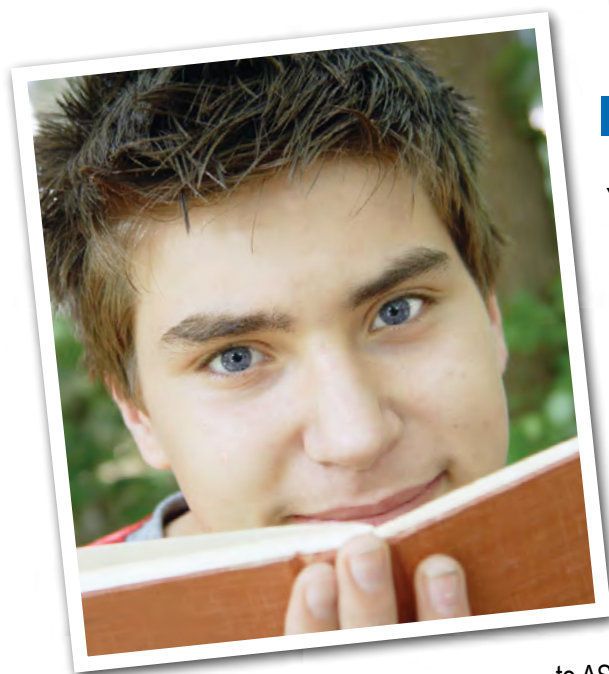


Planning Life After High School for Students on the Autism Spectrum

A Guide for Tennessee Families



Introduction

You and your family have already travelled a journey from a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through health services, early intervention, and special education. You have navigated your way through many specialized services. You have learned to be your child's number one advocate. Wherever your child may be on the spectrum, you have seen progress and you have contributed to that progress. Take time to celebrate all that you've accomplished together.

The next step is for your child and you to begin preparing for your child's transition into adulthood. Young people on the autism spectrum have challenges similar to those that other youth face, as well as individual challenges related to ASD. There is a lot to consider: further education or training, work, housing, transportation, recreation, friendships, finances, and support services.

This guide is intended to help your family start early to plan for the future. The guide includes answers to questions that youth and family members ask, plus resources for additional information.

How do services for adults with ASD differ from those for children?

Based on the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), once students on the autism spectrum are determined to be eligible, they are *entitled* to receive special education services through the year when the student turns 22. After students complete secondary education, they are no longer entitled to services. Instead, they must seek out and qualify for services through adult service agencies. Each agency has their own eligibility requirements; thus, an adult may only meet the requirements for certain services. Many agencies and programs have waiting lists. Even eligible adults may have long waits before receiving services. Youths and families must advocate for and request adult services. They will not be provided automatically.

Is my child's IEP important in planning for what comes after high school? When should that planning begin?

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is crucial. It determines reasonable learning goals, and it establishes what services the school district will provide to your child. IEP goals and services should help prepare your child for adulthood.

The IDEA Law (2004) requires schools to plan for a child's transition to adulthood by age 16, or earlier if the IEP Team thinks it is appropriate. Tennessee rules require that transition planning *begin no later than age 14*. Families need to advocate for transition planning and services in IEP meetings.

Within the IEP is the Postsecondary Transition Plan in which the team documents how students will meet their goals for life after high school. Four areas of focus should be addressed in the postsecondary transition plan including: (1) employment, (2) postsecondary or higher education, community involvement, and independent living.

Should your child with ASD be part of transition planning?

IDEA states that when an IEP team meets to discuss what a student wants to do after high school and what transition services are needed to prepare for those goals, the student must be invited to take part. If the student does not attend, the student's interests must be considered.

Strengths and needs of students on the autism spectrum vary greatly. Strategies and tools are available so that students of various abilities can take part in transition planning (see Resources). Students give input so that plans fit their interests, strengths, and needs. This creates a more student-centered plan. It also prepares students to advocate for themselves after leaving high school.

