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Nurturing and Working in Partnership with Parents During Transition

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The fruit must have a stem before it grows.—Jabo proverb (Hopson & Hopson, 1998, p. 45)

It was a warm summer morning when Calvin sat down at the table to speak to a group of mental health providers and educators. His purpose was to share his experience as a young adult with emotional or behavioral difficulties who had been involved with public systems and how the systems facilitated the transition process to adulthood. Calvin was stoic as he spoke, almost as if he had removed himself emotionally from the words and experiences he shared:

I was put on medication when I was 6 years old because I would lash out at my teachers. I was suspended from school almost every day, and really my experience with the whole mental health system, I think, was a lot of deception and lies and a lot of threats....

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Calvin, who is 20, spoke of these events as if they had happened yesterday. Standing at 6 feet, this young African American male should have been excited about embarking on a new life as he embraced adulthood. However, rather than excitement, there was a sense of distrust and anger in the air. It was clear that Calvin's feelings toward systems in general were heavily influenced by his early life experiences. As Calvin continued to speak, the tone of distrust prevailed:

My mom was threatened by a person from the mental health system. I don't know his name, but he wrote a letter to her stating that if I was not put into a facility, I would become a ward of the court. Being my mom wanted to be involved in what happens with me, she had no choice but to put me into a facility.

The deep pain and distrust of systems were obvious in these words. In Calvin's experience, the systems did not serve him or his family well.

The residential facilities and group homes in which Calvin was placed in provided shelter, special education classes, and mental health services that should have enabled him to develop skills for adulthood. However, Calvin feels that he was not prepared to cope with the "real world" and in some ways is inadequately equipped to handle postsecondary school life.

He described feeling frustrated, angry, and distrustful. At no point during the 10 years that Calvin was in residential facilities did he feel that he or his mother had a voice in his placements or programming. Calvin felt that "people" were always making decisions about him without considering his preferences. The professionals neglected to listen to and respect Calvin's preferences. In fact, they failed to facilitate his plans for the future and ignored his desire to have family involvement in his program. Unfortunately, Calvin's experience is all too common.

Family involvement at this early stage in a young person's transition process is important (Hutchins & Renzaglia, 1998). In general, family participation in a young person's life is most desirable. Therefore, one would expect agencies to actively involve families and young people in transition planning. However, the horrible truth is that, more often than not, the service systems have not engaged young people and family members in planning and goal setting (Katsiyannis & Maag, 1998).

The Jabo proverb quoted at the beginning of this chapter—"The fruit must have a stem before it grows"—is symbolic of youth in transition to adulthood. Children are the fruit, and parents are the stems

from which they grow. The stem is the source of nurturance, without which fruit cannot flourish and can die. Parents must acknowledge that they are the supporters of youth and that, as parents, they also need to be supported by the natural support network (e.g., family, friends, church, neighbors, teachers) within the community. Stems need to be supported by the trunk. The natural support network in the community becomes the trunk that supports the stems bearing the fruit. Continuing this analogy, when systems overtly or subtly discourage parent involvement, the child's growth into adulthood is stunted.

This chapter focuses on how families of young people in transition are essential to the process of moving successfully into adulthood. We emphasize the importance of viewing transition in the context of systems (family, community, culture, and agencies). The process of facilitating transition occurs across several systems and involves the natural support network of the young person, as described in the Transition to Independence Process (TIP) system in Chapter 2. This chapter addresses transition within the context of school-based transition planning as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (PL 101-476) and focuses on parents or other individuals fulfilling parental roles. The term *parent* in this chapter refers to the primary caregiver. The goal is to provide readers with practical suggestions and guidelines on how professionals, parents, and young people can interact for successful transitions. Most of the considerations described in this chapter are directly applicable to individuals facilitating transition from noneducation systems.

