IEP in college.”

The second piece of relevant federal legislation is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Provisions of this law include extending the concepts of Section 504 to all activities of state and local governments, including education and employment. Under Section 504, students must meet the essential qualifications for admission to post-secondary education programs and compete for openings with non-disabled students. However, many schools have adopted special admission policies in regard to otherwise qualified students with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities. (Note: Although AD/HD is not mentioned in the federal laws, there is some legal precedent for affording people with AD/HD protection under both Section 504 and ADA.⁴)

How Parents Can Guide and Support Transition

Because successful transition relies on a clear understanding of a young person's interests, strengths, and areas of struggle, parents play a key role in helping to insure a successful transition for a young person with learning disabilities. With parents' help, a child can:

- Become more aware of his learning strengths and needs, and use his strengths to overcome or bypass areas of weakness
- Learn to better advocate for himself in school and work settings, by developing a clear sense of how his strengths contribute to school or work success, and which adaptations or technology increase his effectiveness
- Explore career interests and aptitudes in the “real world,” through volunteer, summer, and part-time work
- Learn to be flexible and persistent, not allowing an occasional set-back or disappointment to throw them off course

A young person's career path may not always be as direct or smooth as parents would like. When parents are open and flexible, it provides a young person a valuable opportunity to figure out, through trial and error, which pursuits he'll find personally satisfying. For example, a young adult might go to work after high school in a nursing home, decide after a year or two to get his certification as an Emergency Medical Technician or Licensed Vocational Nurse, and then return to work with more responsibility and better pay. Another might start a four-year college program in electrical engineering and discover that he's not sufficiently motivated to complete all the high-level math and science courses. In the meantime, he may have discovered that he gets great satisfaction from diagnosing problems and making repairs to computer hardware, and may enter a two-year college or vocational training program to build his job skills in this area.

Regardless of the particular path to employment and living independently, research has identified some factors associated with success among adults with learning difficulties. According to a study by Paul Gerber, Rick Ginsberg, and Henry Reiff⁵, control is the key to success for adults with learning disabilities.

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“Control,” in the context of this research, means that a person makes conscious decisions to take charge of his life, and to adapt himself as necessary in order to move ahead. The researchers discovered that this control fell into two main categories:

- **Internal decisions.** A person must want to succeed, must set achievable goals, and must confront his learning difficulties so that he can take appropriate actions to increase the likelihood of success.
- **External manifestations (adaptability).** Successful adults with learning disabilities engaged in certain practices that helped foster control and success, such as persistence, finding work that is “a good fit” for their skills and abilities, strategies to enhance performance, and surrounding oneself with supportive, helpful people.

Clearly, parents can and do play a role in encouraging and supporting the development of these attitudes and strategies in their children, throughout childhood and adolescence.

What about Laundry, Bills, and Toothaches?

In order to stay in college or keep a job, young adults must master hundreds of practical daily living skills, such as sticking to a schedule, paying bills, and going to the doctor or dentist as needed. According to Arlyn Roffman, an expert on daily living skills for young people with learning difficulties, a lack of such skills is common. “The National Longitudinal Study (on Transition)⁶ has given us a lot of data over the years that really support the need for training in daily living skills.”

The study looked at adults three to five years out of high school, in relation to three factors:

- engagement in work or school
- residency outside the parents’ home
- social/community engagement

Only 27 percent of the adults with learning disabilities were independent in all three of these areas. About 50 percent were independent in two of these areas. Dr. Roffman notes that this represents a significant lag behind non-learning disabled adults. “And what’s happening with the other 50 percent?” she asks, noting a common concern.

Although young people with learning difficulties face some particular challenges in making the transition to adulthood, some advance planning, flexibility, and perseverance on the part of parents can provide important guidance and support. In the coming months, we’ll be exploring several specific transition topics in greater depth and offering strategies and resources to help you help your child.

