

Beyond High School: College and More!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

What do we dream for students with disabilities? That after high school, they enter the adult service system, move into a group home, join a waiting list for vocational services, enter a sheltered workshop, and/or take an entry-level position at a fast-food restaurant, attached at the hip to a job coach (a job that—some believe—will be the highest position the student will ever attain)?

Low expectations are the bane of teenagers and young adults with disabilities. Too many of us—parents, family members, educators, and others—don't believe in their *unlimited potential*. On the other hand, we may feel the student *is* capable of successfully entering the real adult world of post-secondary education and work, but we don't believe other people (college instructors, employers, etc.) will “accept” the young person with a disability. Simultaneously, unwritten—and erroneous—rules such as, “People with Down syndrome [or other conditions] can't go to college,” dictate our actions.

In any case, life after high school is often the *beginning of the end* for many students with disabilities. Hopes and dreams are quashed when the “reality” of the adult world is faced. But it doesn't have to be that way! Students with disabilities can and should pursue their dreams of college, vocational schools, employment, and anything else!

The first step to a successful life is, of course, to dream big dreams! Parents must dream with and for their children. That doesn't mean we should dream specific dreams: “Ryan will be a lawyer.” It does mean, however, that we talk to children, throughout their lives, like this: “When you grow up and [go to college, get a job, drive a car, get married, or whatever].” *And*, we need to really listen when children say, “When I grow up, I want to be a _____” and then we need to support those dreams every way we can. A child can make such a statement, however, only if he's heard his parents or other significant adults say, “You can be whatever you want to be!” If this isn't a regular part of your conversations, start saying it now and say it often!

I hope you're not shaking your head, thinking, “She doesn't know *my* child! My son can't be anything he wants! I don't want to give him false hope.” If this is *your* frame of mind, then you're probably right—*your child won't achieve much*. Your child's lack of success won't occur because he has a disability, but as a result of *your not believing in him!* Children see themselves through our eyes, at least until they're old enough to escape our influence and can carve their own identities. If we believe in them, *they can believe in themselves*. And nothing great has ever been achieved without high expectations!

It's also important to remember that children and young adults may change their minds many times! Most of *us* did—I've never done any of the jobs I talked about as a child! So it's important that we not get hung up on any particular hope a child may have. Things change!

My 19-year-old son, Benjamin, has had many dreams. When he was younger, he wanted to be a newspaper reporter, a TV weatherman, the host of *Jeopardy!*, and more. One day he announced, “I'm going to be a professional basketball player like Michael Jordan.” I didn't reply, “Honey, you have cerebral palsy and use a wheelchair. That's not a realistic dream.” I knew *Benj* would figure out what was right for him as time passed. As a young teenager, he wanted to be an actor, so we enrolled him in drama lessons and he performed in several plays. Today, he wants to be a film critic (the next Roger Ebert), and have a newspaper column, TV show, and more! He may change his mind again and again about his career path, and that's okay! We'll move on to the next dream with him. *Supporting a young person's dreams is the most important step in helping him become a successful adult.*

The next step is to figure out what needs to happen to make the dream a reality. Some young people know exactly what they want to do and may not need formal post-secondary education to achieve their career goals. In another article (“On Becoming a Business Owner”), employment guru Cary Griffin details strategies that can enable people with disabilities

2 - Beyond High School: College and More!

to become successfully self-employed. A young adult's dreams *may*, however, require college or post-secondary training. Simultaneously, *exposure* to the career—a job in the field or even volunteer work—may be helpful.

At age 14, my daughter wanted to be a pediatrician. Emily loved being with babies and young children, and she was a busy babysitter. I recommended she volunteer in a hospital to see if she enjoyed the “medical environment.” As a junior volunteer for more than a year, she gained experience in different parts of the hospital, and enjoyed meeting new people and learning new things. She also decided a medical career was *not* for her!

Several months later, Emily thought she wanted to be an interior designer. We talked about it, did a little research, talked some more, and she enrolled in an interior design correspondence course. She tackled the first half of the lessons with enthusiasm. But over the next several months, her interest waned. She didn't think this was the career was for her. Nevertheless, she completed the course and enjoyed redecorating her bedroom, using her new-found knowledge. Knowing what we *don't* want can be as valuable as knowing what we *do* want!

If a young person isn't sure which career path to take, it's time to explore, beginning with the person's interests. What does she enjoy doing? We're all happiest when we do what we love!

Although Emily decided she didn't want to be a pediatrician, she still liked the idea of having a career that involved being with young children, so we discussed jobs where that could happen: working in (or owning her own) private preschool or daycare center; being a professional nanny; and so forth. Because Emily has taken ballet for several years, I suggested she might consider teaching ballet to the youngest ballerinas. Again, we don't need to get hung up on a specific dream job. Let's explore all the jobs that could fulfill a person's hopes, interests, and needs.

If “Ryan” thinks he wants to be a lawyer, we can help him explore that career, along with other jobs associated with trials and courts: paralegal, court reporter, court clerk, and so forth. It's important to learn what a person thinks or knows about the actual job they envision.

