

Dreaming and Imagining Your Child's Future

A resource for families who have children with disabilities and/or special needs

While typically developing children have everyday experiences that get them ready for their future and teach them to advocate for themselves, children with special needs may have fewer chances to have these kinds of experiences.

As families who have children with special needs, we need to be intentional about planning for our children's future, including dreaming broadly about possibilities. We need to find ways for our children to build independence that can help prepare them for their future.

Building Skills

Think about using *teachable moments* and role playing to support your child's independence. Consider breaking down chores around the house into smaller steps for your child. Do the same with self-care. Realize that it may take a long time for your child to become independent with these tasks, but the important thing is that you keep offering opportunities. Showing your child that you have high expectations for him/her is a good way to grow independence.

Encourage your child to participate in activities such as school clubs, team sports or faith groups. Consider community connections that you already have that can give your child with new experiences. These opportunities will build friendships and teach advocacy skills.

As your child gets older, consider leadership training so he/she can learn along with other teens with disabilities about self-advocacy and self-determination. (See [Family Voices webpage on youth leadership](#))

Find Role Models

Talk to other families that have an older child with a similar disability. You can also contact agencies that work with older children or adults with disabilities, like an Independent Living Center, to see if they can connect you to someone who has similar challenges in your community. Go to [Independent Living Centers](#) or call **1-800-362-9877**.

A few questions to think about when starting this process:

- **If your child was living the best life imaginable, what might that include?**
- **What makes your child smile and what frustrates him/her?**
- **What are your child's talents and interests?**
- **What needs to happen for your child to have a great life?**

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What Do You Worry About?

As parents or guardians, we have to consider our tolerance for risk and which areas of our child's life we might be willing to let go. While we may feel comfortable letting a typically developing child participate in a team sport, take the bus or stay overnight at a friend's house, we may not feel comfortable letting a child with special needs do the same.

We want our children to be safe, and we don't want to set them up for failure. Think about smaller steps they can take to support their independence and give them opportunities to be involved in the community.

Tools for Future Planning

Having a conversation with the important people in your child's life (care providers, teachers, friends and family members) can be a helpful step in the visioning process.

Some families find that using a more formal tool, like the Discovery Process, or developing a PATH or MAP can help move this process forward. These are all examples of **person-centered planning tools** and they provide a process for thinking about your child's interests, gifts and talents as well as their long-term goals. They help you think about all of the supports, both formal and informal, that will be available to help you and your child reach those goals. And, these tools can be used at any time during a child's life; some parents find it really helpful to use them at periods of transition. Information gathered from these tools can also be introduced during the IEP process.

Resources for Visioning and Person Centered Planning

- **PATHS and MAPS** (and other future planning tools) - www.inclusion.com/planningtools.html
- **The Discovery Process: A Path to Employment for All**
flfcic.fmhi.usf.edu/docs/FCIC_FactSheets/FCIC_FactSheet_Discovery.pdf
- **Person-Centered Planning Resources** - pacer.org/transition/learning-center/independent-community-living/person-centered.asp

If you have questions or need help finding services contact the following agencies:

- **Regional Centers for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs**, a network of 5 centers dedicated to supporting families who have children with special needs at dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/regionalcenters.htm
- **Well Badger Resource Center**, a statewide information and referral hotline, can assist families with finding supports and services at wellbadger.org or **1-800-642-7837**