

## *Adolescence: A Period of Transition*

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### *Abstract*

Because of the important role secondary special educators have in the transition to adulthood of adolescents with disabilities, it behooves educators to have an understanding of human development. The lifespan perspective on human development is particularly relevant to transition planning. Individuals with a lifespan perspective believe development to be lifelong, multidimensional, multidirectional, and plastic (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). By viewing transition planning through a lifespan developmental lens, educators are able to enhance the transition process and more comprehensively prepare their students with disabilities for adulthood. This article describes how the lifespan perspective impacts transition planning and provides an illustration of how a special education teacher can use this framework to develop a student's transition portions of the Individualized Education Program.

## *Adolescence: A Period of Transition*

Adolescence is the period of human development during which a child transitions into an adult. Ontogenetically second only to the prenatal and infancy periods of development, adolescence encompasses the time from puberty to sexual maturation (Berk, 2007). Typically during adolescence, students leave smaller elementary schools to attend larger secondary schools with a different teacher for every content area. Increased independence, peer pressure, and raging hormones can lead to challenging students who are more interested in impressing their peers than academic pursuits. No wonder educators of adolescents have their hands full!

Secondary teachers will admit their jobs are trying at times, but they are quick to relay the joys of working with adolescents. Adolescents can be silly one minute and conscientious the next. They are trying to figure out who they are and who they want to become. The influence of the teacher may have seemed to wane, but in truth the adolescent still desires the attention and support of adults who care. The effect a teacher can have on adolescent outcomes is enormous (Murray & Pianta, 2007; Toland & Carrigan, 2011).

Hence, secondary educators have a responsibility to help students prepare for postsecondary life. In addition to designing and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for adolescents with disabilities, educators need to collaboratively engage in transition planning with adolescents and their parents. Transition planning, from an educator's viewpoint, may just seem like additional paperwork to be completed. In actuality, transition planning is an important process that should guide the development of the student's entire IEP (deFur, 2003). Educators

with a lifespan perspective on human development are able to use this framework to enhance the transition process, thus comprehensively preparing their students for the transition to adulthood.

### *Lifespan Developmental Psychology*

Lifespan developmental psychology is a field of study interested in describing, explaining, and optimizing the development of an individual from conception until death (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Individuals with a lifespan perspective believe that human development is lifelong because individuals change physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially throughout their lives. Additionally, development is believed to be multidimensional, multidirectional, and plastic (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Figure 1 briefly presents some of the most known lifespan theories.

#### **Psychoanalytic**

##### **Psychosocial Theory**

Erik Erikson felt that development was caused by the interplay of biology and social interactions with the environment. Therefore, development could only be understood in relation to the individual's culture. The psychosocial stages of development as posited by Erikson include the basic trust versus mistrust stage, the autonomy versus shame and doubt stage, the initiative versus guilt stage, the industry versus inferiority stage, the identity versus role confusion stage, the intimacy versus isolation stage, the generativity versus stagnation stage, and the ego integrity versus despair stage. Each stage consists of a type of conflict that needs to be resolved. If a conflict is not sufficiently resolved during its corresponding stage, the conflict can be resolved during a future stage. The identity versus role confusion stage coincides with the period of adolescence. During this stage, the main task for the adolescent is to determine who they are, what they believe in, and what they want to become as adults.

#### **Behavioral**

##### **Classical Conditioning Theory**

Classical conditioning theory is based on Ivan Pavlov's studies of animal learning in which he noticed that a stimulus (e.g., seeing the individual who fed the dogs) would elicit a response or behavior (e.g., salivation). The psychologist, John Watson, applied this theory to human development, asserting that adults could mold children's behavior by controlling stimulus and response associations. Watson did not believe that thoughts, feelings, and emotions were useful in explaining or controlling behavior.

##### **Operant Conditioning Theory**

B. F. Skinner extended Watson's ideas about human development by developing the operant conditioning theory which states that the frequency of behavior can be increased or decreased depending on subsequent reinforcers. In other words, what happens following a response will determine if the individual completes the response again in the future.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura emphasized modeling as a source of human development in his social learning theory. He felt that individuals acquire behaviors by watching others model the behaviors and then determining whether or not they are capable of executing the behaviors. Thus, Bandura stressed the importance of cognition when determining which behaviors an individual will imitate.

