



Navigating IEP Transition Planning: What I've Learned as a Parent

When my child was younger, I spent most of my time making sure he got the right therapies, teachers, and supports. Back then, adulthood felt far away. But as the school years flew by, I realized something: I wasn't just planning for his education — I was planning for his future. That's where **IEP transition planning** comes in.

Transition planning is about helping our kids move from school life into adulthood — whether that means college, a job, or supported living. It can feel overwhelming at first, but once I understood what it was and how it worked, it became one of the most empowering parts of our journey.

Step 1: Understanding What Transition Planning Really Means

Under the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, schools must start formal transition planning by age 16 — but many of us begin even earlier. The plan becomes part of your child's **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** and focuses on what comes next after high school.

It includes:

- **Post-secondary goals** — where your child wants to go or what they want to do after graduation.
- **Transition services** — what supports and activities will help get them there.
- **Annual goals** — smaller, measurable steps that move your child toward independence.

What I learned early on is that this isn't just about checking boxes. It's about building a roadmap for real life — one that reflects your child's dreams and your family's hopes.

Step 2: Let Your Child Lead — Even in Small Ways

One of the hardest things for me was learning to step back and let my child's voice take the lead. It's easy to get caught up in what *we* think is best, but the most meaningful plans come from listening.

During our IEP meetings, I started asking him questions like:

- “What do you like most about school?”
- “What would you love to do as an adult?”
- “Do you want to live near family or try something more independent?”

It's amazing what comes out when you give them the space to share. Even if their answers change over time, their input builds confidence and teaches self-advocacy — skills they'll need for life.

Step 3: Building Independence One Step at a Time

Transition planning isn't just paperwork; it's real-world learning. I've found that everyday routines are some of the best teaching tools. Things like cooking a simple meal, taking public transportation, or managing a small allowance can help your child gain independence.

At home, we worked on small things — like packing lunch, setting alarms, or using a calendar. These weren't just chores; they were confidence builders.

Schools can help too. Ask about:

- **Life skills programs**
- **Community-based work experiences**
- **Job coaching or volunteer opportunities**

Every bit of practice helps your child get one step closer to adulthood — and gives you peace of mind knowing they're learning what really matters.

Step 4: You Don't Have to Do This Alone

Transition planning works best when it's a team effort. I leaned on our IEP team, but also reached out to people outside the school — local vocational programs, independent living centers, and even other parents who'd been through it before.

If your state offers **vocational rehabilitation**, sign up early. These programs help connect young adults with job training, internships, and community supports. I also learned that many organizations offer workshops and support groups focused on adulthood planning.

When you bring more people into the circle, you expand your child's opportunities and create a stronger support network.

Step 5: Keep the Plan Flexible

When my son was 14, he wanted to be a chef. At 16, it was computer design. Now he's talking about animal care. And that's okay. Transition planning is meant to evolve — it's not a one-time decision.

Set goals that are **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound), but also be open to change. Review the plan often and celebrate every milestone, no matter how small.

Final Thoughts

At the heart of all this, I've learned that transition planning isn't just about what my child will *do* — it's about who he'll *be*. It's about helping him find belonging, purpose, and happiness. There will be challenges. Some days will feel like one step forward and two steps back. But each success — big or small — is a victory worth celebrating. Transition planning can seem intimidating, but it's really just another way we guide our children toward their best lives. Start early, ask questions, and include your child in every conversation. There's no single path — just the one that fits your family. When that moment comes — when you see your child doing something independently that once seemed impossible — you'll know every meeting, every form, and every tough conversation was worth it.