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ISSUE BRIEF

# Supporting Girls With Disabilities As They Transition To Adulthood

*An Awareness Document for Parents,  
Youth, Advocates, and Professionals*

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# Introduction

Transitioning from youth to adulthood presents challenges for almost every young person. Youth with disabilities, though, are often particularly vulnerable during this time period. When researchers have examined what happens to young people with disabilities after they leave school, we find that individuals from certain groups do not fare as well as others in transitioning to adulthood. In particular, upon leaving school, young women with disabilities seem to fare worse than their male counterparts on many indicators of adult success.

Girls with disabilities represent between 5 and 8 percent of all female youth (Rousso, 2002). They experience disabilities of all types, including physical, sensory, learning, emotional, intellectual, and health. Unfortunately, these girls often experience double discrimination based on their gender and disability.

The purpose of this Issue Brief is to draw awareness to how gender affects the lives of youth with disabilities, particularly for girls, as they prepare to transition to adulthood.

## **GENDER MATTERS**

A number of studies have looked at the relationship between gender and post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. In a comprehensive review of the literature, comprising 34 studies completed between 1972 and 1998, it was found that:

- Well over half the studies reported a 20-30% lower employment rate for women with disabilities compared to women without disabilities, men without disabilities, and men with disabilities;
- Women with disabilities were 11-49% less likely than men with disabilities to work full-time and they earned as much as 78% less;
- Women with disabilities were mostly employed in low status jobs, such as service, clerical/secretarial, and the helping professions (Doren & Benz, 2001).

More recently, the US Department of Education generated nationally representative information to assess the status of youth with disabilities in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). In the NLTS-2, as well as other nationally representative samples, almost two-thirds of youth with disabilities are boys. While the reasons for this disproportionate number of boys among youth with disabilities is unclear, it is

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important to understand that *the experiences of youth with disabilities as a group disproportionately reflect the experiences of boys*. Even so, recent findings from the NLTS-2 indicate some gains for young women with disabilities, as well as identify areas that continue to need improvement. For instance:

- Fortunately, more girls with disabilities are going to college; however, girls with disabilities are experiencing gains in enrollment at 2-year colleges while boys are attending both 2- and 4-year colleges.
- While employment rates of young men and women with disabilities are similar, a significant increase in earnings relative to the minimum wage and shifts in types of jobs held were apparent only among boys.
- Boys with disabilities, but not girls, have shown significant improvement in their high school completion rates.
- Girls with disabilities continue to be less likely than boys to be single.

In addition to gender, a considerable amount of research has linked disability to minority status; for instance, culturally and linguistically diverse individuals are over-represented in special education (Wagner, Cameto & Newman, 2003). Among culturally diverse girls and women with disabilities, disabilities are experienced at a disproportionately higher rate compared to Anglo women and the severity of disability may be greater (Glenn, 1995). The transition of these youth is especially concerning since culturally diverse young women with disabilities are subject to the "triple jeopardy" of gender, race, and disability discrimination.

## POOR TRANSITION PLANNING FOR YOUTH

The transition of youth with disabilities from high school to adulthood has been an area of intense focus for over two decades, and legislation has been introduced to address the needs of these youth. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) set forth specific requirements around transition planning and services for youth in special education. Despite the poor post-school outcomes noted for girls graduating from special education, very little is known about their transition planning experiences and how to support their unique needs. Thus, the Gender and Transition Project conducted a study to evaluate the school transition plans of students in special education, paying careful attention to the impact of certain determinants, such as gender, race, and disability type, on the quality of the plan. Key findings from the 399 plans reviewed indicate that *the transition plans of all youth are generally poor in quality and often do not reflect the requirements of IDEA or effective practices*.