Self-determination is a central principle for transition planning. Self-determination involves knowing one's own strengths and challenges, as well as having the knowledge and skills needed for adult living. Such knowledge comes over time. Most students, including those with ASD, need family members, teachers, and other caring adults to guide them as they begin to plan their adult lives.

What are transition services?

IDEA defines transition services as “a *coordinated* set of activities for a child with a disability that is

- designed to be within a *results-oriented* process;
- focused on improving *academic and functional achievement* to facilitate movement from school to post-school activities, including:
 - postsecondary education,
 - vocational education,
 - integrated employment, including supported employment,
 - continuing and adult education,
 - adult services,
 - independent living,
 - community participation;
- is based on the individual child's *needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests*;
- and includes instruction, related services, community experiences, development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, the acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation.” (Italics added for emphasis.)

What's involved in transition planning?

You and your child should begin describing your vision of the future and keep refining it. Questionnaires and other tools can help your family think through your vision (see Resources).

Transition planning includes four primary areas:

- **Employment:** What does your child want to do to earn a living? Will this be competitive employment, supported employment (e.g., support from a job coach), self-employment? How can your school prepare your child for these goals? Consider skills needed for a specific type of job and skills needed for all jobs (e.g., punctuality, getting along with co-workers). Given your child's strengths and needs, what are the desired hours/days, work environment, pay rate, uniform or dress codes, physical and mental demands, and supervisory needs? How will transportation to and from work be handled? Will your child's earnings affect eligibility for supplemental supports or state or federal benefits?
- **Postsecondary education or training:** What education options following high school are available for your child? What are the requirements for each option? Are there assessments needed before you seek these options? Where will your child acquire the skills to do what he/she wants? How will your family pay for it? What agencies can assist your family?
- **Independent living:** What types of supports does your child need in order to live as independently as possible in the future? Options might include having roommates, having assistants available, arranging group living, or living at home. What skills does your child need in order to live as independently as possible (e.g., household and community safety, personal hygiene, cooking, grocery shopping, laundry, financial responsibility, house cleaning, transportation)? Knowing needed supports and skills can then guide IEP transition planning.
- **Community participation:** How will your child be involved in the community? Will your child take part in recreation, faith activities, or other organizations? Can your child get around in the community independently? How will your child contribute to the community? What personal connections does your family already have in the community that will promote community inclusion?

What should we be doing while our child is still in middle school or high school?

- Transition planning as part of the IEP process should begin early, but no later than at age 14. Involve your child in IEP meetings. Have high expectations for your child's future.
- Have good communication with your child's teacher(s) and seek their ideas in planning for your child's future.
- Do PATH planning. PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) is a team-facilitated approach to person-centered planning using graphics to express the goals and dreams of your youth. For PATH information, see The Arc of Tennessee in Resources.
- Attend all IEP team meetings. Invite an advocate, especially one trained and experienced in transition planning, to attend IEP team meetings. Invite a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor.
- Make sure your child works with guidance counselors and takes part in job-oriented activities that other students do.
- Find out about diploma types and their requirements. Discuss the diploma options with your child and the IEP team as early as possible to make sure that the academic path corresponds with the preferences of the child and family.
- Learn about admission requirements and funding available for college or vocational programs that your child is considering.
- Determine eligibility criteria for adult services while your child is still in school. If a service is appropriate for your child's future needs, begin the application process. Apply even if there are waiting lists. By doing so, you help show the need for more services and supports in Tennessee.
- Get your child's personal documents in order, (e.g., Social Security card, state I.D. or driver's license, most recent evaluation report, and IEP). In your family records, keep copies of psychological evaluations conducted prior to the child's 18th birthday for use in applying for adult services.
- Maintain good health, because it is a foundation for success at school and work. See Healthy & Ready to Work website in Resources.

What should we be doing to prepare as our child exits high school?

You and your child should be involved with your special education team in developing a Summary of Performance. The Summary will be useful as your child pursues college options, vocational training, or employment. The IDEA law requires that "the public agency provide a summary of academic and functional performance, including recommendations to assist the student in meeting postsecondary education goals, for students whose eligibility terminates because of graduation with a regular high school diploma or because of exceeding the age eligibility for FAPE [Free and Appropriate Public Education] under State law."

