

Child to Adult the Bridging Dilemma

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Introduction

Parents of children with bipolar disorder face many challenges as their children transition from childhood to adulthood. Ideally, planning for post-secondary opportunities, careers, and independent life skills should begin prior to the child's 18th birthday and high school graduation, as the eligibility process can take up to 12 to 18 months. Indeed, the move from high school to post-secondary comes at a time when—for some young adults—the needs for emotional support and social structure exceed those which can be offered in a post-secondary academic setting or at home. For such individuals between 18-24 years of age, transitional programs often are a positive intermediary step, providing ample structure and support while concurrently nurturing the young adult's need for independence. Many of these programs provide opportunities for development of employability, independent living, and social skills while strengthening the person's awareness of his disability. For other young adults, federal assistance is available to ensure a successful pursuit of higher education. Transition programs and formal continued education may be links to your child's employment success. Indeed, the National Organization of Disabilities survey of 1998 found that college graduates with disabilities were 63% more likely to be employed than their non-degreed counterparts.

This article briefly reviews options and resources available to young adults with bipolar disorder.

18-24 Transitional Living Opportunities

For the child with bipolar disorder and delayed maturation, a transitional program for 18 to 24 year olds may provide opportunities for safety and support as well as independent living skill development. There are a variety of programs available, ranging from residential life skill training centers (focusing on self esteem, conflict management, anger management, communication, healthy living, and goal setting) to independent living programs (focusing on successful transition from parents' home to independent living). These programs provide counseling services, support resources, and educational options in a structured environment.

Post Secondary Education Opportunities

Vocational Programs

Vocational education programs, available to high school students through the public school systems, provide opportunities for the development of marketable employment skills. In fact, in many states, TECH PREP courses—funded under the Perkins Act of 1990—provide two years of training both prior to and following graduation, leading to an associates degree or certification in a specific career field.

Community College

Enrollment in a local or regional community college provides another alternative for students to increase academic skills, learn a trade, and establish a record of academic success. Many community colleges have open enrollment; this can afford opportunities to students who otherwise may be denied college admission due to poor performance on college entrance exams. Furthermore, most community and junior colleges have

extensive programs for disabled students, providing support services and classroom accommodations as well as assisting students in making connections with available federal funding programs.

College and University

Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the American Disabilities Act of 1990, higher education institutions are required to provide students with equal opportunities for effective participation, regardless of their disability. Accordingly, the American Disabilities Act (ADA) requires academic adjustments be made to ensure the school does not discriminate on the basis of disability. For your child with bipolar disorder, these modifications may include reduced course loads, priority registration, textbooks on tape, flexibility in fulltime status, single room residence for the price of double occupancy, and assignment assistance during hospitalizations. In the classroom setting, adjustments may be made in seating arrangements, allowance of note takers/recording devices, test taking (such as alternative testing modes, alternative testing locations, or extended time), access to private area for composure or stress reduction, and beverage allowances.

If you are seeking eligibility for academic adjustments for your child, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and higher education facilities require formal documentation of need. Often you and your child will be required to provide the following:

- Diagnosis by a licensed professional, including dates of most current diagnostic evaluation and original diagnosis;
- Description of diagnostic criteria, including present symptoms and any diagnostic assessments that were used;
- Description of how the psychiatric illness interferes with or impacts the student's ability to participate in the educational environment;
- Treatment and medications currently being prescribed and their potential impact on the student's learning;
- Suggestions for appropriate academic adjustments.

Disability Support Service offices are available to students attending universities. Many of the disability offices provide services to help students become strong self-advocates. As well, some offices provide peer-to-peer support groups, access to mental health professionals, and family support systems (such as helping to provide information on financial, emotional, and social support services). Finally, these offices may provide additional university resources, including tutoring, project management and study skills, social skill development, and protection from penalization for students who may need to withdraw temporarily from academics for disability-related circumstances.

Trade and Technical Schools

Trade and technical schools are designed primarily to prepare students for gainful employment in recognized occupations (e.g. heating and air conditioning technicians, bank tellers, dental assistants, data processors, electricians, medical secretaries, bricklayers, welders, and surveyors). Vocational training is provided so that a skill in a particular area of interest may be learned or enhanced. Typically, these schools have strong job placement services for graduates as well as job training and internship programs.

Challenges to Assisting Your Young Adult through Transition

Under current Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) legislation—acts designed to protect individuals' rights to privacy and confidentiality—many agencies and schools require parents to demonstrate legal guardianship of their adult child before granting any form of disclosure. Aside from legal guardianship arrangements, other forms of permission for disclosure may be signed by parents and children allowing for school personnel, doctors, or other agency support systems to communicate with parents. Finally, parents of a child with a disability need to be diligent in planning their child's future. Many families find it helpful to consult with an attorney for estate planning and to develop a special needs trust to ensure the child is able to maintain government benefits eligibility.

Employment Options

Gaining meaningful employment can be a major transitional challenge for young adults with disabilities. Indeed, according to the Harris & Associates survey, in 1986, more than two-thirds of people with disabilities were unemployed. There are many reasons for this high unemployment rate, but the three greatest barriers are lack of social skills, lack of appropriate education or training, and lack of appropriate support services to ensure self-sufficiency. Three options available to young adults with disabilities are: competitive, supported, and sheltered employment.

