



# Thresholds

NOVEMBER 2009

## EVOLVING EXPECTATIONS

**There is a very simple formula that encourages people to reach their full potential and enjoy stimulating lives. It is true for all of us. It has to do with expectations.**

**If you are a child, and trying to learn how to play ball, you first strive to hit the ball. You swing mightily at a ball perched atop a tee, but by the time you reach high school you may be able to knock the ball right over the fence. It took time, practice, and you achieved it by evolving your expectations. Your supporters — fans, friends, family, and team mates — didn't expect you to belt it out of the park that first day. They expected that you would connect with the ball and then run like heck for first base. Gradually the expectations, you and others had had for you, evolved as you gained greater skill and greater levels of accomplishment.**

**When you got your first job delivering papers, everyone expected that you would have to work at learning about commitment and how to stick to the job, in bad weather or even in the face of an exciting opportunity to go riding bikes with friends. They expected that you would get the hang of it and you did. You later got another job in a store stocking shelves or busing tables in a restaurant. After that you moved on to another job, each time expectations were raised that as you learned the ropes, gained the skills, and proved yourself, you would move on to another challenge. And you know what? You did. Now you are a teacher, or an engineering consultant, an IT specialist, or the owner of a local convenience store. You got to where you are because of evolving expectations.**

**Evolving expectations are just as essential for a person with an intellectual disability. At home, evolving expectations help them to learn greater self sufficiency in bathing and dressing. At school, evolving expectations help them to learn about friendship and getting along with others. On a co-op placement, evolving expectations help them to successfully gain skills and move on to the next assigned duty. Evolving expectations make it possible for a person to become a contributing member of the community, gain acceptance from their peers, and develop reciprocal meaningful relationships.**

**We have all had to stretch at times to reach our goals and oftentimes we have had to work hard to get where we want to go. Complacency does not breed competency. Commitment and effort can bring about proficiency and develop a trait to want to rise to the challenge.**

**When supporting people with an intellectual disability, we need to encourage their efforts, expect them to succeed, and help them to do so. Be sure to celebrate their success, then evolve your expectations, and start again.**

## **ADAM ACHIEVES HIS GOALS**



**Adam lives in Gananoque and finished high school in 2002. Lacking in self-confidence and really not knowing what he wanted for himself in life, Adam received support from Gananoque and District Association for Community Living and his family to explore work, volunteer and recreation opportunities in his community.**

**It was challenging to know what Adam might enjoy and to make connections for him because he was very quiet and did not have a lot of motivation. Several ideas were tried including volunteer positions with the local chamber of commerce, the volunteer office and the recreation centre. These positions did not continue for a long period of time because they just weren't the right fit for Adam and in some cases there wasn't enough work. Other places were suggested to Adam that might be more of an interest to him and allow him to gain some new skills. There always seemed to be barriers for Adam whether it was accessibility, transportation or Adam's lack of confidence to do the job. Also, he felt like he was relying on other people to pick him up and get him there and to assist him with the job or activity.**

**Adam really needed to set some goals and to start to have expectations for himself. People supporting Adam kept a positive attitude and provided opportunities for him to start to have some small successes. Adam was encouraged to at least try something once before saying he was unable to do it or that he wouldn't like it.**

**Today, Adam has his G2 driver's license and his own car! He no longer has to rely on others to take him places. His car has been adapted so that he can transfer into the car and place his wheelchair in the back. This has made a tremendous change to his level of independence in the community. This opened up a whole new world for him! Adam has learned to use his own cell phone and carries it with him when he is out in his vehicle. This provides him with a sense of security. Adam now has the freedom to do his own personal banking and other errands without support.**

**Wednesday evenings he attends cruise night at the local Canadian Tire Store. Adam really enjoys this because of his interest in cars. Adam does this independently.**

**Adam is currently volunteering at the local Humane Society five days a week for three hours each day, Adam has always enjoyed animals, and this seems to be a good fit for him. He has numerous responsibilities there and does the job independently.**

Adam volunteers at Landon's Bay on Tuesday afternoons. He gets old lumber ready to be used to build new projects for the campground, such as picnic tables. He uses various hand and power tools, such as drills, to do the job. Adam does receive support to complete some of the tasks, but he is able to get himself there independently.

Adam has more goals for the future including going back to the Daytona 500 and securing part-time paid employment. He currently is exploring his options around starting his own delivery business. Adam now knows that having high expectations will assist him on his journey to success! Having goals, people who believe in him, and the necessary supports have been the real difference.