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The Gender and Transition Project study found that the transition plans of students who were in special education:

1. **Did not emphasize goals for post-secondary education.** Less than half (44.6%) of plans had a goal in this area.
  2. **Did not emphasize goals related to vocational training.** Only 31.8% of plans had a goal in this area.
  3. **Had goals in very few transition areas.** Students had, on average, goals in 4.38 of the 12 transition areas. Additionally, 6% of plans had no transition goals listed.
  4. **Often had no plan for how to reach goals;** 33% of transition goals listed on the plans had no accompanying action steps.
  5. **Typically listed the student as responsible for taking the necessary steps to reach the transition goals, often with little or no support from others;** 21.9% of the time the student was listed as the sole person responsible for working towards a goal.
  6. **Lacked a specific timeline for goal completion;** only 12.9% of goals identified a specific target date. Furthermore, 19.6% of goals had no timeline listed at all.
  7. **Rarely described effective practices that are known to promote successful transition outcomes** (such as self-determination training, person centered or career panning, extra-curricular activities, mentoring, individualized financial support, attending to family's cultural values or background, student training on how to request services).
  8. **Did not focus on career development.** Work experience, when described in the plans, was typically segregated, disability stereotypic and inconsistent with the student's employment goals.
  9. **Revealed little understanding or acknowledgement of gender and cultural issues.** For example:
    - a. One third (33.5%) of the employment goals conformed to gender stereotypes, and less than 1 in 10 (6.8% for females and 5.9 % for males) of the employment goals represented aspirations that countered gender stereotypes (e.g., male nurse or female auto mechanic).
    - b. Little acknowledgement of the student's cultural background existed in the transition plans of certain culturally and linguistically diverse youth (14.3%
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of Native American students, 6.2% of African American students, and 16.0% of Asian American students).

- c. 30.6% of Hispanic American students' transition plans made note of student cultural background; however, 82% of these plans acknowledged students' linguistic diversity only by providing a translator at the transition planning meeting. Though language issues are indeed an important cultural area to address, there was little focus on any of the other critical areas that need to be considered when working with culturally diverse students and their families.

While the findings from the transition plan study indicated that poor transition planning exists for both male and female students in special education, it may be argued that girls are differentially impacted by the "non event" of transition planning. Indeed, well-established findings in the literature indicating that women with disabilities have poorer transition outcomes than their male counterparts speak to this differential impact. Furthermore, the finding in this study that there was little understanding or acknowledgement of gender issues in the transition plans that were examined may reflect the carrying out of transition planning activities in a manner that is insensitive to the unique needs of girls and that continues to foster dated gender stereotypes that are not helpful to girls.

## Why is Transition Planning Different for Girls?

### 5 KEY REASONS

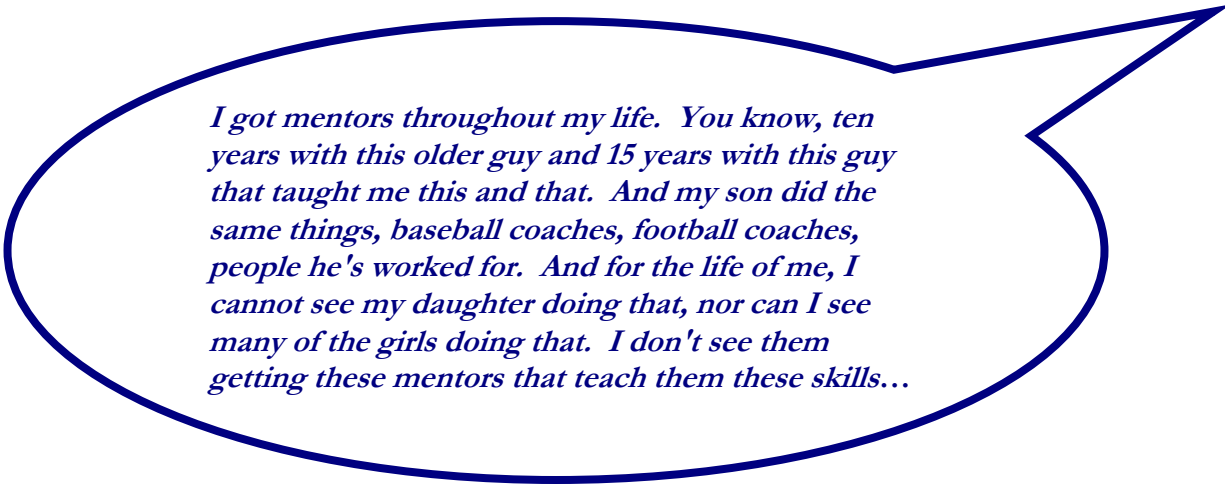
The Gender and Transition Project conducted a needs assessment to identify key factors that contribute to problems in transition planning for young women in special education. We first utilized discussion groups with female youth, their parents, and the professionals who work with them, such as teachers and school psychologists. Then, the data from these discussions guided and informed the development of a survey for identified female and male youth currently in special education. This survey was administered to youth in special education and parents of youth in special education at two large, urban school districts on the West Coast. Based on our discussions and surveys, we learned the following:

