Transcription:

Transition

By Betsy McGinnity & Sandy Boris Berkowitz

My name is Betsy McGinnity, and I work at Perkins School for the Blind, and I’ve been involved with kids who are graduating from school and transitioning into different environments for a very long time – over 20 years. And it’s nice to have this opportunity about what I think I’ve learned and maybe some information that I can share about what works and what doesn’t work with regard to transition. And I’m with my friend and colleague Sandy Boris Berkowitz.

Hi, again my name is Sandy Boris Berkowitz. I’ve been here at Perkins School for the Blind for 21 years with an emphasis always being on . . . with adolescents – working on developing work programs for them and helping them transition to the work world after graduation.

So as we thought about talking to families, we thought about the fact that we’d be talking to folks whose children are very different ages, so we thought maybe it would be helpful to go over some very general things about transition – what it is, and what kinds of things you can expect.

What is Transition?
When we refer to transition, what we’re really talking about is the change from having your son or daughter be involved a school and the academic calendar and going on the school bus and all those regular things to when that child gets to be older and gets ready to transition out into the world of a young adult. The transition process really happens several times during the child’s life. Many of you probably already lived through the transition from early intervention to preschool and another transition from preschool into elementary school and middle school and on and on. I guess the transition that we’re talking about is the big one – it’s that transition from school to after school, which may involve going out to work each day or being involved in activities with other young adults or a variety of things that are different, and each person’s outcome will be different – what they do.

Start Early
Some of the things that are important for you to know is that the earlier you start, the better it will be for everybody concerned. There are many people all along the way at school who can help you get ready for this transition. And some things are mandated, so I’ll spend a minute or two just talking about the law. Make sure that you’re familiar with IDEA 97 that’s the federal special education law. And within that there’s a mandate that IEP teams begin addressing transition no later than age 14. And, in truth, for many children, that discussion should happen much earlier. A lot of what happens in your child’s education plan and in your educational experience, although after kindergarten really begins to get them ready to begin to work to be involved in adult activities and to be interdependent in a larger community. So all that needs to be part of your thinking and your discussion pretty early on.
Would you like to add anything in terms of law? Not really, I think it’s just . . . I think as Betsy said, it’s important to start looking at this early on – the world or work. You look at kids working – or when they graduate school, what are they going to do when they graduate school? Be looking at the process when they’re young teenagers to be exploring different opportunities in the community. To start making contact with businesses in the community, local chamber of commerce in the community, so you’ll know what’s out there. And to have kids start working; at 14 they can get a work (cut?) permits, and then at 16 they can go . . . not full-time . . . it’s just a few hours a week to see what they like and what they don’t like. At 14, for kids or students to start working just a few hours a week – maybe weekends to explore different job opportunities to maybe stay with the job for a year and then look at another opportunity for another year or 6-month period to get an idea of what they like, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, and also what is realistic. I think it’s really important to make contact in the community with your local government, the chamber of commerce, your rotary clubs, all those people that you can network with, so when the child becomes a young adult, they will know your child and hopefully provide some work experiences for them.

An Example
Sometimes it’s easier to understand what we’re driving at by talking about an example. And one thing that I can think of really started quite early with just trying to get a vision of what they thought might be possible for their daughter. And they were very tired of people telling them what their daughter couldn’t do: “She’ll never learn to do this,” and “She’ll never be able to do this.” So they decided to do a different process, and it was a personal futures planning process, which many of you have heard about, I’m sure. And what it really is, it’s a group of people getting together in a less formal way trying to develop some dreams about what might be possible for the individual is. In this case, it was a young woman, and she had her mother and some family friends, teachers, people who really cared about her, and they all came together and really talked about what her strengths were, what her interests were, what her history had been, and then together tried to get a vision of what life might be like for her as she got older. And when they started, she was quite young – she was only, I think, 10 or 12 years old. And the image and the vision was kind of vague. They said that also what they wanted her to go to college and to live somewhat independently and to have friends. And they brought those goals and those ideas back to the IEP team, and what started to happen is people at school started to say, “Well, we’re not so sure about college, but maybe she could get a job where she could volunteer. She could go to the college and help with recycling.” And that’s what she did. She went to a local college. She was involved with other support staff and other students picking up cans for recycling. And that put her in that environment and helped the rest of the team kind of try out what that vision might be like. The team held to their vision – they changed it; they modified it and said, “Well maybe she won’t take classes at a college. Maybe it won’t be exactly what we thought, but we do think this is a good environment for her. It’s a nice place where she can be around people her own age and be exposed to a wide variety of people.” And so over the years, as part of her ed planning, they built in time when she would either go to that environment to volunteer or take classes there – some recreational arts and crafts kinds of things – begin to learn transportation, so how to get from her home to this environment.
Dream a Little