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About the Author

Linda Broatch, Writer/Editor, has an M.A. in Education, with a focus in Child Development, personal experience in supporting those who have learning difficulties, and has worked for many years in nonprofit organizations that serve the health and education needs of children.



A Parent's Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood

High School Students with LD or AD/HD: Considering College

In the ideal world, every student with a learning disability (LD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) would be a master at charting her own destiny after high school. In reality, it is often her parents who orchestrate the transition planning process. Nevertheless, such teenagers should be encouraged to participate actively in planning their transition to young adulthood — including the prospect of attending college.

This article will explain the differences between high school and college; this information can help students with learning and/or attention problems make an informed decision regarding postsecondary education. For students who've decided college is right for them, the article also outlines the essential steps towards independence that high school students with LD and/or AD/HD need to take before applying to college.

Differences between High School and College

If a high school student is to make an informed decision about attending college, and plan effectively for her transition to postsecondary education, she (and her multidisciplinary team, if applicable) needs to be aware of the many inherent differences between high school and college settings.¹

“If a high school student is to make an informed decision about attending college, ... she ... needs to be aware of the many inherent differences between high school and college settings.”

Time in Class and Access to Teachers

Two of the biggest differences between high school and college concern the **amount of in-class time** and **opportunities for direct teacher contact**. High school students are in class approximately six hours a day, and it is not unusual for them to have contact with their teachers four or five times a week. In comparison, college classes may meet only once or twice a week, thus, the opportunities for direct teacher contact are much more limited. In college, faculty members often have limited office hours, making it difficult for students to find time to meet with their professors. With the advent of online courses, this is changing, but having direct access to the instructor of the course, rather than a teaching assistant (TA), is still a concern.

Time Spent Studying

Typically, high school students spend a limited amount of time completing homework assignments at home. Instead, they often work on assignments during a study hall or resource room period. In contrast, college students must learn how to budget study time for themselves. As a general rule, **for every hour of class time, college students need to spend three hours of out-of-class time preparing assignments**. For students with LD and/or ADHD this rule of thumb should be doubled, given the time needed for rewriting lecture notes, reading, or listening to audio textbooks, and integrating course materials from a variety of sources (e.g., texts, lecture notes, lab assignments).

High School Students with LD or AD/HD: Considering College

Support Services

Many high school students with LD become accustomed to special education personnel, learning specialists, or library personnel who are willing to drop what they are doing and “rescue” them before an upcoming term paper or mid-term examination. Most college campuses have a disability services office, but few have the personnel to provide drop-in hours for last-minute term paper editing, test preparation, or content tutoring.

Class Size

High school classrooms typically contain 25 to 30 students, in comparison to many college classrooms, which consist of large lecture halls for 200 to 300 students. During the freshman and sophomore years, students are routinely herded into large, impersonal auditoriums with tiny desks for core courses, such as Introduction to Western Civilization, or Psychology 101. These settings may be efficient for the broad dissemination of information, but for students with AD/HD and/or organization problems, they can be very distracting.

Teacher Feedback and Grading

In high school, homework is often assigned on a day-to-day basis, and students are expected to turn it in daily, or weekly, for teacher feedback. In college, “homework” often consists of long-range assignments (with no scheduled check-ins) such as term papers involving extensive use of Internet resources or cooperative assignments with peers.

It is not unusual for college students to receive only two or three grades per semester. The first grade may not appear until the mid-term, five to six weeks into the semester. For high school students with LD, this is often an adjustment given that they’re used to receiving regular, frequent feedback from teachers. Many college freshmen with LD or AD/HD find themselves for the first time in academic settings that are much more competitive than they ever imagined. High school grades that were once based on subjective measures like “effort” or the “degree of improvement” are replaced in college with grades assigned by teaching assistants who are looking for prescribed responses and mastery of course objectives as stated in the syllabus. The novelty and size of the college institution combined with the scholastic rigor of the curriculum makes it particularly difficult for students with LD or AD/HD to stay focused and up-to-date with assignments.

