



Establishing Long Term Goals: What Are We Hoping to Achieve

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Discussions about programming for students on the autism spectrum often focus on what processes/strategies (e.g., PECs, ABA, TEACCH, Greenspan) one should use to teach. However, before we determine how to teach, the first questions should address what to teach. What are the outcomes we hope to achieve with the strategies we use? In public schools, outcomes are articulated via the curriculum. And in our public school system, the purposes of curriculum are many. First, curriculum is the manner in which we transmit our culture and heritage. Second, curriculum is the way we enhance knowledge. Finally, curriculum should focus on preparing students for adulthood or the next stage of life (e.g., college). Unfortunately, with the intense focus on accountability and statewide testing, schools have by necessity become heavily focused on teaching curriculum that will prepare students to meet academic standards and to pass standardized tests.

Decisions about curriculum become more confusing as individuals approach the secondary school years. For example, in Indiana, to be eligible for a high school diploma in preparation for college, students must pass statewide tests of achievement and take a certain set of courses. For some of our brightest students on the autism spectrum, this process can be incredibly anxiety producing. Families often are faced with making difficult decisions about whether to place their child in courses focused on building vocational skills or on preparation for college.

Each family member and professional will have differing opinions about the desired outcome of a public school education. Considering the high unemployment and underemployment rate of our adults on the spectrum, should an increasing focus be on preparation for adulthood? For many of us, the desired outcome of public education is that students have the skills (e.g., social, academic, communication) to be employed, to be as self-sufficient as possible, and to live in the community. If these are the desired outcomes, then alternative diploma options may need to be considered. These are tough decisions to make and all options should be investigated and weighed.

Whether a student is in elementary or high school, the process of planning for the future should begin as soon as possible. There are processes associated with person-centered planning that can assist. These processes help the family and individual develop a vision for the future and to establish a shared plan toward achieving desired goals. While not all inclusive, the following questions can be used to focus the discussion on ultimate outcomes, regardless of the diploma option pursued.

Where will the individual live? What skills will she/he need to live independently?

Examples of skills needed in home/residential settings include: self-care skills such as bathing, shaving, and showering; domestic skills such as doing laundry, cooking, completing yard work, paying bills, and shopping; interpersonal skills such as sharing a living environment and chores with roommates.

Where will the individual work?

Jobs should reflect the preferences, strengths, and skills of the individual. Regardless of the job, being flexible, communicating, displaying appropriate social skills, working at a reasonable rate, meeting accuracy standards,

following work rules and directions, following the hidden rules of the work culture, problem-solving various situations, and dealing with changes are important skills to learn.

What leisure activities will the individual do with others?

Leisure skills must be taught early and may include: attending sporting or musical events; engaging in physical fitness activities such as jogging, swimming and biking; joining various clubs that reflect special interests; or attending community events. Dating, interpersonal relationships, and sex education should also be addressed.

What general community skills will the individual need?

Preparing individuals to safely participate in community activities involves teaching them about the dangers of the community, distinguishing friends from strangers, utilizing public transportation, accessing various community services, and displaying skills to enhance social interactions.

What will the individual do during free or unstructured time?

Personal free time interests and activities must be taught and expanded upon from an early age. Examples include: listening to music, reading, using a computer, pursuing hobbies, and drawing.

What self-management skills will the individual need to learn?

As the person gains independence, they must learn how to monitor their own behavior. Examples of self-management include: learning how to relax when stressed, seeking information when confused or fearful, and moving about in the community in a safe manner.

What personal management skills will the individual need to learn?

Potential skill areas include maintaining proper hygiene, maintaining certain sleep habits or patterns, maintaining physical health, and accessing appropriate health care professionals when needed.

By answering these questions and others, family members, professionals, and individuals + can begin to identify desired outcomes. Long range planning can assist family members and professionals in designing a meaningful educational program for each individual and in determining the appropriate strategies to use when teaching. Thoughtful planning is critical if we hope to promote success for our future adults.

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