### **TRANSITION PLANNING: CROSSING THE GAP**

Often during the transition planning process through the high school years, students and families face big surprises as preparation is made to leave school. After receiving 30 hours of school support through their school life, young adults face a big gap in that there is no guarantee of support. The Education Act in Ontario provides mandated education services to every student through the Ministry of Education. The Social Services sector is different. Services are not mandated, and different individuals receive different amounts and kinds of services. This presents a huge challenge to individuals with intellectual disabilities, their families, and agencies.

The shock can be lessened by effective transition planning. Beginning the plan early is essential; too often the transition planning process has been left untouched until the final year when the reality of leaving school and taking the next steps cannot be avoided any longer. Transition planning, part and parcel with the IEP, needs to begin during the first year in high school and be re-visited and revised yearly as part of the IEP.

Secondly, the transition becomes smoother when contacts with community agencies are established during the high school years. Since transition means "passing from one condition, situation, stage or place to another", you cannot have a transition plan that does not link the current to the next. Community agencies are available to participate in the transition planning meetings when invited; furthermore, these connections can develop and utilize resources to implement the plan. For example, families may be connected to funding sources available through the Ministry of Community and Social Services (ACSD, SSAH, PASSPORT), which, although not mandated, may help in supporting and enabling individuals to get the services that have been identified in the transition plan. The transformation of developmental services currently underway in Ontario includes steps toward individualized funding underlining the importance of having solid planning in place that goes well beyond the school life. The scarcity of resources and dollars to meet growing needs and demands in our community demands creative thinking that can begin during the transition planning process.

## **FAITH'S BACKPACK — SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION PLANNING**

**One of the most challenging issues people with intellectual disabilities face is that due to the need for accommodation and supports, their life experiences are often parallel but not the same as those of people with disabilities. This usually results in lives less meaningful and satisfying, with missed opportunities. Also, the prevailing societal mindset is clouded by perceived difference, rather than the celebration of similarity, which results in low expectations, isolation, and other negative experience. To counteract these common and powerful dynamics, when developing a successful transition plan, or any other support or planning process, an important principle is to base the plan on what happens for the person/student who does not have a disability.**



**For example, when my granddaughter, Faith, started junior kindergarten in September 2006 she, somewhat hesitantly, but proudly, carried her new backpack into the school with her. Not only did it include her new rainforest lunch box, her sweater and her favorite toy of the day, it carried the promise of her future — her own vision (to be a vet or an animal rescuer), and all the layers of positive expectations held by her parents, grandparents and all the family about her ability to sail happily and productively through school, and come out prepared to walk into a good postsecondary school and from there into a good, fulfilling career and a productive life. It also carried their shared belief that the school system was there to make that happen. When she crossed that threshold she met her teacher and eventually the other teachers and principal in the school who saw her as a student with potential.**

**Typical students move through the elementary and secondary systems every day without a tool that's called a Plan — that is the one with a capital P such as students with disabilities usually have. However, their journeys are guided by a backpack of several strategic elements: positive assumptions about their potential shared by parents and educators; an elementary system designed to educate and nurture young people through to secondary school — parent-teacher conferences, guidance counselors, report cards, trips to the pumpkin patch or Montreal and beyond to learn about the world outside the school, visits to the high school, graduation, high school orientation, more guidance, choice of subjects, visits to colleges and universities; and years of exploring with family, teachers and friends all the options the world has to offer.**

**They build a career path that begins with studies and includes activities that are aimed at an exploration of possible future careers. They take on part-time and summer jobs, do volunteer work, attend career days, take co-op placements. They are engaged in a dynamic, inclusive process that flows along with celebrations, roadblocks and detours .... with the help of their families, their teachers, the education system and the community. They are not restricted by a Plan (with a capital P) developed at one point in time, that is coloured by a mindset stuck on their deficits.**

The best transition planning process for students with special needs would reflect the best experience of the typical students moving through school . All students should have the same journey — the one that Faith is on. Some students and their families will need additional supports along the way, but the journey must share all the same elements:

- **Positive vision** — the foundation needed to move forward but also to counteract likely negative experiences which may undermine potential
- **High expectations**
- **Strong personal ownership** — setting goals unique to the student and building on the student's unique interests
- **Tied to educational goals** — the student is studying relevant subjects and has relevant co-op placements
- **Good, open, and on-going communication** — critical to combat the isolation that many students and their families experience and to create a positive bridge to the community support system
- **Open to change**
- **Includes the student and family meaningfully**

With these elements in place, the Plan is a tool which helps students to set goals and work towards them. It is a dynamic process that follows the natural pathway that all students experience.