A Summary of Performance should cover your child's measurable postsecondary goals, present level of performance in academic areas (e.g., reading, math, and written language), in cognitive areas (e.g., general ability and problem solving, attention and executive function, communication), and in functional areas (e.g., social skills and behavior, independent living, environmental access/mobility, self-determination and self-advocacy skills, career/vocational/transition goals). It should cover related essential accommodations and/or assistive technology. It should make recommendations to assist the child in meeting goals after high school. Finally, it should provide your child's perspective on the Summary of Performance.

When is my child legally an adult?

A child is legally an adult upon reaching 18 years of age, regardless of disability. At age 18, parent(s) are no longer the legal guardian(s), unless they have already taken legal action by filing for Conservatorship. Because these are complex issues, families should get legal advice well before a child turns 18.

The website of The Arc of Tennessee offers *Conservatorship and Alternatives to Conservatorship: A Guide for Families*. The Tennessee Center for Decision Making Support website offers resources on supported decision making. See Resources.

How does having an ASD affect future planning?

Because high school is familiar and structured, and supports are often provided, a student with ASD may function well. Yet that same student may have difficulty when moving to unfamiliar settings. Sensory issues, repetitive behaviors, or poor communication skills may be barriers in new settings such as attending vocational training or college, gaining or keeping employment, or making or keeping friends.

Providing experiences in potential post-school environments during the high school years can help prepare students with ASD. Examples include work (e.g., job training or part-time job), recreation (e.g., going to a gym), and independent living (e.g., residential camp). By exploring these different environments, students and families can identify potential challenges, needed supports, and areas of success.

Can my child with ASD attend college or a technical school?

Since autism is a spectrum of disorders, some students on the spectrum may have the academic abilities, interests, and motivation to be successful in college. Early planning allows families to evaluate whether college enrollment is a realistic goal. If so, investigate college options, prepare to meet admission requirements, and develop financial plans.

As required by the Americans with Disabilities Act, colleges and universities make academic accommodations for students with ASD or other disabilities. Consult with the disability services office at schools you are considering. Some colleges and universities are developing programs to attract students with ASD. Explore national and state ASD advocacy organizations. See Resources section.

Adults with ASD who are well-prepared academically may nevertheless have a difficult time maintaining employment after college graduation because of difficulties in social relationships. Even if your child with ASD is able to attend college, it is still important to foster communication and social skills needed to obtain and retain a job.

What services are available to adults with ASD?

Answers to this question are complex, because services include federal, state, and community programs. Eligibility requirements differ across states and across agencies within a state. Some persons with ASD may have difficulty qualifying for some services. For example, intellectual disability (ID) is an eligibility requirement for some programs, and individuals with ASD who do not have ID would not qualify.

Learn about your state and community services and eligibility requirements. Use autism-specific and disability information and referral services. Network with families of children and adults with ASD through your local chapter of the Autism Society of America. See Resources.

Who is eligible for SSI benefits?

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides monthly payments to persons with disabilities who have limited income and resources. Almost everyone who receives SSI is eligible for health coverage under Medicaid.

SSI eligibility is a gateway to a variety of transition services for students with disabilities. Income eligibility differs according to the age of the student. If a student is younger than 18, his or her parents' income and resources are considered in determining financial need. Income requirements vary depending on the number of parents and children in the household. Once a student is 18 or older, parents' income no longer matters. If you applied for SSI benefits for your child before 18 and were denied because of family income, you should reapply when your child is 18. If you think your child is qualified for SSI, you should contact your local Social Security Office.

What are SSI work incentives?

Through the use of SSI work incentives, a student can have paid employment, can increase income without loss of cash benefits or eligibility for other benefits such as Medicaid, can offset expenses that result from work, and can save for future education and training or to start a business. Incentives help students maintain necessary SSI benefits until they are self-sufficient.