Teaching Style

Not only is the grading different, but so is the teaching style of college faculty. High school teachers are often responsible for teaching a broad range of students and for teaching factual content, while college instructors often expect students to integrate course information independently from a variety of sources rather than merely parroting back isolated facts. High school teachers are known for taking attendance, and regularly checking notebooks and homework assignments. College professors rarely take attendance and seldom monitor students’ daily work. They typically lecture non-stop and require students to think analytically, and to synthesize abstract information on their own. Students with LD often have to adjust to many divergent teaching styles that they may not be used to, while they feel their way through course material for weeks at a time without direct feedback from the instructor.

High School Students with LD or AD/HD: Considering College

Balancing Personal Life and Academics

Perhaps the biggest challenge that students with LD or AD/HD face when they go away to college is balancing their personal life with academic demands. High school students find that their free time is often structured by limitations set by parents, teachers, and other adults. On the other hand, college environments require students to function independently by managing their own time both during the day and at night. Students are often ill prepared and overwhelmed as they try and strike a balance between their course work and active social lives.

Essential Steps toward Independence

Comprehensive transition planning needs to focus on a coordinated set of student-centered activities that should be linked with the student's transition goals (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1994). High school guidance counselors, school psychologists, and parents need to support the student as she plans postsecondary options. This can be accomplished formally (if the student has an Individual Education Plan [IEP]) or informally. Together the team should craft a realistic transition plan that describes:

- Where the student plans to go after high school
- What needs to be done now so she can reach her goals
- Who needs to be involved in this process
- Who will implement and monitor the prescribed transition activities and review progress along the way with the student

A Timetable for Transition Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD (Brinckerhoff, McGuire & Shaw, 2002) located at <http://www.schwablearning.org/timetable> is designed to help students gradually assume greater responsibility for their own learning outcomes and view the postsecondary, multi-year planning process as a series of coordinated steps that involve input from several supporting players.

Junior Year: Assuring a Firm Foundation

The junior year is perhaps the most critical year for high school students as they lay the final groundwork for their postsecondary experience. The proposed academic program for junior year should be selected with considerable thought, given that college admissions officers look very carefully for any changes or trends in the educational rigors in the program of study. Depending on a student's postsecondary goals, she should be advised that if she elects to take only two or three college-preparatory classes per semester, she might not appear to be prepared for a competitive college curriculum that typically consists of four or five courses. Guidance counselors should address these issues early on to be sure that the student and parents understand the ramifications of such choices.

Students with LD should not be routinely waived out of high school course requirements (e.g., foreign language or math) without careful consideration of the implications waivers may have on the college admission process. It is also better for a student to take the most rigorous course load she can manage (with accommodations) and earn "good grades," than fill the transcript with "fluff courses," like "Free-flight Frisbee 101!"

High School Students with LD or AD/HD: Considering College

Practicing Self-Advocacy and Using Accommodations

It is not unusual for high school juniors, or even seniors, with LD or AD/HD to meet for the first time with a college placement counselor and be clueless about the kind of postsecondary setting they want to attend and the level of LD support services they may need. In order for a student to meaningfully participate in the transition process she must learn how to advocate for herself. The student should be able to articulate the effect her disability may have on academic performance. She should also be able to identify any accommodations (e.g., extended testing time, a note taker, reduced course load), technological aids (e.g., audio books, Alpha Smart computer), or support services she will need in order to compensate for her LD and/or ADHD. In the comfort of the high school setting, a student should be encouraged to “try out” accommodations such as audio books, or software to outline term papers, so she can determine what works best for her before she enters college. During the annual IEP conference or at transition planning meetings the student should be encouraged to express her concerns, preferences, and opinions based on personal experience. The IEP meeting is an ideal forum for a high school student with LD to practice self-advocacy skills and to speak up about her own future plans.

It is during this time that planning should focus on matching the student's interests and abilities with the most appropriate postsecondary setting. Guidance personnel can be particularly helpful if they describe (ideally based on their personal visits to colleges) the diverse range of two- and four-year options available to students after graduation.