ORIGINS OF SCHOOL-BASED TRANSITION PLANNING

Historically, there have always been rites of passage that became benchmarks for "children coming of age." However, as society became more industrialized, the once-familiar rituals of our ancestors were replaced by more contemporary benchmarks. When society was legally and morally forced to stop exploiting children in the agricultural and industrial labor forces, school became the primary environment for preparing youth for adult roles. Therefore, the transition from school to postsecondary school life is critical.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, American employers expressed concern that young people coming out of school were not prepared for work. Longitudinal studies on the transition of students with disabilities confirmed the concern of the work force. Special education students exiting high school were particularly unprepared for the adult world (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992; Wagner et al., 1991). With this knowledge, IDEA was enacted in 1990 and amended in 1991 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

[IDEA] Amendments of 1991 [PL 102-119]) and 1997 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Amendments of 1997 [PL 105-17]). IDEA began to address the issue of young adults' preparedness for transition to adult life. IDEA introduced transition language as a mandatory component of the individualized education programs of all special education students. It was Congress' intent that transition services be designed to promote readiness for work, daily living, self-determination skills, and greater independence.

Many of the activities that schools undertake to prepare special education students for transition are shaped by the dominant culture's view of independence and self-sufficiency. *Dominant culture* refers to individuals in American society who primarily are of European heritage, who are considered the "majority," and who historically have been viewed as empowered and privileged (Helms, 1994; McIntosh, 1989). American society embraces the concept of independence as an indication of one's success and fulfillment. Although some families with special education students fully embrace this value, other families, particularly those made up of people of color, often wish for their young people to be prepared for an adult life that emphasizes group identity (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1995). *People of color* refers to individuals in American society who represent groups previously identified as "minority groups," who are of non-western European heritage, who are often disenfranchised, and who frequently feel a sense of disempowerment (Watts, 1994).

Capra (1994) described the cultural value of interdependence as one in which the individual views him- or herself as connected to others in the community. Similarly, Harry identified the concept of connection as "peoplehood" that provides a protective boundary for African American identity within which members maintain an intimate bond as a result of a "common history of social oppression and ostracism" (1992, p. 52). Thus, individuals planning for transition need to be respectful of different values for young adult "independence."

The ramifications of conflicts between the beliefs and philosophies of independence versus interdependence can be minuscule but multifaceted. People who belong to the dominant culture tend to have an inherent sense of a "safety net" (an aura of protection, security, and entitlement) for access to the dominant culture's status, power, and other privileges on which people of color cannot count. Thus, sending a young person off into the world is rightfully perceived as more risky by parents of color. This is one reason that families of color encourage connection in the community (Harry, 1992), and this connection needs to be respected by anyone participating in transition planning.

However, part of the difficulty lies within the language of IDEA. For example, schools are mandated to inform young people at age 17, regardless of family wishes, that they have the right to make their own decisions without parental consent or involvement at age 18 (the “age of majority” mandate). Although in the United States individuals legally become their “own person” at the age of 18, for many families this may not be a value that is promoted at this early point in the young person’s life.

In the case of a Latino family in which the father owned a small produce stand, his eldest son, Juan, was to assume the role of running the family business after completing high school. When Juan was about to enter his junior year in high school, school personnel began directing him to attend community college after high school. Although it was the father’s expectation that Juan would finish high school and work full time in the family business, school personnel and agency representatives believed that Juan could aspire to do other things and therefore encouraged him to make his own decisions contrary to his father’s expectations.

This case is an example of a transition nightmare for both professionals and families. In Juan’s situation, the conflict between cultural values had serious implications for both him and his family. Although they had good intentions, the professionals neglected to consider the conflict(s) they caused between Juan and his family.

This concept of the role of the family stands in contrast to that of mainstream U.S. society to the extent that it places the importance of the group above that of the individual, as compared to the American emphasis on the separateness and preeminence of the self (Condon et al., 1979; Ramirez & Casteneda, 1974). To fulfill one’s role as a member of a group is to place a higher value on cooperation than on individual competition. Thus, Trueba (1989) referred to the dominant mode of U.S. schools as the “culture of competition,” to which students from more cooperatively oriented cultures must adapt. (Harry, 1992, p. 27)

Importance of Empowerment

If young people are going to become self-determined young adults, their empowerment and the empowerment of their natural support system(s) is essential to the transition process. Before the 1990s, specifically within the mental health system, parents were treated as outsiders who were often thought of as the cause of the young person’s problems. With the federal legislation of the 1990s (the 1997 IDEA Amendments and accompanying federal regulations), parents are now considered an essential component of the process of healing and

growth (Duncan, Burns, & Robertson, 1996). Through the transition mandates of IDEA, parents and young people are required to be actively involved in this process.

