

Turning 18: What Parents & Teachers Need to Know

By Massachusetts Advocates Standing Strong (MASS) and Self-Advocacy Association of New York State (SANYS)

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Introduction

It is important for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to learn about their options for what happens when they turn 18. There are not many sources of easy-to-understand information about the options for students with IDD turning 18*. This lack of accessible information may:

- » prevent students with IDD from being fully aware of their options
- » limit the ability of students with IDD to participate meaningfully in discussions about their turning 18 options

We wanted to learn more about the experiences of transition-age students with IDD who had recently turned 18. We wanted to understand what the process was like and how it felt to have discussions with their parents and teachers. This tip sheet is for special education professionals, parents, and supporters of youth with IDD in transition. It is based on research done with students with IDD. Our findings showed that: students were not very involved in discussions about turning 18, they often didn't understand the information, and they wanted more control over their lives.

*In Massachusetts, parents' rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may transfer to students when they turn 18 years old. This process is called "transfer-of-rights." In New York, however, parents' IDEA rights do not transfer to students when they turn 18 years old. Still, some parents and students discuss their turning 18 options with school staff, even though they are not required to do so.

Helpful Tips for Parents and Teachers

How can you help improve the experiences of students with IDD when discussing their turning 18 options?

1) Increase students' involvement.

- » Help students prepare for meetings in advance. Explain what you're going to talk about. Explain new words and terms you will use.
- » Make sure that students are supported during discussions or meetings about transfer-of-rights. Take notes, check in with students, and encourage students. Make sure students are actively involved in the discussion.
- » Give information about turning 18 directly to students rather than just parents. Review the information with them both in a one-on-one meeting as well as a classroom discussion.

2) Help students understand their options.

- » Have conversations about guardianship and alternatives with students so they understand what their options are for decision-making, and so they can participate in the discussion with their parents.
- » Start having these conversations well before students turn 18 years old. Have these conversations often throughout their lives.

3) Give students more control.

- » Allow students to make their own decisions, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. Allow them to change their minds if they wish and support them in their life choices.
- » Have ongoing discussions with students about what their interests and options are for the future. For example, you can make a pros and cons list for students' goals and how best to support them.
- » Share a wide range of possibilities with students and help them think "outside of the box." Listen to what they say and ask questions to better understand what they want.

How We did the Research

We used Zoom to interview 21 students with IDD from Massachusetts and New York about their experiences discussing their turning 18 options. We prepared questions based on our previous research about the students' experiences and asked them those questions. We recorded our interviews and later watched the recordings as part of our data analysis.

For each interview, we used worksheets to write down answers to our key research questions. Then, we reviewed these worksheets to write memos that identified important themes. For each theme, we identified several quotations from different students as evidence of those themes. Last, we combined our memos into a list of main findings.

Takeaway

The turning 18 process can be an exciting time for students with IDD. Our interviews showed that students with IDD are not always actively involved in discussions about their turning 18 options and do not always understand what their options are. At the same time, students with IDD want more control over their lives. With the right support from parents and teachers, the turning 18 process can become an opportunity for them to grow and get ready for adult life.



Resources for Teachers and Parents

User-friendly [Transfer-of-Rights Map](#) with an overview of special education transfer-of-rights rules across all 50 US states, Washington DC, and Puerto Rico.

[Resource Library from the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice](#) about alternatives to guardianship, supported decision-making, guardianship, transition planning, and transfer of IDEA rights for students with disabilities.

An [interactive map](#) to view alternatives to guardianship in each state.

[Center for Public Representation's website](#) to learn more about supported decision-making.

Do you have more questions about this tip sheet and transfer-of-rights?

Please email Allison Hall at Allison.hall@umb.edu.



Guardianship Alternatives and Transfer-of-Rights

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