



Ready-Set-Life! The Things College Prep Didn't Prep Me For

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School teaches you a lot about what you need to know for college. A majority of time is focused on academics. Social skills are supposed to come outside of class. I've written down a few things I wish we would've started earlier. There are a few things I wish I had known. Before you set the alarm for dropping your kids off at college... Run the clock back with me first! (And don't worry, even if your child isn't college-bound, some of these ideas you can use other places, to make life more person-centered)

Elementary School

- Encourage your child to take walks or rolls around the neighborhood, especially with their peers.
- Try to achieve a balance between therapy and social activities.
- Let your kid explain what they need (or don't) to new caregivers or doctors. (How do you feel? Where does it hurt?)
- Have someone in your neighborhood babysit your child. That way your neighbors will learn more about your child, and your child will not be afraid to ask others they know for help.

Middle school

- Over the summer, drop your child off at their new middle school. Have them try to find rooms and areas by themselves. If possible, bring their new class schedule. Can they get from one class to the other without getting lost? Can they get from each class to the front door? They will appreciate not getting lost on the first day of school when everyone else is also trying to get to class.
- Try picking electives based on your child's interests, rather than necessarily being the easiest to modify. Several of my middle school and high school electives ended up leading me to classes I pursued in college. One of these might end up being your child's major. This happened with my film class and school newspaper. My first paying job was to teach writing to my peers. I started editing in middle school. I started taking advanced art in middle school. Now I sell my paintings.
- There are many times in life where your child won't necessarily have a personal assistant. Try picking a few classes where a paraprofessional will not accompany your

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child. Obviously you can tailor these, but I found electives the easiest. There's less writing involved, because there's not a lot of testing. This way, I would've had more of an opportunity to learn when to ask peers for help: who is less busy, who seems willing, how to ask, and whom I've asked repeatedly. Are there some things it is inappropriate to expect a peer to do for you?

- Try homework independently. It would've saved me a lot of trouble with a few teachers who weren't sure if I was producing my own work. Also, self starting and keeping yourself on task gets harder in high school and more necessary in college and the employment world. If you do it yourself, then you really know the answer to the question "how am I going to do this, and exactly how much help do I need to get it done?" Also, it will help with procrastination more naturally.

High school

- I wish we had made it clearer that I needed space in the hallways. I wasn't interacting with my peers, because they were afraid they couldn't be themselves around the adult who was my paraprofessional. My behavior was often critiqued, and I was sometimes shepherded away from age-appropriate, but less adult behavior.
- Don't pass up any opportunities your child is able to participate in to get them ready socially for being on campus. I finally got to a place where people expected me to be an adult when I got to college. There was no special person for me, no paraprofessional, no one showing me the ropes of how to do this, in class and very little outside. I was very lost and confused. A lot of this could've been avoided by giving me enough leash at school to practice social situations. Not that I would've enjoyed artificial situations for people with disabilities very much. They're not real enough. Even someone other than my parents debriefing me on a social situation would've worked better. I'm learning it slowly now, but we should have been more conscious of it during high school. I saw a culture of "you're on the academic track, so let's not add in any life skills". I don't think they realize how little of college and post-college life is actually based on academics.
- Hire your child's peer to come over. See if your child knows how to explain what they need from their friend if you're not there. When you come back, have everyone meet and talk about it. This will help your child figure out how to manage a person they might hire or ask to help them with their needs. It will also give both of you a lot of information about what you need to work on... before you actually need to hire someone. Also, it will give the friend an opportunity to spend quality time with your child. They will gain responsibility in the friendship, and possibly some experience to put on a resume. Before I had attendant care services, we used to do this with a friend of mine who was about three years older. Later, we ended up hiring her as an attendant. Now she's an occupational therapist. You never know what little things can lead to in the long run.

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