For parents and young people to become active participants, it is critical that they become empowered members of the team that may include educators, mental health professionals, and other service providers. *Empowerment* refers to “the degree of control people exercise over their lives” (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994, p. 148). To be empowered, a person must be provided with the skills of self-advocacy that enable him to request the information to make informed decisions. Empowering parents and young people is a new, expanded role for all service professionals. Professionals need to take the lead in facilitating a climate in which families and young people are respected for their expertise and knowledge, despite their level of education, language, or sophistication (Kelly, Azelton, Burxette, & Mock, 1994).

In creating a healthy climate that fosters the empowerment of families, professionals should ask themselves the following questions:

- Do I really believe that families are my equal and can provide “expert” information about their young person?
- Do I stop to listen to what parents and young people are saying?
- Do I listen carefully to the parents’ point of view?
- Do I speak plainly and avoid intellectual jargon? (Hatter & Harvell, 1998)

IDEA mandates that educational professionals begin to address the transition process of young people with disabilities as early as age 14. For many parents, the thought of their 14-year-old preparing for adulthood is scary and, in some cultures, unthinkable. Unlike the “age of majority” mandate under IDEA, professionals must be sensitive to the reduced flexibility these mandates place on families. Professionals can help parents through this process by maximizing family input during planning. This requires professionals to create an atmosphere of acceptance and respect when asking families what transition planning means to them. By eliciting parental feelings and input, professionals can move parents in the direction of empowerment.

Creation of an empowering climate is dependent on professionals’ accepting families and young people as experts and providers of valuable information that enable the young person, with the parents’ and the professionals’ help, to develop a meaningful plan toward a successful transition. Calvin’s story addresses some of the horrors that the transition laws were enacted to prevent. Calvin spoke of residential facilities as places where no one listened to what he had to say. He spoke about wanting to work but believed that he was not taken seri-

ously. It was not until Calvin was 18 years old that he was allowed to have his first work experience. This temporary employment lasted only 3 months, leaving Calvin with minimal experience and no other opportunities to explore other work options before exiting the program. Reflecting on those years, Calvin said that he never had opportunities to develop work readiness skills. In fact, he is still not sure why he was given only a 3-month temporary job when over the years he had repeatedly asked for some employment experiences.

Calvin's attempt to use his voice was met with refusal. If his natural supports had been present in planning, he might have felt more empowered to express his desires. In Calvin's situation, he was never given the power, never given the authority, and never given the guidance to become empowered. Likewise, Calvin's main natural support—his mother—did not feel empowered but instead felt intimidated and disempowered.

Begin Early Partnerships with Parents

Schools or agencies can demystify the process by providing information early in the young person's school life. The transition process should begin early by infusing the concept into the student's special education curriculum throughout the elementary grades and into middle school. Early immersion in the expectations of transition law enables professionals and families to 1) identify goals, 2) examine family expectations for the child within the context of the community, and 3) explore alternatives early to avoid possible conflicting values between the family and the systems.

To accomplish this task, professionals must be sensitive, creative, and flexible in exploring a range of options with the family. Family expectations must be viewed within the context of each family's situation and addressed accordingly. Sensitivity provides the professional an opportunity to determine the family's and the young person's interests and perspectives, thus giving the professional guidance on how to successfully facilitate the transition.

We have found that, traditionally, mother and/or father roles have been those of protector and provider for children. When a child grows up, the parents often have difficulty shifting their perceptions of the child. Parents tend to "hang on" to the familiar roles despite the age or status of the young person, making it difficult for the young person to embrace adulthood.