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## Reason One: Lack of Role Models and Mentors

- A. Youth need people in their lives who encourage and support their transition goals. Mentors and role models are important for exposing girls to different opportunities, and making their particular goals seem possible.
- B. The youth in our studies lacked exposure to appropriate role models and mentors. For instance, youth lacked female role models and mentors who experienced a similar disability or condition. This finding is especially strong for culturally diverse youth who experience this "triple jeopardy."
- C. If youth have role models and mentors, they are likely to be informal relationships, rather than formal. Indeed, many parents and professionals talked about the negative influence of media, which often provides "unrealistic" role models for girls in particular.
- D. Youth lack exposure to role models and mentors who are working in their areas of career interest.
- E. Male youth may have more opportunities to find role models and mentors than their female peers (for example, coaches). Further, parents reported that males seem to feel more comfortable asking for support from adults in their lives. One father said:



*I got mentors throughout my life. You know, ten years with this older guy and 15 years with this guy that taught me this and that. And my son did the same things, baseball coaches, football coaches, people he's worked for. And for the life of me, I cannot see my daughter doing that, nor can I see many of the girls doing that. I don't see them getting these mentors that teach them these skills...*

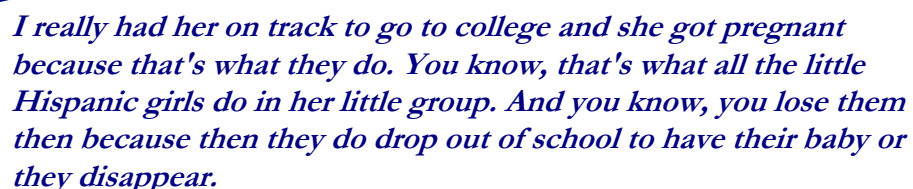
## Reason Two: Different Goals for Transitions

- A. Youth have a variety of goals for their futures, including employment, post-secondary education, and relationships. The adults in their lives, such as parents and teachers, also have goals for these youth. Unfortunately, these views often differ quite dramatically.
  - B. A majority of youth (58% of the survey sample) endorsed feeling that their family has had different ideas about their future than themselves. Parents, as
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well, were aware of this discrepancy (48% of survey sample acknowledge that they had different ideas about their child's future).

- C. The above finding was even stronger when youth and parents were asked about the goals that teachers have for youth. For instance, nearly 70% of youth acknowledged that teachers have had different ideas about their future than themselves.
- D. There can be important differences between the goals of culturally diverse families and the mainstream goals that schools deem appropriate for youth. Culturally diverse families and youth may face stereotypes and discrimination as a result of these differences. Indeed, some of the discussion groups showed insensitivity on the part of some professionals; for example, some professionals criticized the family-oriented goals that many culturally diverse parents have for their children:



*I really had her on track to go to college and she got pregnant because that's what they do. You know, that's what all the little Hispanic girls do in her little group. And you know, you lose them then because then they do drop out of school to have their baby or they disappear.*

- E. Female youth were significantly more likely than males to report that they keep silent about what they want because other people (parents, teachers) expect them to go along with ideas.
- F. Adults often described youth goals as being "unrealistic." Indeed, a number of school personnel said that while their students want "lofty" and "glamorous" careers, professionals want them to learn job skills for more "realistic" employment positions.
- G. Female youth have goals that are often oriented towards relationships. While nearly 40% of girls surveyed indicated that having children was important for their future, only 21% of boys said the same.