## **Cognitive Developmental**

### **Cognitive Developmental Theory**

Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory states that children actively construct knowledge as they manipulate and explore the world. As the child's brain develops and the child acquires more experiences, the child progresses through four stages: sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage. Each stage is marked by different types of thinking. The last stage, i.e., the formal operational stage, is the stage that corresponds with adolescence and is the stage during which a child develops abstract and systematic thinking.

### **Information Processing Theory**

The information processing theory asserts that individuals are actively involved in their own cognitive development by processing information like a computer. Informational input is coded, transformed, and organized before a behavioral response is output. The information processing theory does not divide development into stages; rather, development is considered to be one of continuous change through the development of short-term memory capacity, long-term knowledge, and strategies for acquiring knowledge. During adolescence, the three types of strategies (i.e., rehearsal, elaboration, and organization) are more fully developed so that adolescents are more easily able to use the strategies to acquire long-term knowledge.

## **Contextual**

### **Ethological Theory**

Ethology (i.e., the study of animal behavioral patterns that have evolutionary explanations), is the foundation of the ethological theory of development. This theory suggests that there are critical, or sensitive, periods during which humans are biologically primed to acquire specific behaviors. However, these behaviors are only acquired if the environment is conducive to stimulating the acquisition of the behavior. In other words, certain cognitive or behavioral skills are best learned during certain time periods and under specific environmental conditions (e.g., window of opportunity).

### **Sociocultural Theory**

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory asserts culture is passed from generation to generation and that development must be considered within the context of the culture. He posited the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which states older, more experienced individuals help younger, less experienced learn to complete tasks by gradually providing hints, prompts, and

assistance as needed. Cognitive development is dependent on the support that adults provide children as they attempt to master new tasks, and individuals in different cultures develop different strengths due to the different contexts in which they develop.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory views development as occurring within a complex system of relationships that are affected by multiple levels of the environment. Alternatively stated, individuals are products and producers of their environments. Bronfenbrenner viewed the entire environment as consisting of layers of multiple environments (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem). The environments include both physical structures as well as human components, and are fluid throughout one's lifetime.

*Figure 1. Theories of Human Development with a Lifespan Perspective. Adapted from Development Through the Lifespan, 4th Ed. by L. E. Berk, L. E., 2007, Boston: Allyn and Bacon and Child and Adolescent Development for Educators by M. Pressley and C. B. McCormick, 2007, New York: Guilford Press.*

Development is multidimensional because there are multiple, interacting forces on development such as age-graded influences, history-graded influences, and non-normative influences. Age-graded influences are those that can be predicted based on one's period of development, such as adolescence. History-graded influences are those that are unique to a historical time period and affect everyone within a cohort. A natural disaster is an example of a history-graded influence. Non-normative influences are those that are unique to a small number of individuals. Typically, these types of influences occur haphazardly and can have either positive or negative influences on development. An example of a non-normative influence is the presence of a disability.

Development is multidirectional because individuals can experience progressive and regressive developmental growth simultaneously. As individuals age some developmental areas may experience gains while other developmental areas may experience declines. For example, as a person ages, his or her cognitive abilities may increase while his or her creativity decreases.

Finally, development is considered to be plastic. Plasticity has to do with the extent to which individuals are able to change physically, behaviorally, and societally based on events that occur throughout a lifetime (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). Special education teachers may be familiar with the concept of plasticity in regards to the brain. Children who have experienced a brain injury are more likely to adapt and recover from the injury than adults with the same injury because of the ability of the young brain to rewire its neural connections (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2012).

### ***Transition and IEP Planning through a Lifespan Development Lens***

Secondary educators are in the business of adolescent development, and adopting a lifespan developmental perspective can help educators comprehensively plan student's education and post-secondary future. Transition planning for a student who does not have a disability involves

determining the high school course of study that will allow the student to achieve his or her post-school goals. Guidance and advice is provided to the student in a general manner, and more specialized advice is provided only when requested. This approach is usually sufficient for typically developing adolescents.

However, when an adolescent has a non-normative characteristic such as a disability, more formal transition planning is necessary. This is because adolescents with disabilities need more supports in order to achieve their post-school transition outcomes (Field, Hoffman, & Posch, 1997). Most adolescents without disabilities only plan for postsecondary education and employment. For adolescents with disabilities, a more direct transition plan that targets postsecondary outcomes such as future education and training, employment, independent living, and community participation is necessary because adults with disabilities are not achieving commensurate outcomes in these areas as are adults without disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 requires transition services be in effect by the time the student with a disability is 16 years old and must assist the student in reaching his or her “appropriate measurable postsecondary goals [that are] based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills” (20 U.S.C. 1401(34)). Transition services may include instruction, related services, community experiences, postsecondary employment and other adult living objectives. Additionally, the student’s IEP must include at least one measurable annual goal that will assist the student in achieving his or her postsecondary education/training, employment, and, if applicable, independent living goals.