Here are some sample steps from the Transition Timetable. View (and download) the complete timetable, which lists steps for grades 8 to 12, at <http://www.schwablearning.org/timetable>:

Grade 8: Preparing for High School Success

Students with learning disabilities/ADHD need to:

- Actively participate in IEP meetings and suggest goals that focus on study skills, time management, and test-taking strategies.
- Seek opportunities that will foster self-determination and independence through increased responsibility at home and in school.
- Expand academic interests through electives and extracurricular activities.

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About the Author

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A Parent's Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood

Starting Out Right: Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

The process of transition from school to employment begins much earlier than the waning days of high school. Indeed, with all that needs to be considered and put into action, transition planning should start no later than the first days of high school. Since the vast majority of students with learning disabilities (LD) go straight from school to work (estimates hover around 85 percent), the middle school and high school years become critical to the transition process.

Beyond Academics

There is no doubt that students with learning disabilities should master as many academic skills as possible (e.g., reading, writing, computing, and math) and learn about the myriad issues related to careers and the workplace. It is also during high school that other important competencies such as pre-vocational skills — time management, taking instructions from supervisors, and others — must be fully addressed, in order for the young person to be ready to navigate in the world beyond school, particularly in employment settings.

When an individual with learning disabilities makes the most of the transition process, successful job entry is the probable outcome. However, this initial stage of employment can only be successfully accomplished if the whole transition process is viewed as an interactive one among the young adult making the transition, his co-workers, and the employer.

Transition to employment must also be a process in which the responsibility for success chiefly falls on the young person with LD himself. So, he needs to have a clear notion at all times of what to do, in order to be in control of the ever-changing circumstances of his world. Just as important, he needs to have a sense of how to adapt to the variety of work environments and diversity of tasks that present themselves in competitive employment. If these two competencies can be learned and used effectively, then there is a good likelihood that a young person will make a successful transition to employment.

“Reframing” One’s Disability

Without question, one of the mandatory elements of the transition process is for the young adult to come to grips with the learning disability itself — the learning disabilities literature call this “reframing.” Reframing involves a number of phases. First, the person with LD must have a clear understanding that he actually has a learning disability. That means that any issues of denial must be dealt with — for example, the belief that LD is “just a problem when I’m at school.” Moreover, this acceptance infers that learning disabilities are real and will persist in the years past schooling, although they might take different forms in various adult contexts — including employment.

Second, in order to adjust to the workplace, a person with learning disabilities must develop a firm understanding of his profile of strengths, weaknesses, and challenges, beyond the basic psychological processes such as memory, processing, and organization. Moreover, the young person needs to know how to emphasize and celebrate his strengths, and deal with weaknesses using compensatory strategies, and “tried and true” accommodations such as calculators, spell checkers, and the like. With a self-inventory of strengths and weaknesses, the young person with LD should have the wherewithal to figure out how his

“Adults with learning disabilities say over and over again in interviews that once they accepted their learning disability and its challenges, they were ‘freed up’ to take on the many demands of the workplace.”

Starting Out Right: Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

Learning disability will affect performance of job tasks and social interactions in the work environment. Most important, a young person must constantly work on a full understanding of his learning disability, as each task, interaction, and workday yields new information. In effect, understanding one's disability is an ongoing, ever-changing process.

Third, in order to deal effectively with his disability beyond the school years, a young person needs to have a healthy degree of acceptance of having an LD. He must accept it as a part of everyday life, which can emerge at any time, and which has to be dealt with in an efficient manner — for example, an inability to remember details, or difficulty with setting task priorities. Therefore, in order to compete, accomplish tasks, and succeed in employment and life, a young adult must accentuate his strengths and bypass or accommodate his weaknesses. Adults with learning disabilities say over and over again in interviews that once they accepted their learning disability and its challenges, they were “freed up” to take on the many demands of the workplace.