### **Reason Three: Lack of Match Between Youth's Vocational Aspirations and Actual Training**

- A. The differences in perspectives of goals between youth, parents, and the professionals who work with them often contribute to a lack of match between a youth's vocational goals and the actual job training they receive. For instance, 30% of the surveyed youth indicated that other people want them to be interested in jobs/careers that differ from what they want.
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- B. As a result, 46% of the youth reported that they received little to no training in work skills that will lead to a successful career. For example, this youth related her vocational training experience in the animal care field:

*All I did was get stuck at PetSmart stocking shelves. I thought I was going to be like bathing and feeding animals and having fun.*

- C. Parents and professionals agreed that vocational training is an important component of the transition to independent living for youth. They noted that youth need opportunities such as job shadowing, informational interviews, and networking.
- D. Unfortunately, 60% of surveyed parents reported that their child was not able to find people who can help them get a job.
- E. Female youth reported limited exposure to non-gender-stereotypic vocational experiences. These youth were able to find training in childcare positions, such as daycare and elementary schools, but the youth with goals other than childcare encountered more difficulty and barriers when they tried to gain vocational experience.
- F. Some youth felt that they missed out on certain vocational opportunities simply because they were in special education.
- G. Because of the gender roles and expectations in certain cultures, culturally diverse boys and girls may have quite different experiences in their work/vocational training activities from each other and their non-culturally diverse peers. This lack of understanding and appreciation for the cultural context has negative implications for the way teachers work with their students.

#### **Reason Four: Low Expectations, High Fears**

- A. Transition planning is an important bridge for ensuring that young people with disabilities move into productive and successful adult lives. For many, a successful transition involves some level of independence and self-sufficiency.
- B. Female youth with disabilities, when compared to males, are often considered more vulnerable, not only because of a disability but also because of their gender. For instance, over 58% of females surveyed reported that their family doesn't want them to do certain things because of concerns for their safety, compared to 49% of male youth with disabilities.
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- C. Female youth were significantly more likely than males to report that people expect less of them because of their disability.
  - D. Female youth were also significantly more likely than males to report that people expect less of them because of their gender.
  - E. Parents and professionals worried that the transition goals of their daughters were influenced by their relationships with males. Culturally diverse youth, especially, were described by adults as being vulnerable to sexuality issues, such as teen pregnancy.
  - F. Female youth talked about the difficulty their parents seemed to have in "letting go" and allowing them to become more independent. Safety is a major concern for many parents. Girls may get mixed messages from their families as a result:

*my desires...for my daughter(are) to be stress free and happy, also to know that there are sexual predators that can harm her...*

- G. In particular, some female youth felt that their teachers treated them like children, believing them incapable of making decisions for themselves.

### Reason Five: Low Self-Perception

- A. Female youth reported that they often feel "different" from their peers because of their disability, and they often experience low self-esteem. Many felt shame and embarrassment.

*I had an experience this semester, actually, with a geography teacher. I was asking him about a note taker and finding a solution to somehow keep on the same page with his lecture. He, in front of the entire class, said, "Oh, note takers. Those are for handicapped people right?" And it was really embarrassing.*

- B. Experiences in special education can play a large part in the self-perception of youth, and for many, having a disability and being in special education is connected to teasing and a negative self-image.
  - C. These negative feelings are often compounded by racial discrimination for culturally diverse youth. For example, some parents reported that their daughters experienced additional rejection from their peers because of their skin color and disability.
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- D. Some youth valued being attractive to males and having a child who loved them. This finding may help describe the finding that female youth with disabilities are more likely than men with disabilities to have parenting responsibilities after exiting high school (Doren & Benz, 2001).
  - E. Parents and teachers described girls with disabilities as "pleasers."
  - F. The female youth in our discussion groups often talked about their negative experiences in the transition planning process. Indeed, many stated that they don't even like to participate in transition planning meetings because it seems "pointless and embarrassing."
  - G. Some youth felt that teachers limited their opportunities not only because of their disability, but also because of their culturally diverse background. These youth noted that they were "looked down on" and "teachers didn't help enough" as a result.

## Recommendations for Successful Transition Planning for Girls

### KEY STRATEGIES

Previous research over the past few decades has documented a remarkable disparity between the transition outcomes of female youth with disabilities compared to male youth with disabilities. While federal legislation (i.e., IDEA) was designed to address this problem, the results from the Gender and Transition Project suggest that more work needs to be done. Our first study, which examined the transition plans of youth with disabilities, found that both girls and boys with disabilities experience poor transition planning. Results from our other studies indicated that the "non-event" of transition planning has additional negative implications for girls when compared to boys. In the following section, we identify key strategies for parents, youth, and the professionals who work with them. We hope to inform parents and youth about what to expect from service providers, and highlight service delivery recommendations for consumers.

