



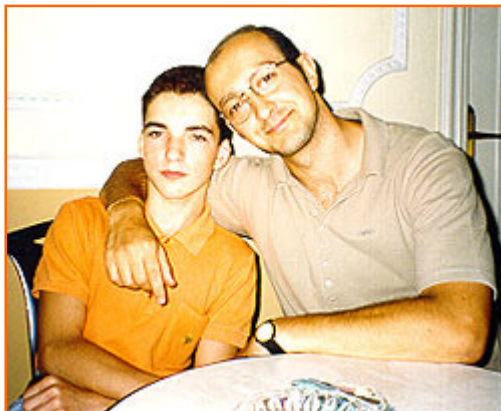
BEST PRACTICES IN TRANSITION PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DIFFICULTIES

Although the Individuals Education Act (IDEA, 1990; 1997) has provided a national mandate to help high school students with disabilities grow into independent adults, youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties continue to experience considerable problems transitioning into adulthood. Their adjustment into socially acceptable adult roles has been examined in a number of follow-up and follow-along studies. These studies consistently show that many of these young people achieve only a few of the critical postschool outcomes identified in the research literature:

◆ **High school completion.** In numerous studies, students who have experienced emotional and/or behavioral difficulties have been found to have the highest high school dropout rates among all exceptionalities (Brown, 1995; Wagner, 1995).

◆ **Postsecondary or vocational education.** Only seven to twenty-six percent of the youth who do graduate go on to enter postsecondary education and training (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

◆ **Employment.** Mirroring the high school dropout rate, the employment status of these young people after leaving school is also very poor. Indeed, these youth are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, or employed in lower-skilled jobs than any other groups of the same age (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). The earnings of these young people are slightly more than minimum wage and often in less than fulltime employment, placing them in poverty (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997).



◆ **Independent living.** Without employment, benefits, and adequate income, many of these young adults are unable to attain a level of financial self-sufficiency necessary to live independently. Therefore, they are at great risk of homelessness and dependency on public assistance once they leave the school system (Doren, Bullis, & Benz, 1996; Davis & Vander Stoep,

1997; Way et al., 1997).

◆ **Social adjustment.** Finally, youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties are more likely to demonstrate substance abuse, unplanned adolescent pregnancy, involvement with the criminal justice system, psychiatric disorders, and poor work, marital and occupational adjustment than other groups (Doren et al., 1996; Vander Stoep, Davis & Collins, 2000; Way et al., 1997). These youth are more than twice as likely as youth with other disabilities to be living in a correctional facility, a halfway house, drug treatment center, or “on the street” as they transition to adulthood.

The complex challenges of the transition process of these young people and their unique needs pose a major challenge to parents, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers. It also presents a compelling argument for designing transition systems around a solid framework of promising strategies that facilitate the vocational, social, and community transition of these young people.

BEST PRACTICES IN MODEL TRANSITION PROGRAMS

To identify the best practices in transition programs for youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties, Clark and Stewart (1992) conducted a survey of more than 250 transition programs across North America, visiting some of them in order to examine their values and practices. Although the transition programs studied presented a wide range of supports and services, common crucial features were identified leading to the development of six guidelines which seem to drive the development and operation of quality transition systems (Clark & Foster-Johnson, 1996; Clark, Desch-Înes & Jones, 2000).

Transition to Independence Process (TIP) system guidelines

1. Person-centered planning is driven by the young person's interests, strengths, and cultural and familial values

Improved community outcomes for young people in transition stem from an informal and flexible planning process driven by the young person's interests, strengths, and cultural and familial values, allowing for the formulation of the individual's goals. In model programs, staff encourages youth to take an active role in planning their transition to work and adult community life and allows them to make decisions regarding their futures. For example, young people served by these programs often determined who would participate in their transition processes. Family members, friends, coworkers, therapists, church members, and others were invited to come together to create a circle of friends to help these young people reach their goals. In addition, the young person's skills, strengths, preferences, cultural values, limitations, and personal goals were used to guide students to educational opportunities as well as pre-employment experiences, and employment. This focus clearly increased the interest, involvement, and self-determination for the young people.