This shift in roles is often more difficult for parents of young people with significant disabilities. The parent of a child with a disability has an even stronger drive to protect, which is reinforced by the real risks that the vulnerable child will face as a young adult. Consequently, the "letting go" by parents is scary and most difficult.

Involving parents early in the transition-planning process helps them prepare for the new role they encounter as the young person makes the transition to adulthood. Professionals can facilitate this process by listening to parents' fears, exercising patience, and encouraging parents to take small steps toward "letting go." Encouraging parents to seek support systems in their community also facilitates the role-change process. The more parents know about the resources and supports within the community, the more comfortable they will become in their changing role. Harry (1992) spoke to the strengths of African American families and their strong kinship bonds as a major component of African American worldview. Asian and Latino cultures have also been identified as holding similar worldviews (Harry, 1992). Professionals who acknowledge and accept differing worldviews are better prepared to make sense of family expectations in the preparation of the young person's life choices.

Help Families Address Real Concerns

An additional issue that families and young people encounter is whether their child should be labeled as having a disability. Many parents and young people feel compromised and angered by the young person's being labeled with a disability such as "emotionally disturbed." Many families face a dilemma when their child must be labeled to receive services because they know that the label may stigmatize him. Generally, the more severe the diagnosis, the greater the chances of being eligible for services.

After graduating from high school, Jimmy, age 20, did not want anyone to know he had been in special education and labeled as "emotionally disturbed." While in high school, he hated being called stupid or crazy by his peers, and he vowed that once he was out of school he would never let anyone know of his past. The stigma and humiliation he encountered eventually not only affected his self-esteem but prevented him from receiving services as an adult. Because he failed to identify himself as a person with special needs, local service agencies denied him access to needed services.

Professionals familiar with system expectations can provide young people and their families with information and strategies that enable them to advocate for themselves. Part of self-advocacy involves knowing one's strengths and limitations and being able to articulate them to others. Service agencies expect young people to identify their limitations to obtain services.

The art of empowerment and advocating for oneself is not acquired through mystical efforts (Ellis, 1995). Anyone can learn and feel empowered if he has a nurturing environment in which his voice

is valued. Professionals can facilitate this process by providing families and young people with a forum in which to be heard.

Facilitating Empowerment

The dynamics of empowerment can be accomplished by professionals' assisting families in

1. Becoming informed by seeking information
2. Knowing their rights
3. Seeking choices and making decisions
4. Asking questions
5. Identifying appropriate coping strategies
6. Learning to speak their voice (i.e., give voice to their needs) (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998)

Once families feel successfully empowered, they and the professionals with whom they work can model the previous six points of empowerment building for young people.

Linda chose to let people know about her difficulties. Her parents, who over the years had to develop their own sense of empowerment, were able to help Linda see her disability not as a handicap but as a hurdle that she had to work around in her life. Linda's parents taught her to seek information and ask questions about available resources and services within her community. Feeling empowered, Linda was able to inform her postsecondary teachers of her difficulties. Together, she and her teachers were able to create a plan that involved other service agencies that enabled Linda to develop skills for adulthood. Linda's story speaks to the importance of parental empowerment and how it can affect young people. Table 1 provides guidelines for parents and other natural support providers and young people for facilitating successful transitions for youth with emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Barriers to Family Involvement

Families of young people identified as having emotional or behavioral difficulties often feel that they should not intervene in treatment or treatment planning for the young person. Many of these families feel marginalized, which is a sense of feeling deprived of the power to effect change, and therefore there is a concomitant feeling of vulnerability (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Families of youth with emotional or behavioral difficulties feel marginalized when they perceive that they have no impact on how professionals decide to advise, serve, treat, and educate the young person.

Families of young people of color have to contend with an additional issue regarding empowerment and marginalization. Most people of color are marginalized individuals because of their cultural

Table 1. Role of parents or natural support people and young people in transition

Parents or Natural Support People

Know your rights: Part of family empowerment is becoming informed. Ensure that rights are provided in writing and explained in a language that the parent understands.