Adaptation in Employment Settings

The other challenge of successful transition is being adaptive to employment settings. It is important for a person with LD to be vigilant about orchestrating an environment where he can succeed — by either adapting himself to the work situation, making the work situation adaptive to him, or both. Individuals with LD need to be able to think creatively in order to alter work situations so they can perform more effectively and efficiently. For example, an alteration might be finding a quiet place to work, using computer software to help manage a task, or asking a colleague for assistance.

With self-knowledge about his learning disability, and a creative approach to adapting to the workplace, the young person can address the challenge of finding the “best fit” between himself and the work. “Best fit” means working in a job role that:

- One is interested in
- Allows use of one's strengths (with possibilities for reasonable accommodations for task challenges)
- Provides a supportive supervisor and co-workers
- Offers a work climate that is truly accepting of diversity

Together, the ingredients listed above comprise a learning disabilities-friendly employment setting. In this kind of work environment, a person with LD can feel comfortable, be effective, and advance.

Social Skills

Social skills are another important underpinning for success in any employment setting. A young person with LD must possess a social skills repertoire that includes conversing, reciprocating, supporting others, and taking responsibility, to name just a few. Without question these social skills should be well honed in competitive employment, which means they must be learned during the transition preparation years in high school, or earlier. A transition program that does not focus on social skills will put a person with LD at risk for failure in employment.

Ultimately, successful transition from school to employment depends on establishing a strong work ethic. This includes basic behaviors like getting to work on time and showing enthusiasm for work, as well as more advanced behaviors such as taking initiative at work and being a good team member. Young adults should learn these routines before leaving school, and should solidly implement them in employment settings, beginning on the first day of work. Practicing such routines means handing in homework on a timely basis, managing one's time, taking responsibility for one's own performance, asking for and using another person's help or advice, and many others.

Starting Out Right: Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

Lessons from Adults with LD

The message from individuals with learning disabilities who are successful in the workplace is simple: **Because you are learning disabled you must be more conscientious in your work — both to compensate for your disability, and to counter any negative ideas co-workers may have about LD.** That attitude will have a great effect on your work. The words of persons with learning disabilities who have “made it” in employment are pragmatic and instructive. Consider their experience and wisdom when talking with a teenager about preparing himself for the workplace.

“Work as hard as you can so people can see you are really trying.”

“Be to work early and work late if you have to.”

“Anticipate, if you can, so you can be ready for them.”

“Be prepared; that is when you are the most self-confident.”

“Don’t take no for an answer; go after it and accomplish it.”

“Reflect on each day’s work at 4 p.m. and make a list of the next day’s tasks and problems.”

“Use compensation as an ‘anchor’.”

“Take responsibility for yourself. You must learn to work harder when you have to.”

“Learn as much as you can about your strengths and weaknesses in the work setting.”

“See failures as setbacks, but use setbacks as goals to conquer.”

“Recognize when someone is ‘extending a hand.’ Be willing to grab it but not abuse it.”

The process of transition to employment is as individual as the young person with LD himself. **There is no one profile that captures the complexity of how a young person with learning disabilities can successfully adapt to an employment setting.** Without question, however, successful transition to employment requires three key elements: A transition program in middle school and high school that is linked to the realities of the workplace; a young person’s ability to ‘reframe’ his learning disability; and a young person’s willingness to be adaptive and flexible in employment settings. Parents should closely monitor the school’s transition program. With parent support, the young person himself should take major responsibility for reframing his disability and learning how to be flexible and adaptable in the work setting.

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About the Author

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A Parent's Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood

Toward Independence: Helping Teens Prepare For Life on Their Own

For teens and young adults with learning disabilities (LD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), having a disability is more than an academic matter; the effects of these disorders regularly spill into life beyond the classroom — at home, at work, and in the community. Whether heading off to college or to employment, all young people must develop an array of community living skills to successfully adjust to adult life. **These independent living skills fall into six areas:**

- meal preparation
- money management
- housekeeping
- self-care (e.g., hygiene, medical care)
- planning leisure time and activities
- getting around (e.g., transportation)

Unfortunately, many teens and young adults with LD and/or AD/HD find it difficult to acquire these skills. Some of these difficulties derive from the LD itself; others stem from environmental factors, such as an overly protective parenting style. However, with awareness of the potential for difficulties, instruction in the areas of challenge, and careful planning, youth with LD and/or AD/HD can acquire needed skills and move successfully into independent life.