### **STARTING THE TRANSITION**

Helping a student to prepare for transition takes time and energy. In Ontario, Regulation 181/98 of the Education Act requires that the Individual Education Plan (IEP) of an exceptional student who is 14 years of age or older include a plan for the student's transition to appropriate postsecondary activities, such as work, further education, and community living. The transition plan must be developed with input from the student, parent(s)/guardian(s), the principal, school staff, community agencies, and post-secondary institutions, as appropriate. While the regulation requires that the principal, in developing the transition plan, consult with such community agencies and post-secondary institutions as he or she considers appropriate, "the contents of the plan remain the responsibility of the school principal while the student remains in school".

The Act is on the mark in recognizing that students need the help of their families, school staff, and community agencies to develop a successful plan. Setting goals and taking steps towards those goals is essential for success. Connecting students and their families to community resources will help everyone prepare and ease the transition. To explore the act further, visit:

## **ASHLEY PURSUES COLLEGE**

During her high school years, Ashley and her family wanted her to participate in co-operative education programs, and Ashley had the opportunity to participate in various placements allowing her to explore her interests and make a career choice. After participating in the school hospitality program and finishing a placement in the kitchen of a seniors' centre where she had been responsible for some food preparation and various other tasks, Ashley decided she would like to work in the kitchen of a restaurant some day.

After finishing high school in 2006, Ashley started volunteer jobs with support from Gananoque and District Association for Community Living (GDACL). Although she enjoyed them, it was obvious this was not where she truly wanted to be. It took some time and support from GDACL for an opportunity to become available in her area of interest, but it did happen. In the spring of 2008, Ashley started a paid job at The Bravo Restaurant in Gananoque as a dish washer. At first she was working only one day a week, but she started to get calls for more shifts during the busy season. As Ashley got more comfortable at her new job, she was given some other responsibilities including basic food preparation and clearing the tables in the dining room.

Ashley decided she would like to gain more skills in food preparation and cooking and applied for a Culinary Skills-Chef Training program at her local college. GDACL went with Ashley and her mom to see a counselor and discuss eligibility. With encouragement from the counselor and assurance that her work place credits would be considered for the program, Ashley went ahead with her application.

Ashley anxiously waited to find out if she had been accepted. She continued to work at The Bravo and started to explore living arrangements closer to the college. She also applied for a bursary to assist with her college expenses and later learned that she had received The Anne Stafford "Light up the Future" bursary from Community Living Ontario. After some time she heard from the college that she would need to complete a math and English course to be accepted into the program. Ashley was disappointed but didn't let that diminish her determination. Ashley immediately went to TR Leger School in Gananoque to inquire about registering to get the math and English courses that were needed. To be eligible to start the college program in September, she needed to complete her courses by July. This was going to be a challenge for her, but she continued to make the effort while never losing sight of her goal to be able to attend college.

Although usually quiet, hesitant to express herself verbally, or to make her desires known, in this case, Ashley made it very clear how important this was to her, despite the roadblocks she faced. She continued to stay committed. As she continued to work at her math and English it became clear that perhaps a different environment or strategies might be helpful to Ashley and her learning process. GDACL went with Ashley and her mom to the college to meet with a counselor again who advised Ashley that the prep courses at the college would be the same as what she is taking at TR Leger; however, taking the courses at the college would allow her to get familiar with the college and experience some of the social aspects. The class was already full; Ashley continued with the English course and wrote the exam before TR Leger closed in June. Unfortunately, she did not pass, but she will pick it up again in September.

**In spite of the challenge and frustration of academic courses, Ashley has kept it clear in her mind that she wants to attend college. Ashley and her family, GDACL and TR Leger School will be working in collaboration to come up with different approaches and accommodations to assist Ashley with her school work. One idea that Ashley looked forward to was the possibility of a college student tutoring her with her assignments.**

**Ashley's co-op experience during high school was very important for her. Finding and securing a job after high school can be difficult, but her placement experience helped lead to an opportunity for her and a desire for further learning in this area. Real expectations need to be present in co-op experiences and in the work place in order for individuals to develop their skills. The expectation needs to be that the student and/or employee will have contributions to bring to the place of work.**

### **Guiding the Process to Success (GPS)**

**The joint research project (partners are the Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario, Upper Canada District School Board, Thresholds Committee of Leeds and Grenville, and the South Eastern Ontario Community University Research Alliance in Intellectual Disabilities) is well underway.**

**The Thresholds newsletter published in November 2008 dealt entirely with the constructs and goals of the research project. Copies can be requested from any of the Thresholds members listed on the back page of the newsletter.**

**Efforts began with an orientation and training day in November of 2008. Since then, transitioning students have signed up to have their transition guided by the GPS. A first round of interviews was completed in the spring 2009. Follow up interviews are being scheduled now. As results become available, they will be shared through this newsletter, to the participants, and through the school boards.**

*Nobody succeeds beyond his or her wildest expectations unless he or she begins with some wild expectations.*

**Ralph Charell**

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