Figure 2 graphically shows a lifespan developmental perspective of transition planning for a student with a disability. During adolescence age-graded influences, history-graded influences, and non-normative influences interact with each other to contribute to transition planning practices. The transition planning practices influence the interrelated postsecondary outcomes. Thus, the age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative factors indirectly influence the postsecondary transition outcomes. The following case study shows how a teacher uses knowledge of lifespan development to plan the transition of a student with a disability.

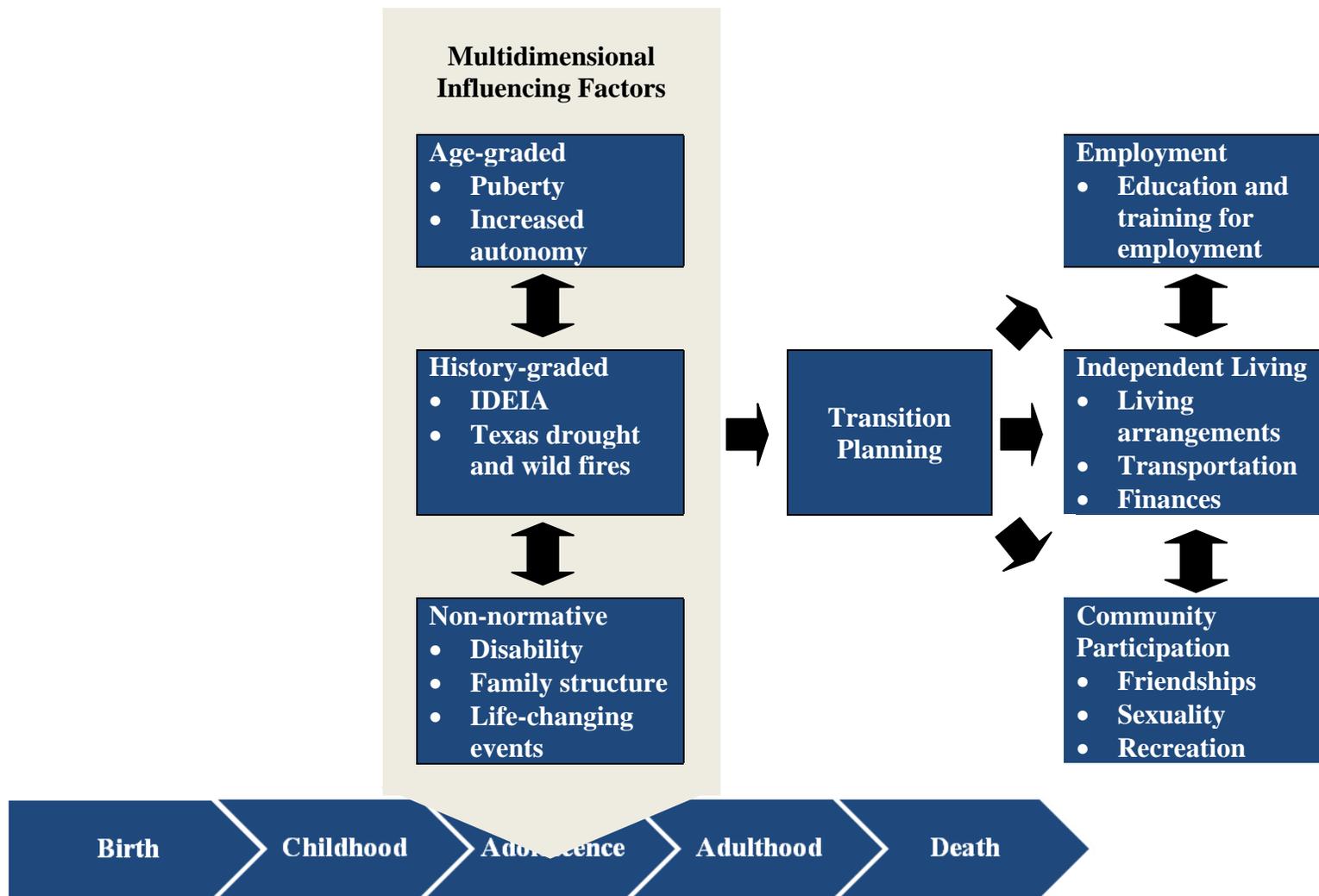


Figure 2. A lifespan developmental perspective of transition planning.

## Case Study

Anastasia is a friendly 15 year old freshman. Her parents emigrated from Mexico three months before she was born, and at Anastasia's birth they were surprised to learn she had spina bifida and a clubfoot. Her early childhood was spent in and out of the hospital due to medical complications. She has shunted hydrocephalus, takes medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and self-catheterizes. She is able to walk unassisted, although her gait is slow and uneven. Anastasia also has a learning disability which affects her math functioning.

Ms. Podolak, Anastasia's special education teacher and case manager, decides to use a lifespan developmental perspective to assist her in comprehensively planning the transition components of Anastasia's IEP. Ms. Podolak holds a meeting with Anastasia and her parents to brainstorm the age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative factors that could influence Anastasia's transition planning and development into adulthood (Figure 3 presents Anastasia's influencing factors). Next, Ms. Podolak considers how Anastasia's influencing factors impact each step of the transition planning process. Figure 4 shows the parts of Anastasia's IEP that Ms. Podolak drafted after each of the transition planning steps were completed.

- Anastasia is 15 years old and a freshman in high school
- She is petite compared to her peers and has not completed her physical sexual maturation
- Her family gave her a Quinceañera to mark her 15th birthday
- She has expressed interest in dating
- She does not have a part-time job

### Age-graded Influences



- Educational laws require transition planning and standardized assessment for graduation
- The agricultural community that Anastasia lives in has experienced drought and wild fires which have impacted the economic and social outlook of the community
- Her father has had trouble finding steady work since the drought and wild fires

### History-graded Influences



- Anastasia is a first generation Mexican American who lives at home with her parents and three siblings
- Her first language is Spanish, and Spanish is the language she uses to communicate with her family at home
- She has physical and learning disabilities
- Anastasia takes medication daily and requires medical monitoring of hydrocephalus and frequent urinary tract infections

### Non-normative Influences



Figure 3. Anastasia's age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative influencing factors

**Step 1: Conduct age-appropriate transition assessments related to education/training, employment, and independent living skills, when appropriate.** Because IDEIA is a history-graded influence that affects all students with disabilities under the age of 22 years, Ms. Podolak must assess adhere to IDEIA's requirements for developing and implementing transition services for Anastasia. The first thing she must do is conduct transition assessments to determine Anastasia's needs, strengths, preferences, and interests in the areas of education/training, employment, and independent living. Transition assessment is the "ongoing process of collecting data on the individual's needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demand of current and future working, educational, living, and personal and social environments" (Sitlington, Neubert, & Leconte, 1997, p. 70-71).

Ms. Podolak reviews Anastasia's state standardized tests to compare Anastasia to other adolescents of the same age/grade level and to determine her academic needs and skills related to postsecondary education and training. She also considers Anastasia's unique (i.e., non-normative) characteristics when choosing additional formal and informal assessments, collecting data, and determining Anastasia's present levels of academic and functional performance.

Ms. Podolak interviews Anastasia and her parents using the school district's transition interview forms. Because of the language and possible cultural differences between Ms. Podolak and Anastasia's family, Ms. Podolak strives to communicate with the family in a culturally responsive manner (e.g., she views the parents in high esteem, seeks to understand their desires regarding Anastasia, and attends to the family's use of high context communication) and uses the services of a trained Spanish-language interpreter. She asks Anastasia and her parents to complete their parts of the Transition Planning Inventory, ensuring that Anastasia's parents receive a Spanish version of the Transition Planning Inventory home form. Finally, Ms. Podolak has Anastasia take the O\*Net Computerized Interest Profiler.

**Step 2: Develop measurable postsecondary goals in education/training, employment, and independent living skills, when appropriate.** IDEIA requires that a student's postsecondary goals be measurable and based on the student's strengths, preferences, and interests. Measurable postsecondary goals are outcome statements that specify what the student will do, when, and to

what extent (O’Leary, 2008). Using data from Anastasia’s transition assessments, Ms. Podolak drafts education/training, employment, and independent living goals for Anastasia that are achievable and harmonious with her culture. Because adolescents Anastasia’s age frequently change their minds about their futures, Ms. Podolak will draft progressively more specific postsecondary goals each year for Anastasia.

**Step 3: Identify transition services including the course of study, instruction, related services, community experiences, employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and when needed, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.** Using Anastasia’s postsecondary goals as the beacon, Ms. Podolak drafts the transition services. Whether needed or not, IDEIA requires that all areas of transition services be considered. The transition services support achievement of Anastasia’s postsecondary goals and are considerate of her culture and unique characteristics. In addition to considering the transition services Anastasia needs, the IEP team determines who will be responsible for each aspect of the coordinated set of activities which encompass the transition services.

**Step 4: Develop at least one measurable annual IEP goal that will enable the student to meet the postsecondary goals for education/training, employment, and independent living, when appropriate.** IDEIA requires that every postsecondary goal must have at least one measurable annual goal to facilitate the student’s achievement of the postsecondary goal. The same criteria for determining measurability are applied to the annual goals; i.e., goals are outcome statements specifying what the student will do, when, and to what extent (O’Leary, 2008). In collaboration with Anastasia and her parents, Ms. Podolak drafts annual goals that support Anastasia’s postsecondary goals and transition services.

**Step 5: Develop a summary of performance if the student is exiting high school.** In addition to providing recommendations for accommodations, assistive services, and compensatory strategies for postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation; a summary of performance must address the student’s academic achievement and functional performance. Because Anastasia is not exiting high school during the next year, this step is not yet applicable to her. However, Ms. Podolak is already thinking about the accommodations, assistive services, and compensatory strategies Anastasia may need.

Figure 4. Transition planning steps and the transition components of Anastasia’s IEP.

**Transition  
Planning Steps**

**Anastasia’s Transition Component of IEP**

**Step 1:  
Conduct age-appropriate transition  
assessments**

List the age-appropriate transition assessments, dates, and results:

- ~State Standardized Tests 4/2011
- ~ O\*Net Interest Profiler 11/2011
- ~Transition Planning Inventory 1/2012
- ~ISD Student & Parent Interviews 1/2012

Anastasia passed all of her state standardized tests (with accommodations), except for math. Based on the O\*Net Interest Profiler, her top interest areas are artistic & enterprising. She is interested in being a TV news reporter or working in a resort. Anastasia’s parents do not want her to have a career that requires travel; they prefer she lives with them as an adult. Anastasia helps her mother by babysitting her younger siblings. However, it’s difficult for Anastasia to complete some household tasks because of fatigue from walking. She takes her medication daily (but she doesn’t remember the names of the meds or why she takes them) & self-catheterizes. Her mother monitors her health because of frequent urinary tract infections. Anastasia had a Quinceanera when she turned 15, but she seldom socializes with friends outside of school.

**Step 2:  
Develop measurable post-secondary goals**

List the measurable postsecondary goals that are based upon the age-appropriate transition assessments:

- Education/training goal(s)  
After high school, Anastasia will attend a local community college.
- Employment goal(s)  
After high school, Anastasia will work part-time in the journalism field.
- Independent living goal(s), if appropriate  
After high school, Anastasia will live independently with her family.

**Step 3:  
Identify transition services**

Describe the student’s needed transition services, the person(s) responsible for implementation, and the timeline(s) for completion

Services and Activities	Person Responsible	Due Dates
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<p>Instruction</p> <p>a. self-determination instruction</p> <p>b. Study skills instruction (special education teacher)</p>	<p>a. sped &amp; gen. ed. teachers</p> <p>b. gen. ed. teacher</p>	<p>a. 5/31/2015</p> <p>b. 5/31/2013</p>
<p>Related services</p> <p>a. Maintain walking endurance and increase standing endurance (Anastasia, PT)</p> <p>b. Contact Independent Living Center for benefits counseling (Anastasia, parents, ILC)</p> <p>c. Contact vocational rehabilitation services to learn about assistance with college tuition (Anastasia, parents, VR)</p> <p>d. Contact disability services office in order to determine necessary steps to request accommodations</p>	<p>a. PT</p> <p>b. Anastasia &amp; parents</p> <p>c. Anastasia &amp; parents</p> <p>d. Anastasia &amp; parents</p>	<p>a. 5/31/2015</p> <p>b. 4/30/2013</p> <p>c. 3/31/2014</p> <p>d. 5/31/2014</p>
<p>Community experiences</p> <p>a. Increase recreational activities with friends outside of school environment (Anastasia, parents)</p>	<p>a. Anastasia &amp; parents</p>	<p>a. 4/30/2013</p>
<p>Development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives</p> <p>a. Obtain job experience outside of the home</p> <p>b. Shadow local journalists and hospitality workers</p>	<p>a. Anastasia, parents, &amp; sped teacher</p> <p>b. Sped teacher</p>	<p>a. 5/31/2014</p> <p>b. 5/31/2015</p>
<p>Acquisition of daily living skills</p> <p>a. Make more responsibility for her health care needs</p>	<p>a. Anastasia, parents, &amp; sped teacher</p>	<p>a. 5/31/2013</p>
<p>Functional vocational evaluation</p> <p>Anastasia has completed the O*Net interest</p>		

profiler; no further vocational evaluation is needed at this time		
Linkages with adult services <i>a.</i> Provide benefits counseling <i>b.</i> Provide information about college tuition assistance	<i>a.</i> Independent Living Center <i>b.</i> VR	<i>a.</i> 5/31/2013 <i>b.</i> 5/31/2015

Review and update the course of study

Courses	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12 +
English	English I	English II	English III	English IV
Math	Algebra I Co-Teach	Geometry Co-Teach	Algebra II Co-Teach	Math Models Co-Teach
Science	Biology I	Integrated Physics & Chemistry Co-Teach	Chemistry I Co-Teach	Environ-mental Systems Co-Teach
Social	World Geography	United States History	World History	Government / Economics
Speech & Health		Speech / Health		
PE / Athletics	Adaptive Personal Fitness			
Fine Arts				Art I
Foreign Language				
Electives	Journalism I / Teen Leadership  Principles of Ag	Student Leadership  Principles of Hospitality & Tourism	Yearbook I  Principles of Floral Design  Travel & Tourism Mgmt. / Lifetime Nutrition & Wellness	Hotel Mgmt.  Beginning Photo-journalism

**Step 4:**

**Develop at least 1 measurable annual IEP goal for each postsecondary goal**

List at least one measurable annual IEP goal that will enable the student to meet the postsecondary goals

Education/training

*Using a planner, Anastasia's organizational skills will improve from needing teacher prompting to record due dates 90% of the time to 0% of the time, as measured by teacher and self-monitoring reports.*

Employment

*Using the internet, Anastasia's job search skills will improve from not knowing how to locate and complete job applications to locating and completing a job application with 100% accuracy and no prompts, as measured by teacher review of the application.*

Independent living

*Using a planner, Anastasia's ability to monitor her health care will improve from needing parent to monitor 95% of the time to 10% of time, as measured by self-monitoring reports.*

**Step 5:**

**Develop a summary of performance**

Develop the summary of performance

*Not applicable at this time*

## *Discussion*

The first task Ms. Podolak engaged in was to meet with Anastasia and her parents to brainstorm the age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative factors that could impact Anastasia's development and transition into adulthood. By recognizing the multidimensional influences on Anastasia's development, Ms. Podolak was able to honor Anastasia and her family's unique characteristics while being responsive to Anastasia's individual needs. For example, Anastasia had a desire attend college, but her family was concerned about paying for tuition especially because of the reduction in their income due to the wildfires. Ms. Podolak suggested Anastasia attend a local community college before transferring to a more expensive university and told the family about the tuition assistance vocational rehabilitation services provides. She also referred Anastasia to the community college's disability services office in order to determine necessary steps to request accommodations and explained the increased need for her to become her own advocate as she transitions to post-secondary education.

Because development can be multidirectional, Ms. Podolak will annually re-assess Anastasia's needs, strengths, preferences, and interests in the areas of education/training, employment, and independent living. Ms. Podolak also understands there may be some mastered IEP goals that will need to be re-visited in the future due to regression. Regarding IEP goals which are vital for Anastasia's safety in living independently after high school, Ms. Podolak knows she must provide Anastasia with continued opportunities for maintenance of these important goals.

Anastasia will grow and change continuously because human development is lifelong and plastic. Therefore, Ms. Podolak will be sure to make adjustments to Anastasia's transition plan as Anastasia matures. Ms. Podolak feels confident Anastasia will be able to achieve her postsecondary goals with the implementation of her transition plan and the support of her family.

## *Conclusion*

By using the lifespan developmental perspective to enhance the transition planning process, special educators are able to better prepare their students for the transition to adulthood. A lifespan perspective of human development provides educators with a framework in which to develop a coordinated set of activities individually designed for each student. Taking a moment to ponder the implications of age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative influencing factors on an adolescent's development can result in a comprehensive, coordinated set of activities that we know as transition services.

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