And that’s, I guess, what I’m thinking of when I’m thinking of starting early is to really think, with a group of people who really know your son or daughter – who care about your son or daughter, and figure out, as a team, where you’d like to head – dream a little bit. Even if the child is quite young, and you really don’t know. What you know is that the child is very interested in machinery, but you really have no idea what they can do with that skill. Well maybe you can begin to expose them to environments where they can learn about machinery. And, again, we had another student who loved machines, and we got him a position in kitchen where there were many machines around him. But his favorite one was the freezer, and part of his job everyday he would get to walk by this walk-in freezer, and the air would blow out from the fan, and that was very reinforcing to him, and it helped people kind of get a sense where to begin with him. And, in fact, it became a theme throughout his professional placement, so that when he graduated, he knew that the environment for him had to be one that looked kind of industrial. He would not be a person who would be happy in a place where there was no machinery.

An Example

There was a student we had who actually was a student in a public high school, and it was very clear he was going to college. He also wanted to live at college, but he never had lived anywhere at home. He was not the summer camp, overnight kind of guy. He came here for a 5-week program, which allowed him to learn how to do some cooking and some cleaning and picking out his clothes and his laundry and going food shopping. And that’s, I think, another part of the whole transition process. There’s a lot of components, but don’t worry. It all works out. I think the big thing is thinking of all the components and, as Betsy said, I think a personal future plan really kind of helps with all that – to get some ideas of, “Okay, great my son of daughter is going to go to college, yet can they really live independently? Do they have the skills?” So that is another area to just look at, and summer camp could provide those skills – maybe part of the classroom experience. Do the students get to do the cooking? Do they get to do any meal preparation? I think that’s what . . . when he was here for 5 weeks, he did great. He’d go to school; he was doing very well.

Why is Transition Important?

Another thing I have in my notes here – to talk about why transition is so important and how to kind of get ready. And, it’s a very big change for people, and those of us who’ve worked with families helping them get ready for their son or daughter to transition, have often said that it’s generally harder on the parents than it is on the child. And we talk a lot to people about why that is – you know, what is it that’s so different. Part of it is that for most of us the students have been involved in a school environment for sometimes 18 to 20 years if you think of early intervention, they’ve been involved with the system for a very long time. What happens as they graduate, after age 21 or 22 depending upon your state, is you’re dealing with a very different service system, and everything changes. You’ve always lived with a school calendar with summers off and typically school vacations, and you’ve had transportation to and from school, and IEPS, and all of the trappings of education. You move into an environment where it’s all changed. Nothing much is guaranteed. The people that you’re dealing with are different people. One important change is
they don’t see your son or daughter as students. They often see your son or daughter as an employee or the client or the resident. And they’re used to dealing with your son or daughter directly, where in the educational system, everybody is used to dealing with the parents, because the parents are the people who sign the IEP.

**The Student Should Participate (if possible)**

So another important thing that’s been written into the federal law is that as soon as the student is able, and certainly by age 14, they should be begin to participate in their IEP. And they should begin to participate in planning for their education. Beginning to get everybody to look at the student and to think of the student as an emerging adult is pretty important. It is important for students, no matter what their skill level, to begin to have opportunities to make some real decisions about their lives, and beginning to make decisions and choices really has to go all the way back to preschool. As often as you can give children an opportunity to assert themselves, the more ready they’ll be when they graduated, when they’re adults, and people have that expectation of them. And I know for maybe a few of you are sitting there saying, “She’s crazy. My son or daughter will always need support and will always need my help.” And that may be true, but they also are young people who are growing and developing skills and developing some level of autonomy that we all need to recognize. To me, I think it’s one of the fun things about adolescence; there’s not a lot of fun in adolescence, but that piece of it is kind of fun to think of somebody who is developing systems and autonomy and the ability to speak themselves.