“Most teens with LD and AD/HD eagerly anticipate a more independent life beyond the high school years. [Thus] they benefit from opportunities to learn ... independent decision-making.”

What the Research Says

A variety of studies suggest that young adults with LD and/or AD/HD participate less in community life and remain reliant upon their parents long after their peers have achieved independence. One major research study, the National Transition Longitudinal Study-I (Wagner et al., 1991), investigated 8,000 special education students in grades seven and higher as they moved through the next several years in terms of their engagement in work or school, residency outside their parents' home, and social activities. Only 27% of those with learning disabilities were found to be independent in all three domains, and only 50% were independent even in two when they were three to five years out of high school. Data from the second round of the National Transition Longitudinal Study (NTLS2) are gradually being released and will continue in the coming years to paint a picture of the transition process for youth with LD and/or AD/HD.

The trend toward extended dependence upon parents may be attributed in part to the tendency for parents of youth with LD and AD/HD to assume too much responsibility for scheduling and arranging their children's lives well into the adolescent years and beyond. Although these parents mean well, their overprotectiveness contributes to a “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1975) that limits their children's growth. When kids have few chances for decision-making, they miss out on the opportunity to learn from failure, and are unable to develop the self-determination and skills needed to plan and fend for themselves.

Toward Independence: Helping Teens Prepare For Life on Their Own

Like their non-disabled peers, most teens with LD and AD/HD eagerly anticipate a more independent life beyond the high school years. They benefit from opportunities to learn and demonstrate new skills and independent decision-making. The following case histories describe two young women with LD, both 19 years of age and high school graduates, both scoring similarly on measures of intelligence, and illustrate how different parenting styles can help or hinder a teen's development of independent living skills:

A Tale of Two Teens

One was energetic and outgoing and had led an exciting life during her teen years. She had a driver's license, had held several part-time jobs, and enjoyed spending her salary at the mall, which she frequented with her many male and female friends. She did her own laundry, made her own lunches, and occasionally cooked simple suppers for the evenings when she was on her own. Her history stood in stark contrast to that of the second young woman, whose parents admitted to being "a little overprotective." She had never been expected to assume any responsibility for chores at home, had never, in fact, even made herself a sandwich. She had never held a job, had neither a license nor friends. Even on her bicycle, she had always been restricted to the block on which the family lived. (*Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood*, Roffman, 2000, p. 164)

Denied the opportunity to blossom, the second young woman was caught in the stranglehold of dependence. As soon as she had the opportunity to learn independent living skills, she grew enormously; clearly, she had been ready to move forward toward an independent adult life. Her major constraint had been not the learning disability itself but the attitude of her parents, who had cultivated a prolonged dependence. In contrast, the first young woman had been eased along with both high expectations and a great deal of support from her parents and had developed a number of skills that would serve her well as she left home and began life in an apartment.

How Learning and Attention Difficulties Impact Life Skills

Even young adults with LD and/or AD/HD who have supportive parents experience challenges in independent living, often directly related to the specific characteristics of their disability. Their challenges continue to ebb and flow throughout their adult years. Consider these examples:

- The young woman who spells poorly will have difficulty filling out forms at her doctor's office.
- The young man who has trouble reading will find it challenging to decipher the washing machine directions at the local laundromat.
- The fellow who is disorganized is likely to lose his keys over and over again.
- The woman who is distracted may start to clean the living room and fail to finish when she picks up a magazine from the floor and stops to read an article that catches her eye.