Schedule meetings at a convenient time, and attend planning meetings or send a representative.

Be aware of your child's school program and request supports if available.

Be empowered—speak up, request information, and ask professionals to assist in obtaining whichever information or services are necessary.

Before your meeting in a comfortable environment, plan with your child what you wish to be the outcome.

If you feel uncomfortable with and overwhelmed by the process, seek assistance from parent support groups from which advocacy skills can be learned and supported.

Young People

Be open to new learning opportunities, including social skills training if necessary and self-determination skills training, including goal setting and decision making.

See the transition process as yours; be willing to identify areas of interest and preferences, and advocate for those. Know your rights as a young person with emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Take charge of your own transition-planning meetings. That is, run your own meeting, with assistance from adults if you need it.

Feel empowered. This may mean that a professional will have to coach you on what to say, expect, or do in a given situation.

group's historical treatment and their current position in American society (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Thus, families of color often feel particularly disempowered, which is easily exacerbated by systems' reinforcement of this perception.

First- and second-generation Asian Americans are more likely to see behavioral or emotional difficulties as some form of imbalance between body and mind: "Psychiatric disorders are often interpreted in terms of an imbalance of physiological functions, which creates disharmony among the elements of the body" (Harry, 1992, p. 37). Typically, identification of a disability has a significant negative effect on the image of the family of the young person with the disability. Therefore, there is a strong desire not to be identified or to seek services. This greatly influences the percentage of Asian Americans seeking services through either school or service systems (Harry, 1992).

African Americans have a genuine concern about being misdiagnosed for mental health services and, more specifically, school-based services. Historically, African Americans have been overrepresented in special-needs categories (Wagner et al., 1991). This is seen in numerous legal cases, such as *Mills v. District of Columbia* (1963), in which inappropriate school tracking practices were based on race, and the *Larry P. v. Riles* (N.D. Cal. 1972) ban on IQ testing for African American youth.

Professionals must be sensitive to the many issues that families and young people face. Sensitivity to individual differences, intergenerational conflict, and cultural/ethnic considerations must be addressed by all individuals involved in the transition-planning process (see Table 2). Professionals can help mediate in parents' and young people's conflicts regarding transition goals and can play the "neutral" role of facilitating the transition. Goals and expectations must be clarified with parents and young people to facilitate this problem-solving task.

It is critical that all professionals in service agencies pay close attention to how systems disempower families and young people. The following sections describe barriers to family involvement.

Knowledge Barriers Barriers occur when minimal information is provided to the family and the young person that would enable them to make sound decisions. Although transition law and the codes of ethics of many systems attempt to guard against the withholding of information, it continues to occur.

Studies have shown that when parents are given limited or no information about the transition process, participation is significantly reduced (Hutchins & Renzaglia, 1998). Parents are inhibited when they are unclear of the purpose of the planning process. Consequently, they are not likely to participate and either 1) present obstacles to the process through lack of cooperation or 2) become overly compliant and accept whatever is recommended.

Communication Barriers The use of professional jargon erects an instant barrier between family and professional. Typically, when professionals use jargon, it excludes the family and the young person from full and equal participation in the communication. Use of acronyms

Table 2. Role of professionals and paraprofessionals in transition

<p>Collaborate with all partners equally. This ensures a climate of trust and value among families and youth with emotional or behavioral difficulties.</p> <p>Encourage the positive dialogue that is critical for successful transition. It is too easy to talk about the undesired qualities of a young person with emotional or behavioral difficulties. It is critical to emphasize the young person's strengths before exploring her challenges.</p> <p>Provide a safe environment in which collaborative efforts can grow and be nurtured. For many parents, contact with agencies resurrects stresses based on a history of experiences. "Any collaborative relationship should be marked by a demonstration of respect and compassion for family members; an understanding and an accommodation of different styles of social interaction; the use of straightforward language; creative outreach efforts; respect for families' cultures and experiences" (Bullock & Gable, 1997, p. 7).</p> <p>Provide flexibility to meet the needs of families and young people with emotional or behavioral difficulties. When working with families of color, systems must respect the family and community hierarchies during transition planning.</p>
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such as *ITP* (individualized transition plan) or *ED* (emotionally disturbed) creates an invisible barrier that leaves the outsider “out.” Such practice by professionals creates a hierarchy and/or class system, assigning the family and the young person a marginalized role.

