

# Transition To Adulthood For Individuals With Disabilities

Life is full of transitions, and one of the more remarkable ones occurs when we get ready to leave high school and go out in the world as young adults. When the student has a disability, it's especially helpful to plan ahead for that transition. In fact, [IDEA](#) requires it.

## Quick Summary Of Transition

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Transition services are intended to prepare students to move from the world of school to the world of adulthood. Transition planning begins during high school at the latest. IDEA requires that transition planning start by the time the student reaches age 16.

Transition planning may start earlier (when the student is younger than 16) if the IEP team decides it would be appropriate to do so. Transition planning takes place as part of developing the student's [Individualized Education Program](#) (IEP).

The [IEP team](#) (which includes the student and the parents) develops the transition plan. The student must be invited to any IEP meeting where postsecondary goals and transition services needed to reach those goals will be considered.

In transition planning, the IEP team considers areas such as postsecondary education or vocational training, employment, independent living, and community participation.

Transition services must be a coordinated set of activities oriented toward producing results. Transition services are based on the student's needs and must consider his or her preferences and interests.

## IDEA's Definition Of Transition Services

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Any discussion of transition services must begin with its definition in law. IDEA's definition of transition services appears at §300.43. It's rather long but see it in its entirety first, and then we'll discuss it in parts.

### **§300.43 Transition services.**

(a) **Transition services** means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that—

(1) Is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's 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, or community participation;

(2) Is based on the individual child's needs, considering the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and includes—

(i) Instruction

(ii) Related services

(iii) Community experiences

(iv) The development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and

(v) If appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation.

(b) Transition services for children with disabilities may be special education, if provided as specially designed instruction, or a related service, if required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education.

## Considering The Definition

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A number of key words in the definition above capture important concepts about transition services:

- Activities need to be **coordinated** with each other.
- The process focuses on **results**.
- Activities must address the child's **academic and functional achievement**.
- Activities are intended to smooth the young person's movement into the post-school world.

You can also see that the definition mentions the domains of independent and adult living. The community... employment... adult services... daily living skills... vocational... postsecondary education. This clearly acknowledges that adulthood involves a wide range of skills areas and activities. It also makes clear that preparing a child with a disability to perform functionally across this spectrum of areas and activities may involve considerable planning, attention, and focused, coordinated services.

Note that word—**coordinated**. We italicized it above because it's very important. Transition activities should not be haphazard or scattershot. Services are to be planned as in sync with one another in order to drive toward a result.

What result might that be? From a federal perspective, the result being sought can be found in the very first finding of Congress in IDEA, which refers to “our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.” [20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(1)] Preparing children with disabilities to “lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible” is one of IDEA's stated objectives. [20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(5)(A)(ii)].

## Students At The Heart Of Planning Their Transition

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For the students themselves, transition activities are **personally defined**. This means that the postsecondary goals that are developed for a student must consider his or her interests, preferences, needs, and strengths. To make sure of this, the school:

- must invite the youth with a disability to attend IEP team meeting “if a purpose of the meeting will be the consideration of the postsecondary goals for the child and the transition services needed to assist the child in reaching those goals under §300.320(b),” and
- “must take other steps to ensure that the child's preferences and interests are considered” if the child is not able to attend [§300.321(b)].

## When Must Transition Services Be Included In The IEP?

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What's not apparent in IDEA's definition of transition services but nonetheless critical to mention is the timing of transition-related planning and services: When must transition planning begin?

The answer lies in a different provision related to the content of the IEP. From §300.320(b):  
(b) **Transition services.** Beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP Team, and updated annually, thereafter, the IEP must include:

- (1) Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and
- (2) The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.

So, the IEP must include transition goals by the time the student is 16. That age frame, though, is not cast in concrete. Note that, in keeping with the individualized nature of the IEP, the IEP team has the authority to begin transition-related considerations earlier in a student's life, if team members think it is appropriate, given the student's needs and preferences.

## The Domains Of Adulthood To Consider

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The definition of transition services mentions specific domains of adulthood to be addressed during transition planning. To recap, these are:

- postsecondary education,
- vocational education,
- integrated employment (including supported employment),
- continuing and adult education,
- adult services,
- independent living, or
- community participation.

These are the areas to be explored by the IEP team to determine what types of transition-related support and services a student with a disability needs. It's easy to see how planning ahead in each of these areas, and developing goal statements and corresponding services for the student, can greatly assist that student in preparing for life after high school.

## Types Of Activities To Consider

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Remember that IDEA's definition of transition services states that these are a "coordinated set of activities" designed within a results-oriented process? Specific activities are also mentioned, which gives the IEP team insight into the range of activities to be considered in each of the domains above:

- Instruction
- Related services
- Community experiences
- The development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and
- If appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation [§300.43(a)(2)]

Confused by all these lists? Putting them together, what we have is this: The IEP team must discuss and decide whether the student needs transition services and activities (e.g., instruction, related services, community experiences, etc.) to prepare for the different domains of adulthood (postsecondary education, vocational education, employment, adult services, independent living, etc.) That's a lot of ground to cover!

But it's essential ground, if the student's transition to the adult world is to be facilitated. A spectrum of adult activities is evident here, from community to employment, from being able to take care of oneself (e.g., daily living skills) to considering other adult objectives and undertakings.