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Which way now?

Victoria Wright guides us through the maze of transition for young people with disabilities and SEN

For young people with disabilities and SEN, transition is about growing up and becoming an adult. It is also about the move from school to post sixteen provision, from children's services to adults' services (if they receive social care support) and the move from paediatric to adult health services (if they have health support needs). In England and Wales, young people and their families will start to hear about the transition process from the beginning of Year 9 at school.

The challenges of transition

The transition to adulthood is a time of celebration, change and challenges for all young people. But, for many young people with disabilities and SEN and their families, it can be a frustrating and daunting process.

"...it felt like merely being thrown over the fence from children's to adult services. My transition was a pretend process with a few bureaucratic milestones and I was expected to morph into an adult on my 18th birthday" (A Transition Guide for All Services, DCSF 2007).

One of the reasons why transition can be a confusing experience is that the young person and their family will receive support from different agencies at different stages throughout the transition process. The young person may transfer from paediatric to adult health services at the age of sixteen, but not transfer from children's to adult social care until they are eighteen. This is alongside the transition stages in their education. Each of these

transitions is likely to occur independently of each other, resulting in disabled young people and their families repeatedly having to deal with new agencies and professionals, retelling their story each time.

But there are many things professionals can do to make the transition process a better experience for young people and their families.

Many families describe the transition process as "hurtling into a void"

Professionals working together

It is important that all the professionals supporting young people with disabilities and SEN work together to ensure a smooth transition for each young person and their family. All local areas in England have or are developing multi-agency transition protocols, a strategic document that details the roles and responsibilities of all agencies involved in the transition process in that local area. Many areas also have a transition pathway, a document that accompanies the protocol, outlining in a clear and accessible way who is responsible for supporting young people with disabilities and SEN and at what stage in the transition process.

Meaningful participation

Young people with disabilities and SEN have the right to participate and be at the

centre of decisions about what happens in their lives. The full and meaningful participation of young people and their families is essential in ensuring that the support and provision being offered is appropriate to their needs. Young people with disabilities and SEN should be empowered to have a say about what they want to do when they leave school and have their views and aspirations taken into account.

Providing information about the transition process

Many families describe the transition process as "hurtling into a void", because they have not been given sufficient information as to what will happen when their child leaves school or is transferred to adult services. Providing high quality accessible information from an early stage about what support and opportunities are available will help ensure the transition process is a less daunting experience. Most local areas have a range of information about transition, such as leaflets, websites and DVDs, and many run transition fairs, where parents and young people can meet all the teams and other organisations they may need support from.

Effective transition planning

Effective transition planning is an essential part of the transition process. Schools have a duty under the Education Act 1996 and the SEN Code of Practice to ensure that in Year 9 young people with a Statement of SEN have a transition

review, followed by a transition plan that is reviewed every year until the young person leaves school. The plan should not just be about post-school arrangements but also for ongoing school provision. The SEN Code of Practice states that transition planning should be participative, holistic, supportive, evolving, inclusive and collaborative.

"it felt like merely being thrown over the fence from children's to adult services"

Young people and their families should be given plenty of advance notice about the review, and the young person should be encouraged to participate. If they don't wish to attend or are unable to attend, every attempt should be made to communicate with the young person to ensure that their views are represented. The support of an advocate can ensure that the young person's voice is heard.

According to the SEN Code of Practice, the transition plan should set out clearly the wishes and aspirations of the young person, as well as the support they need and when they will need it. The plan should enable young people, their families and professionals to keep a track of the transition process, review the support, and plan what support will be needed in the future. Using person-centred approaches, the transition plan should cover areas the young person thinks are important and be based on

their individual goals, rather than centred around available existing services.

Post sixteen opportunities

Young people with disabilities and SEN must be provided with the same opportunities to live fulfilled lives as their peers. This means that local areas should provide a range of suitable and

all young people when developing local youth strategies.

North Tyneside, for example, have commissioned two years of advocacy to support young people with disabilities and SEN with their transition plans. From age sixteen plus, all relevant young people will have access to an advocate provided by North Tyneside Independent Advocacy Service.

Examples of advocacy support include:

- supporting young people to prepare for meetings and other decision making forums
- having a "voice" in meetings and other decision making forums
- supporting young people to navigate the many different agendas presented by professionals, agencies, families and carers. **SEN**

accessible opportunities for young people to access, such as opportunities in education, work or volunteering, youth and leisure activities. For young people who do not want to go to college or get a job, local areas should provide access to meaningful daytime activities that are based around the young person's individual needs and aspirations.

For young people with disabilities and SEN, having access to positive activities provides them with an opportunity to make friends and become an active part of their community. Every local authority in England has a duty under the Children Act 1989 to commission positive activities for "vulnerable" groups of young people. Aiming High for Young People: a ten year strategy for positive activities, launched in 2007, invests in the development of positive activities for all young people. Therefore, local areas must remember to include the needs of

Further information

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Transition Support Programme: www.transitionssupportprogramme.org.uk