It's important to help a young person learn as much as she can, and let her make the decision. *Whose life is it anyway?*

For example, when Emily pictured herself being a pediatrician, she saw herself being with children. She didn't envision blood, needles, urine exams, and more. If I had said, “You can't be a pediatrician—you can't stand the sight of blood!” I would have crushed her hopes and/or she could have decided to pursue that career to prove me wrong and herself right! Her first-hand experience (volunteering) helped her decide.

It's important to help young people learn as much as they can, and let *them* make the decision. *Whose life is it anyway?* We can help a young person research a career path, visit places where those careers take place, introduce them to people in those careers, and more.

Be wary, however, of “official” vocational/career aptitude tests. These may reveal a student's *abilities* for a particular job, but these may not represent the career the student actually *wants*. Parents, educators, and others may push a student in the wrong direction based on the results of a test!

When helping a young person explore careers of interest, don't let the “way things are” get in the way of “what can be.” Remember: *the possibilities are endless!*

In some states, students who receive special ed services do *not* receive a high school diploma; instead, they receive a “certificate of attendance.” This might be seen as a barrier to the student moving on to post-secondary education, but it doesn't have to be! Many children who are homeschooled do not receive a high school diploma; instead, they take the GED (General Educational Development) test and go on to college. Students with disabilities can do the same thing. A wide variety of GED study guides are available at public libraries and bookstores, and free practice tests are available on the Internet. (And see my article, “Diploma or Certificate” for more helpful info about this issue.) In addition, with the advent of homeschooling via the Internet, students can take classes online and earn a diploma that way.

At many community colleges, a diploma, GED, and/or ACT or SAT tests are not required! Instead, students simply take the college's placement tests. Today, my son is in his second semester of college while he is *simultaneously* studying for his GED. In essence, a GED or high school diploma is the “ticket” to financial aid. Since Benjamin doesn't have his GED yet, we're paying for his tuition. And, in many states,

four-year schools waive the ACT or SAT test for students transferring from community college!

Students can earn a two-year degree at community college, or use the two years to earn credits before transferring to a four-year school. Many community colleges also offer vocational/trade programs in auto mechanics, electrical, and more.

Sadly, many students who receive special ed services are *not* receiving the education they need to easily move into post-secondary education. Even this barrier can be overcome, as evidenced by the experience of a woman who shared her story with me.

In high school, “Robin” enthusiastically announced that she wanted to be a preschool teacher. Her parents and special ed teachers assured Robin she could do “anything she wanted,” but *they did nothing* to actually support her dream of going to college for a two-year degree. When she finished high school, Robin took the community college entrance exam, and was shocked and saddened by the results: “They said I tested at an elementary school level.”

Throughout her public school years, Robin had *not* received the education she needed to fulfill her dream. And she didn’t know this at the time—how could she? Robin was a child, segregated in special classrooms, with no access to the general curriculum. But surely her parents and teachers knew it, and she was hurt and angry that they deceived her.

All was not lost, however. In her mid-20s, Robin took the bull by the horns, studied on her own, asked for and received study help from others, passed her GED, entered the community college, and received her degree. It wasn’t easy and it took a long time, but Robin made it happen. *Why, though, did it have to happen the way it did?*

The lessons from Robin’s experience are profound. We must really listen to a student’s dreams: we must take them seriously, even while knowing they may change—many times! Then we must do whatever is necessary to support those dreams. Parents, educators, and other adults in the student’s life all have a role to play in this life-altering endeavor.

Before deciding something “isn’t possible,” do the research! Help the student learn how to call or

3 - Beyond High School: College and More!

write the schools (university, community college, trade school, etc.) that she may be interested in attending to learn about admission requirements and procedures. Take a tour of the school and get a taste of the environment. Help the student find out what it would take to visit some of the classes. Talk to teachers and students. And do all this with a “can-do” attitude—*your* attitude will rub off on others!

Even if a student doesn’t have the academic strengths (or the desire) to master college-level curriculum, the “college experience” can be a valuable addition to the young person’s life! A student with a disability (just like other students) can “audit” classes—attending classes without receiving grades or college credit. Learning whatever she can in those classes, making friends, and having new and different experiences can enrich the life of a young person and ensure her success. Furthermore, *adults* with disabilities of all ages can and should explore post-secondary education as way of broadening their horizons and meeting their career goals.

Politicians, business leaders, educators, and others routinely say, “Children are our future.” It seems, however, that students with disabilities have *not* been included in this credo, and this must change! Whether a young person with a disability wants to be a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker—or a hairdresser, actor, lawyer, teacher, doctor, auto mechanic, or President of the U.S.A.—we can help turn a student’s career dream into a reality. The time is right to make sure “*All children—including those with disabilities—are our future.*”

UPDATE: Since the time this article was originally published, a variety of “special” college programs for students with disabilities have been created at many universities across the country. These seem like a “good idea,” but most simply replicate public school “life-skills” classes on a college campus. Proponents say they’re “inclusive,” but most are not, in reality. Furthermore, they’re open only to a select few, and many require students to be SSI recipients (for tuition, plus more moola from parents). Why are we creating more segregation? We can do better!