What are Vocational Rehabilitation and Pre-Employment Transition Services?

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program helps people with disabilities get jobs. A VR counselor will work with your child to determine if they are eligible and help them come up with a career plan. They will also help determine what services and supports they need to meet their career goals. Examples of VR services include vocational assessment, assistive technology evaluation, postsecondary training, job placement and/or transportation support.

A VR representative should be requested to become involved in the transition planning process at least 18-24 months before your child exits high school. This includes attending a child's IEP. Talk to your child's teacher or provider of Pre-Employment Transition Services to make sure a VR counselor is involved and invited to the IEP meeting.

VR provides a Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) program that helps students with disabilities prepare for life after high school. Pre-ETS are offered to students between ages 14-21. This program is a partnership between high schools and the VR program. Topics covered in Pre-ETS might include: learning about jobs, learning about college or training programs, getting jobs or internships, practicing skills needed for jobs and/or living on their own, and learning how to speak up for themselves.

Students do not have to be a VR customer to receive Pre-ETS, but parents/guardians will be required to sign a permission form. As long as the student has a disability, is enrolled in school, and is between the ages of 14-21, they will be eligible for Pre-ETS. Proof of disability can be shown through an IEP, 504 plan, or doctor's diagnosis. Anyone can request Pre-ETS. Family members, teachers, students, advocates, or others can contact their VR office to request Pre-ETS. Local school districts will work with VR to find a provider. See resources.

Pre-ETS Resource: www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/vocational-rehabilitation/transition-services/pre-employment-transition-services.html

How can we help our child with ASD be successfully employed?

Assign household chores that incorporate following directions, with visual supports, if needed. Build on your child's interests and provide incentives for completing work. Begin at a young age and continue into young adult years.

Educators can partner with families by providing ideas and helping with supports. For example, video and peer modeling can be used to teach activities of daily living such as grocery shopping and cleaning.

Planning and individualized supports should be provided to help students with ASD prepare for meaningful employment. During middle and high school, students with ASD should take part in volunteer jobs, summer employment, unpaid or paid internships, in-school work experiences, and job shadowing. Preparing for a new setting and providing supports will help accommodate a student's sensory, social, communication, or cognitive challenges.

A complete transition assessment can help students and families identify areas of interests and abilities. An assessment can aid in transition planning by establishing measurable postsecondary goals and by identifying the services needed to reach these goals.

Become well-informed about resources at the community and state level and learn how to network effectively among these resources.

Tennessee Resources

Autism Chapters

- ❑ **Autism Tennessee**
<https://autismtennessee.wildapricot.org>
- ❑ **Autism Resources of the Mid-South**
autismresourcesmidsouth.org
- ❑ **Autism Society East Tennessee**
www.asaetc.org

Work Planning and Preparation

- ❑ **WorkAbleTN**
Offers confidential one-on-one benefits counseling to empower you to make choices about your goals and chosen lifestyle. We provide information about how working may (or may not) impact your benefits. WorkAbleTN will guide you to appropriate resources and help boost your confidence to advocate for what you want.
<https://www.tndisability.org/workabletn>
- ❑ **Next Steps at Vanderbilt**
A 4-year inclusive higher education program committed to providing neurodiverse students an inclusive, transformational postsecondary education in academics, social and career development, and independent living, while honoring equality, compassion, and excellence in all endeavors.
peabody.vanderbilt.edu/nextsteps/

❑ **Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation, Tennessee Department of Human Services**

This program focuses on connecting Tennesseans with disabilities, their advocates and potential employers with resources that pave pathways to employment and elevated levels of independence.
<https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/vocational-rehabilitation.html>

❑ **Volunteer Tennessee–Access AmeriCorps**

An inclusion program for individuals with disabilities.
www.volunteertennessee.net

Referral and Information Services

❑ **Disability Law & Advocacy Center of Tennessee (DLAC)**

Provides free advocacy, legal, and information services, including information on legal aspects of transition from school to work and one's rights as a Vocational Rehabilitation client.
www.dlactn.org