Competitive Employment and Transitional Employment Training

Competitive employment—either in the form of full or part time—is work performed in the open labor market with competitive wages and benefits. In this setting, employees receive no outside support unavailable to non-disabled coworkers. The pathway to competitive employment may be through higher education, vocational training, or a three-phased transitional employment training model. The third pathway, transitional employment training, may be monitored by Health and Human Services or State Vocational and Rehabilitation Services, and is made up of the following three phases:

- Phase 1 - initial training and support services in a low stress work environment.
- Phase 2 - on-the-job training at a local company or agency; the focus is on job performance and simulated work stress. Job coaches work with the disabled worker to develop appropriate social, conflict resolution, work etiquette, and independent living skills.
- Phase 3 - provides limited support and up to six months follow-up services before being discontinued.

Supported Employment

Individuals with severe disabilities may require ongoing support services to perform job requirements. For these individuals, supported employment—competitive work in an integrated setting—may be an alternative. There are four models of supported employment:

- One-on-one job coaching;
- Enclave model - several individuals with disabilities are trained and supervised in the same environment by a single job coach;
- Mobile crew model - consists of 4 to 6 individuals with severe disabilities and a job coach who move from business to business providing a variety of services as a team; and
- Benchwork model - consists of 8 to 15 individuals with disabilities who perform contract work with the supervision of a staff member, primarily working in electronic firms or related industries.

Sheltered Employment

Sheltered employment options are available to individuals with disabilities who would benefit most from a self-contained unit with little or no integration with non-disabled workers. Few young adults with bipolar disorder qualify for this level of service.

Available Federal Services

For children with disabilities, the transition from high school to the next life phase can be emotionally, socially, academically, and financially challenging. Accordingly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stipulates that a transition plan—identifying academic, social, emotional, and independent living skills necessary for successful transition into adulthood—be added to the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) prior to the child's 16th birthday. For some children with disabilities, Social Security Income (SSI)/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) work incentives or additional supports through state vocational and rehabilitation services are available. Since eligibility for benefits is determined by many factors, parents of a disabled child will need to contact their local office for additional information and application. SSI funding is provided to individuals who have a financial need as well as a disability. For this reason, many of our families have been unable to access SSI benefits for their children; however, when a child turns 18, parental income and resources are no longer factored into the child's eligibility for services. Frequently, individuals who qualify for SSI services also are eligible for food stamps and Medicaid benefits through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Access to SSDI—in contrast with SSI—depends on the employment status of the applicant's parents; these benefits are eligible only to persons who become disabled before the age of 22 and whereby at least one parent worked a specific amount of time under Social Security but is now disabled, retired, or deceased. CABF encourages families to consult with an attorney for estate planning and to develop a special needs trust to ensure the child is able to maintain any government benefits eligibility.

Vocational and Rehabilitation (VR) services are federal-state funded programs that assist eligible persons with disabilities in developing employment plans, employability skills, and self-sufficiency. VR services are not an entitlement program, but rather an eligibility program for persons with mental or physical disabilities that limit or cause substantial obstacles to employment. Under Section 103 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (amended by PL 99-506), a wide range of services can be provided to the eligible individual, including:

- A battery of evaluations (aptitude, interests and capabilities);
- Counseling and guidance services to help the individual get a job, keep a job, and develop skills in areas where they have limitations;
- Medical and hospital care to attend to mental or physical problems that are obstacles to employment;
- Job training;
- Maintenance payments to cover increases in basic living expenses while participating in VR services;
- Transportation to support and maximize access to other services;
- Support services to family members;
- Reader services for persons with visual impairments;
- Note taking services;
- Tools and equipment to ensure a person can perform job skills;
- Recruitment and training services;
- Job placement; and

- Occupational licenses or permits.

Ensuring Success During Transition

Ultimately, for children with disabilities, successful transition from childhood to young adulthood depends on planning and skill development, family and community support systems, and the characteristics of the individual—including levels of maturity and acceptance. Those young adults who have been integrally involved in their treatment, who recognize the triggers of their illness, and who understand the importance of good health practices and medication compliance are better prepared to negotiate this important life passage.

Conclusion

Parental responsibilities change as children mature and age. As the parent of a child with a disability, you may need to be more diligent in adapting your parenting role to ensure your child's self-sufficiency and independence. For your child, achieving success depends on a reliable support network and the transition of your parent role from one of authority to mentor, guide, and advisor. Additionally, you and your child will need to develop a mutual level of trust and respect regarding boundaries, the child's abilities to make positive choices, and respectful communication. Finally, as a parent, you must avoid "taking over" or "reacting" when your young adult shares his worries or concern, thus supporting him in his quest for independent living as a young adult.

Web Resources

National Center for Secondary Education and Transitions

<http://www.ncset.org/default.asp>

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

<http://www.nichcy.org/>

Woodbury Reports programs for 18-24 year olds

<http://www.strugglingteens.com/1812.php>

Doing Your Homework: Making the Transition from School to Work

<http://wrightslaw.com/heath/transition.work.htm>

Help for College Students with Disabilities

<http://www.wrightslaw.com/flyers/college.504.pdf>

Success in College for Adults with Learning Disabilities

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/adult/heath_collegesuccess.html

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND THE LAW after High School: An Overview for Students

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/legal_legislative/latham_ld.html

Person-Centered Planning: A Tool for Transition

<http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1431>