Navigating Your Way  
Ages 6-14

Once your child is established in elementary school, it’s important to start planning for the changes and challenges that lie ahead as your child transitions to middle school, high school and beyond. Understanding the educational and service systems will be important, but equally important is getting connected to other families and broader local community supports.

Although services may always be a part of your child’s life, it’s relationships with people—not systems—that form the building blocks for your child’s future. As you and your child move through this stage of life together, never give up thinking about ways to ensure that they are included at school and in your local community. Inclusion is key to your child’s ability to live a full life and pursue their dreams.

Make a conscious effort to build social connections that will follow your child into adulthood. By the time your child is this age, you will see their interests and passion, and can support them in identifying activities to participate in. Look for school and community-based clubs where they share a common interest with other students, such as scouts, local recreation programs and Special Olympics Unified Schools programs.

Unified programs bring students with and without disabilities together to participate in sports and other school events that promote an inclusive school environment. More and more schools are participating in Unified programs. If your school does not participate in a Unified program, ask your principal, special education teacher and/or athletic director to contact Special Olympics Washington to learn how to become a Unified School.

The Family Community Connections Guidebook, a free publication of The Arc of Washington State, offers valuable tips and worksheets for identifying people, places and ideas to help broaden your family member’s social circle and community connections. Visit informingfamilies.org to download a free copy in English or Spanish.

As you navigate your child’s elementary and middle school years, pay close attention to what motivates them to learn and grow. Be sure to give them lots of opportunities to make decisions, as well as mistakes, and to try new things.

My Life Plan, a free online planning tool, is a great way to document your child’s interests, strengths, abilities and needs. Based on questions created with input from other families My Life Plan helps you create goals based on your child’s unique qualities at every stage of life. Visit <mylifeplan.guide> to get started.

It takes work to give your child the support he or she needs to develop skills and achieve their goals. From preschool to adulthood, you’ll find yourself navigating not one but three large systems: education, publicly funded services, and healthcare. Of these three major systems, education is the only guaranteed entitlement for your child. Depending on your family income, child’s eligibility or the availability of services publicly funded services and health care may or may not be provided.

Thanks to the families before you, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, known as IDEA, public schools must provide your child a free appropriate public education from age three to twenty one. This section of the journey will take you up to age 14.

Every student is entitled to have an individual educational program known as an IEP. It’s specifically tailored to meet their learning strengths and needs. An IEP includes education goals and objectives in addition to related services as needed such as speech, physical, or occupational therapies, assistive technology, counseling, or other aides and services that enable your child to receive a free appropriate public education.

Be sure to include your child—the student—in the IEP process to the best of their age and ability. This not only helps ensure that their goals and interests are heard, but also helps them build self-advocacy skills.

Even with state and federal laws to ensure your child’s right to an education, it takes a lot hard work to see that your child gets the services and education he or she needs. No one knows your child better than you do, so when it comes to making decisions regarding his/her education, it’s important to speak up and ensure that your child’s needs are being met.

Organizations such as Parent to Parent (P2P) and Partnerships for Action, Voices for Empowerment (PAVE) will help you learn how to be your child’s best advocate. Visit <arcwa.org/getsupport> to find a Parent to Parent office near you. For assistance from PAVE, visit <wapave.org>.

The Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) resolves complaints, disputes, and problems between families and public schools. The OEO is independent of the public school system and provides an alternative to costly lawsuits and administrative hearings. For more information, call 1-866-297-2597 or visit <oeo.wa.gov>.

In addition to special education, other publicly funded services may be available to your child.

If your family is low income and in need of financial assistance, contact the Social Security Administration to find out if your child qualifies for Supplemental Security Income. Call toll-free 1-800-772-1213 or visit online at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov). SSI is the gateway to Medicaid services, such as Apple Health, so it’s an important first step for families with low income.

WithinReach provides local and state resource information on health care coverage and other services for families of children with special health care needs in Washington State. For answers to your health care questions, call the Family Health Hotline toll-free at 1-800-322-2588 or visit [www.withinreachwa.org](http://www.withinreachwa.org). You can also apply for Apple Health directly by visiting wahealthplanfinder.org.

If your child is eligible for Apple Health, an important benefit is called EPSDT, which stands for Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment. With EPSDT, children can get a regular check up and treatment for medical issues found during an exam up to age 21. Call 1-800-562-3022 and ask about EPSDT services for your child.

Many home and community-based services—such as personal care, respite, and therapies—are administered through the Developmental Disabilities Administration. DDA is the state agency that provides case management and supportive services for children and adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Washington State. Learn about services and eligibility at <dshs.wa.gov/dda>. You can also sign up for DDA news updates by clicking the box on the right of the homepage.

Children who are not eligible for DDA may be eligible for personal care services through Community First Choice if they are on SSI. Assessments for this service are conducted by DDA for all children, including those who are not eligible for DDA. So if your child is denied eligibility for DDA services, and is receiving SSI, you can still ask DDA for a personal care assessment.

As your child moves through each stage of life, keep in mind that services and benefits are just part of the picture. Support can come from relationships with family, friends, and others in the community; as well as assistive technology, local resources, and a person’s own strengths and abilities. The Star Form can help you identify sources of support to help reach any goal. Many families also use the star form in IEP meetings or with new staff to given an idea of the student’s interests and goals. To learn more, visit <informingfamilies.org/star>.

Start planning ahead to those high school transition years and beyond, to life as an adult. A special needs trust—such as the DD Endowment Trust Fund— shelters and protects assets that would otherwise disqualify your child for government benefits, such as SSI and Medicaid. Visit <ddetf.wa.gov> to learn more.

ABLE savings accounts are also available in this state, allowing individuals with disabilities to save money without losing financial eligibility for government benefits such as SSI. Visit [washingtonstateable.com](http://washingtonstateable.com) to learn more.

For a list of these and other resources, visit Informing Families, a project of the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council, at: [informingfamilies.org](http://www.informingfamilies.org).