❑ **Tennessee Disability Pathfinder**

A free statewide, multilingual clearinghouse of disability resources. A partnership with multiple State of Tennessee agencies.
TNPathfinder.org

Support

❑ **Centers for Independent Living (CILs)**

Independent, nonprofit organizations that provide information and referral, advocacy, independent living skills, and peer support.
www.tnsilc.org

❑ **Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT)**

A nonprofit legal services organization that provides free legal advocacy services to protect the rights of Tennesseans with disabilities.
<https://www.disabilityrightstn.org>

❑ **Medicaid Alternative Pathways (MAPs), Tennessee Department of Disability and Aging**

MAPs is a program that will set people with intellectual and developmental disabilities on a path to learn skills to help them work, live independently, learn about their neighborhoods, and find hobbies that interest them.
<https://www.tn.gov/disability-and-aging/disability-aging-programs/maps.html>

❑ **Statewide Independent Living Council of Tennessee**

<https://www.silctn.org>

Transition Planning

- ❑ **Secondary Transition Project, The Arc of Tennessee**
<https://www.thearcctn.org/resources/get-help/transition-to-adulthood/>
- ❑ **Support and Training for Exceptional Parents (STEP)**
<https://tnstep.info/transition/>
- ❑ **The Tennessee Center for Decision Making Support**
<https://www.tndecisionmaking.org/>
- ❑ **Tennessee Department of Education, Division of Special Education**
<https://www.tn.gov/education/families/student-support/special-education.html>
- ❑ **Transition Tennessee**
www.transitiontn.org

Autism-Specific Resources Developed by Other States

- ❑ **Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI)**
https://www.ocali.org/project/transition_to_adulthood_guidelines

National Resources

- ❑ **Beach Center on Disability—Affiliate of the Life Span Institute and Department of Special Education, University of Kansas**
www.beachcenter.org
- ❑ **Healthy & Ready to Work National Resource Center**
hrtw.org
- ❑ **Going to College**
www.going-to-college.org
- ❑ **Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Indiana University**
www.iidc.indiana.edu
- ❑ **IRIS Center for Training Enhancements, Vanderbilt University and Claremont Graduate University**
iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources.html
- ❑ **National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota**
www.ncset.org
- ❑ **National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability**
www.ncwd-youth.info

❑ **Center for Parent Information and Resources**

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org>

❑ **Pacer Center**

www.pacer.org

Postsecondary Education

❑ **Think College, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts at Boston**

Conducts research and provides training and technical assistance for professionals, families, and students related to postsecondary education for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Provides a searchable database of postsecondary education options.

www.thinkcollege.net

❑ **American Autism Association**

<https://www.myautism.org/informational-kits/college-programs-for-students-with-autism>

❑ **SPARK Finding a college program for students with Autism**

https://sparkforautism.org/discover_article/finding-a-college-program-for-students-with-autism/

❑ **Vanderbilt School of Engineering – The Frist Center for Autism and Innovation**

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/autismandinnovation/college-autism-network/>

❑ **TN Colleges of Applied Technology**

<https://www.tbr.edu/tcat/institutions>

This publication was authored by Jan Rosemergy, Ph.D., Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC) Director of Communications and Dissemination; Brittany Yuchnitz, MIND (LEND) Trainee (Social Work); and Megan M. Griffin, UCEDD Trainee (Special Education). It was edited, designed, and produced by the Dissemination and Graphics staff of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), with the support of the Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) Training Program. We are grateful for review and suggestions by many, including faculty of the VKC Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD) and members of Tennessee chapters of the Autism Society of America.

This publication may be distributed as is or, at no cost. View more printable resources and materials online at: vkc.vumc.org/printables.

This publication was made possible by Grant No. T73MC00050 from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the MCHB, HRSA, HHS. Revised 2024. Cover photos @sjlocke, iStockphoto.com and @bobbieo, iStockphoto.com



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER