

Help Your Young Adult Learn About Accessing Accommodations After High School

When your young adult with disabilities graduates from high school, many aspects of his or her life will change. Services that had been provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) will end, and your son or daughter will need to find new ways to receive accommodations in postsecondary education and training, employment, and for independent living.

Although accommodation rights are provided to adults with disabilities through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, services are not provided automatically. In order to receive services, adults must disclose their disabilities to schools or employers, request accommodations, and provide required documentation showing that the accommodations are necessary because of a disability.

Here are three ways you can help your son or daughter learn how to understand, manage, and explain his or her disability to others and obtain needed accommodations.

1. Make sure your son or daughter knows these three things in order to request an accommodation:

- General and specific information about his or her disability. Naming the disability can increase your young adult's confidence and self awareness. Provide your child with factual information that shows both the strengths and challenges of his or her disability. Be prepared to return to the topic a number of times as your child grows and his or her ability to understand increases.
- Types of accommodations that have worked in the past. Knowing which supports have worked (and which haven't) will help your young adult identify the types of accommodations he or she may find useful in the future. Think of these supports as tools in a toolbox. Teaching your youth how to choose familiar "tools" for future "projects" provides an important life skill.
- Types of accommodations that may help in adult roles. Moving into postsecondary education or employment situations will present your youth with new challenges. Help your son or daughter think about which accommodations have worked

What's an Accommodation?

Accommodations can include many things, including:

- additional time to learn new responsibilities
- alarm watch or beeper
- checklists, pictures, symbols, or diagrams instead of words
- division of long assignments into smaller tasks
- ergonomic chair with extra padding or arm supports
- ergonomic tools, handle build-ups, or other tool adaptations
- extra breaks to allow for stress management techniques
- height-adjustable table or desk
- magnification of computer screens
- personal attendant
- reduction of workspace distractions

For more ideas, visit the JAN accommodations

Web site: askjan.org/media/atoz.htm

in the past, how they might be modified for these new situations, and what new supports might be useful. Discuss which “tools in the toolbox” might still be helpful and what new “tools” are needed.

2. Teach your young adult how and when to disclose information about his or her disability.

Disclosing means intentionally releasing information for a specific reason. People may disclose disability information in order to receive an accommodation, explain behavior, or obtain services. Disclosure does not mean telling everything about a disability. It means sharing only information that will result in accommodations that promote success in the workplace or at school.

To help your young adult decide whether and how to disclose, you may want to role play with him or her. You could provide a script, for example, that explains how his or her disability influences learning or performance. You could practice asking for accommodations in different situations. You may also find it helpful to coach your young adult in who to tell, how much to say, and what information to keep private.

Let your youth know that accommodations may be requested at different times in his or her career. For example:

- If an accommodation is needed in order to participate in a job interview, your young adult will need to disclose prior to the meeting. If an accommodation is not needed at that point, it's not necessary to mention the disability. In fact, early disclosure may result in being screened out by the employer. (Although illegal, such discrimination does happen and can be very difficult to prove.)

Provide Suggestions When Asking for Accommodations

Whether at work or in a postsecondary education setting, young adults may find it necessary to disclose their disability in order to receive accommodations that will help them succeed. It's best to disclose as soon as the need for accommodations is realized. It's also helpful to suggest specific accommodations. Here are two examples:

Jeremy recently received a promotion at work from a dock hand to a receiving clerk. He liked his new position, but his boss has had to remind him several times to finish all the required job tasks. In fact, his boss told him if he didn't improve, he would be demoted back to the dock. This information took Jeremy by surprise. He hadn't had any problems before this promotion. On the receiving dock, he worked hard and efficiently unloaded trucks with few interruptions to his routine. In his new position, he was interrupted all the time and couldn't always remember what he had finished and what was waiting to be done.

Jeremy was worried and talked to his dad that night after work. His dad reminded him that at home he had a check-off list for his daily chores and activities. Jeremy decided it was time to tell his employer about his disability and to suggest the use of a similar list.

The next day, Jeremy met with his boss. He acknowledged that he was having difficulties remembering all the steps that needed to be done when receiving new products. He explained, “I have a disability that affects my memory. I have this letter from my doctor that explains it medically. It would be helpful if the receiving tasks were on a check-off list that I could mark when finished. Then I would be sure not to miss anything.” His employer was happy to make this accommodation and keep a good worker. The list worked so well it was initiated for everyone in the department.

Annie is a college student. She enjoys participating in class discussions but has trouble taking written exams because her learning disability makes it difficult for her to process written material. On one test she received a D. Annie was embarrassed to ask her professor for help, so she arranged to see a counselor at the Student Disability Center. The counselor agreed to write a letter to her professor stating that Annie had a disability and qualified for accommodations that included additional time taking tests in a quiet room. Annie felt that the additional time would help her improve her grades. The D would remain on her record, however, and it would make it difficult for her to raise her overall grade above a C. Annie decided that in the future she would notify all her professors before classes started that she would need accommodations.

Meet Samantha

Samantha was uncomfortable sharing her learning disability at her college. She had difficulty learning through lectures and needed to hear the same information from more than one source to fully understand the material. She was already using a small tape recorder for some of her classes and didn't feel there was a specific accommodation that the college could provide. Samantha was careful to select, when possible, professors that supplemented lecture materials with group activities and interactive projects. Samantha signed up for generic study support at the learning center and initiated group study sessions with other students. Her strengths helped others learn, and the group discussions reinforced the lecture materials. She took a light course load so she could work part-time. She loved the intern opportunities at her school and spent two semesters working at two different companies in her field. It took Samantha longer than four years to graduate from college, but when she did she had excellent work and intern experiences on her résumé. The employers who interviewed her were more interested in her varied work experiences than her final grade-point average, which was slightly above average.

- Once your youth has been hired, he or she should request needed accommodations before beginning the job. If he or she doesn't do so and consequently does poorly or gets fired, the protections of the ADA and Rehabilitation Act don't apply. Remember, employers or postsecondary schools are not required to ask whether disability-related accommodations are needed. In fact, in most cases it is illegal to do so.
- For the same reason, if new accommodations become necessary as your young adult learns the job or earns a promotion, he or she should disclose the disability to the appropriate person at that time in order to be protected by the ADA and Rehabilitation Act.

Keep in mind that under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), an employee is entitled to an accommodation only if it is needed because of his or her disability. An employer can ask for medical documentation of the need for the accommodation.

Remember, too, an employer can ask about your son's or daughter's ability to perform a job but cannot ask directly if he or she has a disability. For example, a boss could say, "I see you use a wheelchair. How will you move our manufactured parts from your workstation to quality control?" Your young adult could reply, "I have used an attachable tray to move items at my school-based employment. It worked really well."

3. Teach your son or daughter ways to accommodate needs without disclosing.

Not everyone with a disability wants to disclose. Some young adults would prefer to be fired from a job or expelled from college than disclose they have a disability and would benefit from accommodations. To a parent, this attitude can be frustrating and difficult to accept, but ultimately it is your youth's choice.

If your son or daughter decides not to disclose, you can offer tools and teach strategies that can promote success. Here are some approaches that people with and without disabilities often use to accommodate their own needs.

What is "Reasonable Accommodation"?

In relation to the ADA, reasonable accommodations are any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. Examples of reasonable accommodations include:

- stools for jobs that require a person to stand for long periods of time
- flexible work hours or breaks when it doesn't impair essential functions of the job
- alternative formats for written material, such as audio recording or color-coded instructions
- noise or distraction reduction strategies

For example, if people become drowsy during the workday, they may have a caffeinated drink. If they take a stressful call from a customer, they might vent to a co-worker or take a short break. If they find themselves overwhelmed with new tasks or duties, they might make a list or discuss the issue with their supervisor to find a solution. If they find it hard to get going in the morning, whether due to medication or sleeping habits, they might work a second shift so mornings aren't so rushed. If they find driving too stressful, they might car pool, take a bus, or move closer to work. They might hire monthly household cleaning support, pick up ready-to-eat meals, and use lawn care services. There are many ways people accommodate themselves to hectic schedules, stress, heavy work loads, and multiple responsibilities at work and at home. There are many ways to compensate.

As you think about the ways you accommodate your own needs, consider how you might share these methods with your son or daughter. With these supports, your young adult may not need to disclose at all in order to succeed.

Resources

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

Website: askjan.org

Phone: 800-JAN-7234 (toll free), 877-781-9403 (TTY)

JAN consultants provide guidance regarding the ADA's definition of reasonable accommodation to individuals with disabilities, their family members, employers, and professionals. They offer disability-specific strategies for worksite accommodations. The Web site also includes resources such as accommodation possibilities listed by disability categories.

Meet Noor

Noor graduated from a two-year nursing program. He compensated for the effects of his antidepressant medication by taking afternoon, evening, and Saturday classes in a program for working adults. His depression, an ongoing issue since middle school, would sometimes incapacitate him for weeks at a time. When he accepted a hospital job on third shift, he was reluctant to disclose his disability due to the possibility of being discriminated against for mental illness. He found night shifts to work well with his medication schedule and felt little or no stress working those hours. He saved up his vacation time so he could take time off during February, the month he typically had the most difficulty.

As Noor matured, he was more confident and successful in understanding and controlling his stress and depressive episodes. He still had times when it was difficult or impossible for him to report to work, but he carefully saved his sick and vacation days to cover those periods. His overall attendance record was comparable to that of his co-workers and did not cause a problem for his supervisor.