For example, at one of the programs we visited, José, a 17-year-old, strong, tall, Hispanic young man, had not been in school since he was arrested three months before. José had been in and out of a variety of out-of-home placements since he was eight years old. Released to a foster home in his hometown of San Antonio, José had been mandated by the judge to return to school and keep out of trouble. Throughout his multiple placements and incarcerations, José had always managed to keep a ten-speed bicycle he had purchased three years ago with money given to him by his Aunt Rosie. José had

maintained his bicycle in excellent condition despite the miles he had put on it.

A transition facilitator at José's new school worked with him on identifying his interests and skills and on expressing them during his transition planning meeting. His team was very supportive of his interest in mechanics. With the team's encouragement, José joined a school-to-work program that taught him skills in small engines repair. The transition facilitator also helped him find an after-school job opportunity that required these new skills and helped him prepare for the interview. Now, along with his school activities, José works at a bicycle shop in his neighborhood.

2. Services and supports must be tailored for each youth individually and must encompass all transition domains

An array of individualized services and supports is essential during the transition from school to the world of employment and independent community living. The supports and services provided by the model programs visited were comprehensive in scope, encompassing the four different transition domains of employment, educational opportunities, living situation, and community-life adjustment. A comprehensive array of community-based service and support options within each of these domains was provided to accommodate the strengths, needs, and life circumstances of each young person.

For example, in the employment domain, the model programs accessed a range of work opportunities with varying levels of support, including practicum and paid work experience, transitional employment, supported employment, and competitive employment (e.g. employment in a large hotel or in a park with a coworker identified as a training mentor). Similarly, in the domain of community-life adjustment, various supportive individuals, including the youth's natural support system, provided supports and services in different settings. For example, a live-in aunt taught her nephew how to cook at home; a teacher helped her students establish an Internet users' group; and a case manager helped a young person obtain the necessary financial means to move into an apartment. These supports and services were most effective when they were flexible, individualized, and reflected the changing needs of the young person.

3. Services and supports need to be coordinated to provide continuity from the young person's perspective

Continuity of supports across child and adult systems is essential during the transition to adult living, especially when a young person turns 18 and must begin to access adult services. To ensure access to required community resources and the creation of opportunities across all of the transition domains, collaborative linkages must be established at the young person's level and at the system level. For example, in some programs that were visited, transition facilitators or casemanagers assigned to transitional youth were employed half time in children's mental health and half time in adult mental health services, giving them the authority to work in both arenas. In other communities, regional and state level interdepartmental teams were formed to coordinate available resources and to resolve issues related to specific individuals (e.g., eligibility criteria).

Continuity is, however, best achieved from the young person's perspective when the program focuses on establishing the young person as his or her own "life manager" teaching self-advocacy and related skills that allow him or her to function as independently as possible. In conjunction with this focus is the development of reliable natural support systems. In many cases, these supports are found to be the only ones that continued after managed care had pulled its funding.

4. A safety net of support is provided by the young person's team

Another crucial feature identified in some of the model programs was their unconditional safety net of support. Kaleidoscope, a youth development program in Chicago, was one such program that exemplified this no eject/no reject policy. The program service providers offered an unconditional commitment to transitional youth by accepting referrals based on the community's determination of who was to be admitted, and by unfailingly adjusting services and supports based on the current and future changing needs of each individual. They never denied services to these youth and never rejected them under any circumstances. Kaleidoscope did not punitively discharge any of the youth involved in their transitional program. Although a few youth did

decide to leave the program on their own, and others left due to contingencies such as criminal convictions that involved prison terms, administrators and staff at Kaleidoscope "stuck with" the youth they served, "no matter what." This commitment is a powerful expression by staff of their hopefulness and a positive affirmation of the young person's worth and merit.