I agree, I think for parents that sometimes the transition is much more difficult than for the student. It’s that letting go process. And I think it’s, you’ve said, I think it’s important for parents to get to know the system, to get to know the people. For people in adult services – to get to know them, to ask them to come to your child’s school, to possibly even participate in a day program, for a day, with your child, so they will get to know him and her by name instead of just a file that’s in there. And invite them on a yearly basis to the IEP but also to a classroom activity, so, again, they can get to know what your child is like.

**Become Familiar with the Adult System**

I think it’s equally important for families to get to know what the adult system is like. It’s very different, and I think sometimes people approach that system with great anxiety and feeling angry, because they are many guarantees that you get in education that you don’t get with adult services. And so that can make the transition even more difficult. I think, if you can do it – I mean I know everybody has their own style, and people have real constraints on what they can do with their time – but one of the most successful approaches I’ve ever seen in families is those families that can begin to get involved a little bit with the adult system while their son or daughter is still within school – fairly young, age 14 or 15. Often programs within the community that serve people with disabilities need citizen support; they need people to participate in human rights committees or advisory boards or fund-raising – any number of things. If that’s a skill that you have as something that you feel you can do, it’s a wonderful way to learn about the system so that you’re already familiar with it by the time you need to use it. It’s also a very good to learn what to expect and how you can help adult services, because they aren’t as well-funded, and they’re more
difficult to manage. They need help; they need connections. I think it’s worked well for some families; they have become much calmer as they approach that transition because they have a good first-hand knowledge of how to work with that system. For some people, it’s just not their style and not what they would do. So it’s something to consider if that fits your needs, but certainly not something that everybody has to do. I think everybody has to approach this in the way that feels comfortable for them.

**Form a Network with Other Parents**

I agree with you there Bets. I think it’s important for parents also to form a network with other parents – find out what’s going on, get to know parents with children who are older who’ve gone through this. They can be a wonderful support for you and to you. I guess that’s my big thing. When I work with parents now, we on the education system can offer all that support, but they really need someone who has been there and done that – and not on a professional level but a real feeling kind of level. So I really just want to suggest that you get to know these parents who’ve been there and done that.

**Try to Have a Clear Idea**

You’re right, that is a really helpful thing to do. I was thinking of something that’s helpful, I guess, to those folks who are working with you professionally – although it may not always be easy, is for families to clearly state what they want and what they need. That vision – your needs, your desires, your wishes, if you will, should really drive the process. Sometimes there’s a temptation to say, “Well, this is what’s out there.” So your child can pick from this particular menu and do this, this, or this. And you shouldn’t really accept that; you should, I think, have for yourself a very clear idea of what you think will help make a very good quality of life for your son or for your daughter, and stick to it. I don’t mean be difficult or stubborn or hard to get along with, but be clear that for you and for your family these are the things that are important.

**An Example**

We talk about one of our very early transitions was a young man who we tried to have him do a variety of jobs while he was still in school, and everybody had to do jobs that they didn’t really love. And we put him in situations where he’d get dirty or the environment didn’t smell good – he hated them. And he was very, very clear that the thing that was most important to him was than he wanted to get dressed up to do to work, and at that time, I must admit I was younger and not as experienced, and I thought, “No, that’s not the most important thing. The most important thing is to get a good job, and you should be able to tolerate different environments.” And his mother supported him in that and said all of his life that dressing up, being in a clean environment – those things were the most critical to him, and she persuaded Sandy to find him that kind of a job. And it was a really fun process and a wonderful learning experience for us, because in those other jobs where he wasn’t happy, he wasn’t particularly successful. In the job where he wore a tie and dressed up, he was the delight of the work environment. He did a great job, and people were truly impressed with him. And he’s still there many years later – still wears a shirt and tie.
Summary
By way of summary, I guess I would say take a deep breath, relax, it really be okay – kind of like us being videotaped. Transitioning is hard, but it can open up new opportunities, and there are a lot of people out there to help you get through it. There’s a lot of information. Some of it you can get to from the website – you can get DB-LINK, and you can get some wonderful transition information from( ), and people can help you get those things to help with the fear. But it is a journey, and you’re really the people directing it with your sons and daughters.

And I agree with Bets. Relax; take a deep breath. Change is hard, but change can also be exciting. Good luck!