

Transition Starts Early – Building Independence and Self Advocacy Over Time

Factsheet for Virginia’s Parents

Why Transition Planning Begins Long Before Age 14

When we hear “transition,” we often think about **the teenage years**—jobs, college, and life after high school. In Virginia, formal transition planning for students with disabilities with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) begins at age 14 (sooner if needed).

But research and best practice tell us something important: **Preparation for adulthood doesn’t start at 14—it starts in early childhood.** The skills children need for adult life—communication, independence, decision-making, and self-advocacy—are built over time. **The earlier we start, the stronger the foundation.**

What Does Early Transition “Thinking” Mean?

Early transition does **NOT** mean:

- Planning a specific job for a preschooler
- Making long-term decisions too early

Instead, it means:

- Helping children **develop skills and awareness over time**
- Giving them **opportunities to make choices and build independence**
- Supporting families to **think about the future in small, manageable ways**

Key Skills Start Early

In preschool and early elementary school children begin to make simple choices (“Do you want this or that?”); communicate needs and preferences; follow routines; try new things and build confidence and social skills. These are the first steps toward **self-advocacy and independence.**

In Middle School and High School

Students build on earlier skills to **participate in their IEP meetings; explore careers and interests; practice decision-making, volunteer and participate in the community, build independent living and self-advocacy skills, and learn about their rights and responsibilities.** Ask about **Pre-Employment Transition (Pre-ETS)** at age 14. By this point, students should be actively thinking about their future.

Why Starting Early Matters

Starting early helps:

- Build confidence over time
- Reduce anxiety about the future
- Strengthen self-advocacy skills
- Improve long-term outcomes in employment, independent living, and community participation

Students who are involved early are more likely to:

- Understand their strengths and needs
- Speak up for themselves
- Make informed choices as adults

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What Families Can Do Early On

At home, families can **offer choices**, throughout the day, encourage your child to speak for themselves; talk about strengths (you're really good at X); and build routines and responsibilities.

At school, families can ask how your child is **building independence**; encourage your child to **participate in meetings**, even if in a small way, and focus on **life skills**, not just academics.

What Schools Can Do

Schools can support early transition thinking by **embedding self-advocacy and independence skills** into instruction; **including students** in conversations about their learning; helping students **identify strengths and interests**; connecting learning to **real life skills**.

How This Connects to the IEP

Even before formal transition planning begins at age 14 in Virginia, the IEP plays an important role in building the foundation for adult life. IEP goals can **support skills such as communication, social interaction, independence, and self-management**. Teams can begin this work early by including goals that focus on choice-making, problem-solving, and increasing independence across school and daily routines.

Even young students can be encouraged to **share their preferences, participate in simple decisions**, and begin to **understand what helps them learn best**. As students grow, the IEP team can gradually increase expectations for student involvement, helping them build confidence and self-advocacy skills over time.

The Big Picture

Think of **transition as a journey, not a single event**. By the time formal transition planning begins, students should already be on the path—learning who they are, what they need, and how to speak up for themselves.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/RESOURCES:

Edutopia - How to Foster Student Self-Advocacy in IEP Meetings

Iris Center, Vanderbilt University – What is Student Centered Transition Planning?

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) – Predictors of Post-School Success

PEATC – [Transition Planning for the Future - Be Ready Start Early](#)

PEATC – [Self Advocacy Parent Factsheet](#)

PEATC – [Self-Directed IEPs Parent Factsheet](#)

Raising Children Network – Self-Advocacy: How to Help Children Speak Up for Themselves

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