Another example is when non-English-speaking families attend meetings at which interpreters are not provided or documents are provided in English only. Even with interpreters available, it is critical to know the credentials of the interpreter. Not everyone who can speak two languages is bicultural. It is important that the interpreter be not only bilingual but also bicultural, because there may be concepts in the family’s culture that do not translate into dominant culture concepts, and vice versa. In addition to the bilingual/bicultural issues, it is important that professionals be aware that, in certain languages, there are no direct translations for some mental health terms. Therefore, professionals need to carefully and patiently define terms and phrases for reinterpretation.

Phan, a Vietnamese teenager, was 19 years old with a significant physical disability that interfered with his daily functioning. His family was limited in income yet consistently refused to take advantage of community resources that could assist with Phan’s transition. Finally, the bilingual/bicultural interpreter informed the school team that, within the Vietnamese culture, for family members to take anything that they did not pay for would be seen as charity. Consequently, this would devalue the family’s status within the community. This example highlights the value of having an interpreter who not only speaks the language but, equally important, understands the culture as well.

Schools and others should use caution when enlisting the children who speak fluent English of parents who do not as interpreters for their parents.

Attitudinal Barriers Attitudinal barriers can be erected by both parents and professionals. In our experience, professionals often make and act on assumptions about the families and young people they serve. These assumptions are often wrong and insensitive. For example, assuming that all families want their young people to attend college is ethnocentric and insensitive to alternative goals. Being insensitive to the feelings, history, culture, relationships, and roles of young people and their families is a primary barrier to families’ feeling empowered and involved in transition planning (Ginavan & Jozwiak, 1993).

Trust, deference, threat, fear, and suspicion are feelings that are commonly found among families in their interactions with schools and other service agencies. These feelings generally stem from previous

interactions with systems. Often, trust and deference can seem the same when families interact with agencies such as schools. However, the two attitudes are very different. Trust occurs when the family understands the process, respects the professional, and believes in the integrity of the system, whereas deference occurs when a family adopts an attitude of noninterference and delegation of authority (Harry, 1992). In both situations, professionals are likely to see families and young people agreeing with restraint and without excessive questioning. Similarly, threat, fear, and suspicion could easily present with similar behaviors, such as anger, questioning, excessive distrust, and sometimes posturing. What may seem to be hostile behavior could, in fact, be fear.

It is important for transition facilitators to be respectful and to validate the feelings that parents express. Clearly, some of these feelings need to be addressed and alleviated through open, honest communication.

Ignoring Parental Supports Brian, a high school junior, was identified as having behavioral difficulties. Although assigned to a special education class for his entire day, Brian was eager to find a job. School staff did not consider Brian eligible for work on or off campus because of his extreme behavioral difficulties and skill limitations. Consequently, Brian was not enrolled in a work experience program. Brian's mother, conscious of her son's desires, pursued potential work options within the community. A church provided a job for Brian and helped to shape his behavior into acceptable social skills for the work environment.

Fortunately, Brian's mother was able to advocate for her son. Her familiarity with the community and her desire to seek accommodations for her son enabled her to make use of the family's natural support—the church. Brian's story highlights the importance of professionals' considering the natural supports of the family when preparing young people for adulthood.

