

STARTING TRANSITION PLANNING IN THE EARLY SCHOOL YEARS

"Realistically, most families aren't going to be thinking about transition when their child is under age 12 or 13," admits Paul Wehman, a professor of physical medicine, rehabilitation, and special education at Virginia Commonwealth University. But Dr. Wehman emphasizes that parents and teachers need to begin preparing children with disabilities for adult life at an early age. "When kids are in high school, they [will already] need to know what they want to do."

Tips on starting transition planning early:

- In elementary school, children should be spending about 5 hours a week learning about different careers. They should know what industries are and what work is done in different types of jobs. Dr. Wehman recommends that children at this age be given tasks to do around the school to get an idea of what it is like to perform a job. Both parents and teachers should be emphasizing the importance of work and careers.
- When children with disabilities move to middle school, they should be engaged in more hands-on job-related activities. For example, they could do volunteer work for nonprofit organizations or even perform small tasks at actual job sites. At this stage, about 10 hours a week should be devoted to career education and planning.
- Throughout childhood, notes Dr. Wehman, "it's good to try out different activities, such as travel and volunteer work. The sooner you give a child opportunities to try out different things, it helps the child decide what [tasks] he or she prefers." Dr. Wehman mentions religious institutions and recreational activities as other good sources of activities for children with disabilities to use to learn about themselves.
- By the time a child reaches high school, he or she should be spending 20 to 25 hours a week on transition planning. Dr. Wehman advises transition teachers to visit families and learn about each student's environment. Once the teacher has

determined what skills a student needs, the teacher can plan a transition program that teaches useful skills.

- Although the skills needed for a successful transition vary depending on each student's preferences, environment, and disability, all students, says
- Dr. Wehman, should have skills in personal responsibility (keeping appointments, punctuality), self-care, socialization, basic work tasks (following directions), and functional arithmetic, reading, and writing.

Dr. Wehman is the author of "Life Beyond the Classroom," a classic text on defining and planning transition for people with specific types of disabilities. For information, see

<http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/transition.htm>