Toward Independence: Helping Teens Prepare For Life on Their Own

The Role Parents Play in Fostering Independence in their Children

If challenges in independent living are predictable and persistent as youth with LD and AD/HD move out of their family homes into the community, why don't schools include more life skills goals in students' transition planning? Middle and high school students with LD and AD/HD would clearly benefit from direct instruction in such practical independent living skills as housekeeping and money management. However, in these days of high-stakes testing, schools tend to be reluctant to commit valuable teaching time to these less academic — though certainly not less essential — areas.

What are the specific challenges teens with LD and AD/HD face as they move into life beyond the care of their parents, particularly in terms of meal preparation, money management, housekeeping, self-care, leisure planning, and getting around (transportation)? And what can parents do to help them prepare for this major transition? The next articles in this series will focus on essential life skills needed for successful transition to independent living and will suggest strategies parents can use during their children's middle and high school years to ease them toward that goal.

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About the Author

Arlyn Roffman, Ph.D., an expert on transition issues in special education, is a Professor at Lesley University, where she served as founding director of Threshold, a transition program for young adults with learning disabilities, from 1981 to 1996. She has served on the professional advisory boards of several national LD organizations and maintains a private practice in psychology.



A Parent's Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood

How Do Kids with Learning Disabilities Become Successful?

This is the first question in a 4-part series on the findings of the Frostig Center's longitudinal study, "Patterns of Change and Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities." The following is an edited transcript of an interview conducted by SchwabLearning.org's Ann Christen with Dr. Raskind, on October 8, 2002.

SchwabLearning.org asks:

Dr. Raskind, based on your research of success attributes in people with learning disabilities, please define what success is and describe how kids with learning disabilities can become successful adults?

Dr. Raskind answers:

Success is really not easy to define. It really means different things to different people and it may mean different things at different times in a person's life. That said, I still think we can find certain commonalities among people in terms of the factors that might be considered important to being a successful individual, such things as having good friends, positive family relations, being loved, self-approval, job satisfaction, having physical and mental health, financial comfort, spiritual contentment, and an overall sense of meaning to one's life.

“... the success attributes ... were more predictive of success than variables ... like academic achievement and IQ.”

At the Frostig Center, where we've been doing our research on success attributes and learning disabilities, we have developed what we refer to as a multidimensional view of success. We include many things in that. Success here includes, again, positive relationships with one's family, positive relationships with peers, good feelings about one's self, life satisfaction, success in employment, and educational success, as well. In regard to the second question that you asked, "How do children with learning disabilities become successful adults?", we have to keep in mind that children with learning disabilities really become adults with learning disabilities, and the problems they have in childhood continue into and through adulthood.

It's been interesting for us to watch kids grow up over the years and move into adulthood. One of the things that we've seen and one of the things we've had questions about is why do some individuals with disabilities, end up doing well employment-wise, have good peer relations, family seems to be doing well, and who could be called "successful," while another group with similar backgrounds and similar types of disabilities may end up in really a difficult situation, barely able to keep their heads above water either emotionally, socially, or financially? So we're interested in why that happens, what factors or attributes contribute to success and what things really stand in the way of success. There have been a number of research studies, including our own, which I'll mention in a minute, that have pointed to a number of factors, personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that lead persons with learning disabilities to successful life outcomes.

Some of the other studies that have been done in addition to our own have been by Dr. Paul Gerber, of Virginia Commonwealth University, and Dr. Emmy Werner at the University of California, Davis. In our

How Do Kids with Learning Disabilities Become Successful?

own study, we tracked over a 20-year period a group of individuals who had been identified at an early age as having learning disabilities.

In this research, we really tried to get as much information as we could directly “from the horse’s mouth.” We conducted two- to six-hour interviews in areas of social relationships, family and dependents, psychological health, education, and employment. We also went through diagnostic records over 20 years, case records, and even public records — voter registration and court records — to get some additional information about how they were doing and, ultimately, why. We made an effort to determine which individuals were successful, which ones weren’t successful, and then to see if we could really pin down exactly why some were led to successful paths and others were still really struggling.