Brian's mother and the church were natural supports that the school ignored. When professionals do not consider families' natural support systems, their resource base is undermined and their ability to contribute is compromised. Extended family, close friends, churches, and other individuals and institutions can provide emotional support and guidance to parents as well as opportunities for skill development or other activities identified in the transition plan. If professionals are unaware of natural supports in the parents' and young person's lives, the transition process is handicapped and a source of support for the family and the young person is undermined. Therefore, it is critical that professionals, along with parents and young people, identify the natural

supports within the young person's community. To assist professionals with this process, the following questions should act as guidelines:

- What is the focus of community life (for the young person)? (for the family)?
- Where does the young person go to "hang out"? Who are her friends?
- Where do families go? Where do they play?
- Where do families get together?
- With whom do family members spend time? Doing what activities? (Thorpe, 1997, p. 266)

It is the natural support system that continues in the young person's life long after the professionals' work has ended.

Reduced Family Resources Families of children with emotional or behavioral difficulties who need services disproportionately have lower incomes and receive little assistance in obtaining mental health services (Cheney & Osher, 1997). The effect of limited resources for these families and young people is devastating emotionally, financially, and socially. Families forced to create their own resources are left to cope with stresses that ultimately affect all members of the family:

This intensity of effort on the part of families with children with disabilities causes great stress, especially given (a) the prospect of their children's continued dependence (Hanley-Maxwell, Whitney-Thomas, & Pogoloff, 1995) and (b) limited availability of needed community support services (Thorin & Irvin, 1992). Stress also results from the additional responsibilities families shoulder once the public school is completed (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Jones, 1988). (Lehmann, 1998, p. 130)

Lack of Formal Supports Formal supports are those resources specifically designed to aid families and individuals that are not part of the community, such as therapists, agency personnel, managers, and other service providers. Families of young people with disabilities that have insufficient formal supports and services experience enormous daily stressors (Cheney, Hagner, Malloy, Cormier, & Bernstein, 1998). Divorce can become a prominent feature in many homes. In single-parent homes, stress may take on a different profile, as many parents become too busy taking care of the basics of living to devote adequate attention to assisting the young person with emotional or behavioral difficulties in the transition process. Consequently, many young people remain at home after high school with minimal involvement in any postsecondary activities (Wagner et al., 1992). In the absence of sufficient formal supports, many families do not know of or see alternatives to their situation once the young person has made the transition out of high school.

Although this presents a dismal picture for families and young people with emotional or behavioral difficulties, if professionals reach out to assist them they may prevent some of the negative stresses that affect these families. Professionals can encourage and engage in ongoing communication with families and young people with emotional or behavioral difficulties. Educators are the frontline supports for families and often the catalyst to involve other agency professionals. Professionals can empower families by encouraging them to become knowledgeable about resources within their communities. This may require educating some families on how to seek out resources (Cheney & Osher, 1997). Professionals can provide families with alternative means of involvement in young people's planning. Families that live in rural areas or single-parent families may find active participation in young people's transition planning difficult. Alternatives may include professionals' traveling to the families or meeting with families during non-traditional times, such as in the evening. Accommodating families and young people not only reduces some of the family stresses but also ensures parents' involvement and sets a sincere tone of caring.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many issues and challenges that families of young people with emotional or behavioral difficulties face during the transition years. Studies such as the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) clearly highlight the outcomes for youth who are not prepared adequately for adulthood.

One of the keys to better preparation for adulthood is a partnership with parents in the preparation process. In general, all systems, including but not limited to families, schools, and mental health and other service agencies, must recognize the need to be flexible and must teach families, youth, and professionals to engage in effective collaboration. Inherent in effective collaboration is respect for all individuals involved and sensitivity to the cultural, generational, and gender differences of all participants (Cheney & Osher, 1997).

The story of Calvin that opened this chapter described ineffective collaboration. Effective collaboration for successful transitions involves four basic principles:

1. Collaborating with all partners equally
2. Listening to all "voices"
3. Providing adequate time for planning
4. Being flexible and sensitive to the concerns and needs of diverse families (Hatter & Harvell, 1998)

Tables 1 and 2 provide collaborative guidelines for young people, parents, professionals, and paraprofessionals on promising best practices

for effective and successful transitions. If parents, young people, and professionals truly work together on effective collaboration, then studies in the future, similar to the National Longitudinal Transition Study, will reflect that, indeed, working together does have positive outcomes for youth with emotional or behavioral difficulties.

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