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## 1. Engage In Effective Transition Practices

Previous research has documented a number of practices effective in promoting successful transition. These include (a) youth involvement in transition planning; (b) participation in extra-curricular activities and general education; (c) career planning and work experience that is individualized to a student's career interests; (d) instruction in skills such as self-determination, self-advocacy and independent living; and (e) mentorship.

In addition to these practices, our research shows that it is also important for transition planning teams to attend to issues of gender and cultural context in order to provide transition supports that are meaningful and applicable. For instance, girls may need additional support and encouragement to become involved in their transition planning meetings and they would likely benefit from additional training on how to request services and supports.

## 2. Develop Transition Plans That Matter

While transition plans are meant to provide a roadmap between school and adult life, professionals often view them as perfunctory paperwork. Further, youth and parents may also regard the transition planning process as negative and useless. Indeed, our results suggest some reasons this might be the case: the majority of plans reviewed in our first study were not individualized and lacked attention to integral issues like gender, culture and disability. If transition planning is to have a meaningful impact, we must focus on the goal of students achieving a successful adult life, rather than on the mechanics of simply getting a plan done.

## 3. Educate And Support Professionals

Educate and support professionals, such as school staff, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, staff in One-Stop Career Centers and other key professionals on supporting the specific transition needs of young women – from a youth-directed perspective. Professionals should ask families and students about their gender expectations, cultural traditions, and family background so that these factors can be considered in the development and implementation of a successful, IDEA-compliant transition plan.

## 4. Respect And Listen To Youth's Goals And Aspirations

As we heard from the girls in our discussion groups, they have a wide variety of goals and dreams for themselves. These goals often differ from those of others, like their parents and teachers. However, it is still important that we honor girls' choices and help them to become active agents in determining their future. We can listen to their ideas, needs, wishes and perspectives. Valuing their ideas will

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have a great impact on their self-esteem. We may need to encourage them to speak up, since often, girls remain silent for fear of social rejection.

## **5. Recruit Mentors And Role Models**

Mentors can help young women develop the skills, knowledge, and motivation to successfully transition from secondary education to adult life. For young women with disabilities, mentoring can impact many of the goals that are part of effective transition planning practices: academic success, career-awareness, developing social skills, creation of networks, and self-advocacy. It is important that young women with disabilities be exposed to both mentors who experience a disability and those who do not, as well as mentors from both genders. Girls and young women may have difficulty finding available mentors, so keep in mind that mentoring can take place in different forms: one-on-one, small groups, e-mail exchanges, and letters. Girls may need additional support in finding mentors and role models in their careers of interest.

## **6. Promote High Expectations For Youth**

Parents and professionals often describe concerns for the safety of girls with disabilities, which may lead to differing expectations for their ability to become self-sufficient and independent. Parents may have more difficulty "letting go" of their daughters with disabilities because of these concerns for safety. As a result, girls with disabilities may hear messages that limit rather than promote their successful transition to adulthood.

## **7. Promote Self-Determination**

Self-determination is the ability for people to control their own lives, reach goals they have set, and participate fully in the world around them. It includes choice, decision-making, and goal attainment. Central components also include the ability to evaluate oneself and act on self-evaluation. Encouraging girls with disabilities to set goals, make choices and self-assess will likely increase their successful transition to adulthood.

## **8. Attend To Cultural Context**

Classrooms in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse and professionals must respond to this diversity by obtaining the skills to work competently with this changing student body. It is necessary that the cultural context is considered for each and every student in their transition planning process. Gender roles within certain cultural groups may be an important context to consider when working with girls. Furthermore, teachers, administrators, and school staff need to increase their awareness of stereotypes and the damage that such stereotypes can cause in youth transition planning experiences. Also

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important with regard to cultural context is the integral role of family. Schools need to engage in culturally appropriate practices to foster relationships with diverse families. Such practices may include flexible meeting schedules, providing accommodations at meetings (translators, child care, transportation), and developing a warm interaction style.

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