We were able to identify a number of **success attributes**, and I think one of the interesting things is that we were actually able to do that mathematically, statistically. We could really analyze things to a point where we could say that these specific success attributes lead to successful life outcomes. Now, some individuals who are successful will not necessarily have every single attribute, and other individuals who are not successful may have some of the attributes. The idea is that successful individuals are more likely to possess these attributes. And **these attributes are** — and we’re going to go through these in a little bit more detail — but let me name them for you first:

- self-awareness
- proactivity
- perseverance
- goal setting
- the presence and use of effective support systems
- emotional coping strategies

Now, again, these success attributes don’t guarantee success, but just increase the likelihood of more successful life outcomes. I think one of the things that was very fascinating is that the success attributes I just mentioned were more predictive of success than variables (as we refer to them) like academic achievement and IQ.

One of the things that we really hope we can do is sensitize parents to these attributes so parents can help foster these various elements, values, and behaviors in their children, to, hopefully, lead them to more successful life outcomes.

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About the Author

Marshall H. Raskind, Ph.D., is Director of Research and Special Projects at Schwab Learning. He is a frequent presenter at international learning disability conferences and is the author of numerous professional publications on learning disabilities. He is well-known for his research in assistive technology and longitudinal studies tracing LD across the lifespan.



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Resources & References

Transition to Adulthood: Focusing on Life after High School

Related Articles on SchwabLearning.org

National Study Follows Youth with Learning Disabilities from High School to Adult Life
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=717>

Parent Role Affirmed in Feds' Sobering Study of Teen Students with LD
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=790>

Researchers' Roundtable on Transition for Young Adults with Learning Disabilities
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=787>

Other Resources

Websites

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) website
<http://www.ncset.org>

Council for Learning Disabilities:
 Transition and Individuals with Learning Disabilities
<http://www.cldinternational.org/c/@Q4AiE213pN8NQ/Pages/transition.html>

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Resources & References

High School Students with LD or AD/HD: Considering College

Other Articles in Series

Teens with LD and/or AD/HD: Shopping for College Options
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=976>

Transition Timetable
<http://www.schwablearning.org/timetable>

Related Articles on SchwabLearning.org

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<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=787>

Self-Advocacy: A Valuable Skill for Your Teenager
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=522>

Other Resources

Books

Preparing for College: Options for Students with Learning Disabilities
<http://www.ahead.org/publications/#prepareforcollege>
By Dr. Lydia Block and Wayne Cocchi

College Students with Learning Disabilities — 3rd Edition
<http://www.ahead.org/publications/#ldstudents>
By Loring Brinckerhoff, Ph.D.

Ready, Set, Go: Helping Students with Learning Disabilities Prepare for College
<http://www.ahead.org/publications/#readyssetgo>
By Association on Higher Education and Disability

Section 504: The Law and Its Impact on Postsecondary Education
<http://www.ahead.org/publications/#504>
By American Council on Education and the HEATH Resource Center

Self-Advocacy Skills for Students With Learning Disabilities: Making It Happen in College and Beyond
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1934032069/ref=nosim/schwabfoundation>
By Henry B. Reiff, Ph.D

Websites

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) Website
<http://www.ncset.org>

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) Website
<http://www.ldonline.org/njclcd>

Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) Website
<http://www.ahead.org>

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Starting Out Right: Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

Other Articles in Series

Transition to Work: Helping Teens Prepare for Typical Employer Questions
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=980>

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<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=1059>

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<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=990>

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<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=983>

Other Resources

Books

Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1557664307/schwabfoundation/>
By Arlyn J. Roffman, Ph.D

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Books

Exceeding Expectations: Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0890797056/schwabfoundation/>
By Henry B. Reiff, Rick Ginsberg, Paul Jay Gerber

Websites

The Frostig Center:
Life Success for Children with Learning Disabilities
<http://www.ldsuccess.org>



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