5. Achieving greater independence requires the enhancement of the young person's competencies

Although vocational training and career development often predominate in transition programs, other community life skills are necessary to successfully transition into independent adult living. Such skills, including problem solving, communication, daily living, money management, personal hygiene, housekeeping, emotional/behavioral self-management, recreational and social development, are integrated into numerous curricula on the market, offering models and strategies for teaching these relevant and meaningful life skills. These approaches, however, often do not account for the diversity of individual needs of transitional youth. To avoid this deficit, model programs provided youth with concrete actions and practice opportunities in real-life community environments, such as integrated worksites, apartments, and shopping malls, to teach these important skills most effectively and functionally.

Effective transitions to the world of work and adult community life were clearly enhanced in programs that helped youth acquire community-relevant skills. It was important for these youth to learn how to function in the mainstream of the community alongside regular students, community members, and coworkers. In the model programs visited, such environments included practicum experiences in a competitive work environment, school-sponsored work experiences, community-based instruction, apartment living, and after-work social activities with coworkers. In several of the model programs visited, transition facilitators actually helped transitional youth establish themselves in the community. They helped them select the apartment, furnish it, and obtain necessary kitchen appliances, hygiene supplies and cleaning materials. As the young person moved into the apartment, the transition facilitators taught and reinforced such skills as budgeting, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and getting along with neighbors.

Community businesses and industries were tremendous partners in the transition programs when youth were ready to enter the labor market. Often the businesses' unique needs were met by these interested young people. For example, at the Marriott Foundation for people with disabilities, school representatives worked closely with youth who had experienced difficulties in order to place and support them in corporate sponsored internships. Such internships provided the young people with work experiences that helped them gain the skills and experience necessary to seek competitive employment later in life.

This approach to teaching relevant and meaningful community living skills is very important for these students who often have had poor experiences related to traditional classroom instruction (Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990; Wehman, 1997). Students involved in these activities also appreciate being able to earn high school credits toward graduation while acquiring these relevant community based experiences.

6. The TIP system must be outcome driven

Finally, all of the programs visited exhibited an outcome orientation that emphasized three features: youth outcomes, system responsiveness, and system effectiveness. Limited resources, new legislative mandates, and changing views about the needs for ongoing services for youth during transition all indicate the need for increased evaluation of programs and youth outcomes. Service providers who were interested in and responsive to such evaluation data seemed to be more effective than those who were not involved in monitoring outcomes.

For example, the school attended by José, the young man previously described in this article, went the extra mile to track outcomes. Not only did this program monitor José's outcomes closely (he only partially met his academic goals), but he was also successful in achieving each of his employment and independent living goals. The program also aggregated such outcome data on a regular basis to determine how the program was doing overall. These data on goal completion were tracked across all four transition domains.

Conclusion

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To "make it" as adults is particularly difficult for youth with emotional and behavioral challenges (Vander Stoep, Davis, & Collins, 2000). Many of these youth encounter economic hardship, instability, and dependence when they leave school to enter the world of employment and independent living. The consequences of being set adrift during this transition can be tragic if these young people are left without social or independent living skills and community support. To be effective, professionals and community members must continue to address the complex, multiple, and interrelated needs of this population across the four transition domains of employment, educational opportunities, living



situation, and community-life adjustment.

Transition systems based on the six TIP guidelines identified above will clearly be more effective in addressing these youths' needs than those that are not. However, adopting best practices alone may not be enough to ensure successful transitions. Greater collaboration among all required supportive resources and services also needs to occur (Clark & Foster-Johnson, 1996). Finally, research and development efforts must continue to be undertaken in order to address critical issues faced by youth and young adults in their crucial transitions from school to adult living. These systemic developments, in conjunction with best practices, may be what are required to ensure more successful transitions of these young people.

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