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The Next Step for Children with Special Needs: Planning for After High School

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Many parents of children with special needs describe the time after high school as “like falling off a cliff.” But there are options available, and long-term planning can help you decide what is best for your family.

To learn more about how families can start preparing for the post-high school years, we’ve reached out to Peter Bell, Executive Vice President of Programs and Services at Autism Speaks, a leading non-profit autism science and advocacy organization. Bell is an expert on services available for children with special needs. Moreover, he has gone through this transition with his own 20-year-old son, who has autism.

If you’re worried about what life will be like for your child after high school, you’re not alone. Many families face this challenge. Let’s take a closer look at the options that may be possible for your child.

Transition Planning: Start Early

Many organizations that advocate for children with special needs—including Autism Speaks, National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS), National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), and national non-profit Great Schools—recommend early planning. In fact, transition planning may be legally required to start at age 14 if your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

At Autism Speaks, Bell says, “our general advice is to start early and to pace yourself. All the things you need to think about and plan for don’t happen over the course of a week or a month. You need to use that 5 to 6 year period of later adolescence to plan.” However, even if your child is graduating this year, it’s never too late to start preparing.

Most of the services available to children with special needs end after they leave high school. At that point, families generally take on the responsibility of coordinating resources for their child. Bell recommends doing research to make sure you understand what services your home state provides. Certain services require advanced registration, and states may have long waiting lists.

Autism Speaks offers a transition tool kit to help families plan ahead. Families with a child with autism between the ages of 14 and 22 may request a hard copy from the organization, tailored to their specific state. Autism Speaks also offers transition timelines for each state, which may also be applicable for children who

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What's Available? Options for Children with Special Needs
The options available to your child will be partially dependent on your child's capabilities and interests. Even if your child has fewer capabilities, Bell stresses the importance of including your child in the planning process.

"You want to involve the child no matter what their level of functionality is," says Bell. "There are certain children with autism who may not have strong communication skills, who can still be involved." For example, Bell's son has some language skills and, with the help of his therapist, was able to circle and point to activities that interested him.

If you apply for services through your state, you may be assigned a case worker who can help you apply for programs. Some non-profit organizations may also be able to help you locate resources. Autism Speaks, for example, offers an extensive Resource Guide that you can search for services in your area. Bell notes that their Resource Guide is the world's largest database for autism services. Some of these services may also be helpful for children with other developmental conditions.

When researching options, there are three main areas to explore: employment, day programs and buddy programs, and post-secondary education.

Employment
According to the National Center for Special Education Research, 71 percent of students with disabilities had a paid job within 6 years of leaving high school. There are three types of employment options for people with special needs:

Competitive: This involves applying to employers directly, without supportive services.

Supported: This is the most common type of employment for people with special needs, and involves working in an integrated environment among people without disabilities. Support services, such as a job coach, assist the employee with job skills. A job coach may work with the employee full-time in the beginning, and then visit only as needed.

Sheltered: People work in a program designed specifically for people with special needs. Wages for this type of work are sometimes low, which Bell notes makes these programs controversial. According to NDSS, sheltered employment often involves manual labor, like assembling goods. It may also include creative projects, like photography.

Bell notes that all states have vocational rehabilitation programs, commonly called "voc-rehab," which may help prepare students with special needs for employment. Sometimes these programs will provide a job coach, but there may be a waiting list.

Most job coaches also accept private payment. If you are interested in finding a job coach, you can consult your state's voc-rehab program, your school's special education department, or your child's therapists. There is no certification for becoming a job coach, so be sure that you ask for a resume and references before hiring someone.

Day Programs and Buddy Programs
If employment isn't possible for your child, day programs and buddy programs may be helpful options.

"There are a variety of different organizations who offer those kinds of services," says Bell, but notes that programs may not be readily available in some regions. To find programs in your area, Bell suggests consulting Autism Speaks' Resource Guide. He notes that Special Olympics and Best Buddies provide excellent activities. Your local YMCA or Easter Seals organization may also offer programs or have suggestions for nearby services.

When assessing your options, Bell recommends looking for programs that offer recreation as well as physical activities. Like everyone, children with special needs have diverse interests

"Some like sports, or music, or the arts," adds Bell, "It's important to have a rich variety of activities and programs."

Postsecondary Education
Postsecondary education options for students with special needs vary widely. Think College, an initiative of the Institute for Common Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, has a database of over 200 college programs for students with intellectual disabilities. Their website lists each program with

information on admission requirements, tuition fees and financial aid, housing options, and if students can earn a degree or certificate through the program, among other details.

If your child has autism, Autism Speaks provides extensive information on postsecondary education resources. You may also be interested in consulting College Autism Spectrum, which has information on more than 20 colleges offering programs for students with autism.

There are also numerous programs tailored to students with learning disabilities, as the *New York Times* reports. You can contact the College Board to learn if your child might be eligible for special testing accommodations.

HealthAhead Hint: Preparing for the Future
Even if your child is still in school, it's never too early—or too late—to start planning. Depending on your child's abilities, postsecondary education or supported employment may be excellent opportunities. If those goals seem out of reach, consider engaging the help of an organization that can provide visits and activities. With advanced planning, you may find some great options for your child.

* Note: This article refers to many outside organizations and services they provide. GE does not have any affiliation with these organizations, and GHS has not done independent research on their services.

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