THRIVE EMERGE

TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL

By Mary Jo Puglisi, LCPC

High school graduation is such an exciting time, lots of pictures on social media to let your friends know that your child succeeded, plans for celebrations, time to reflect on the accomplishment! Of course, right after the graduation is the graduation party where everyone asks the inevitable question, “What’s next?”

For some people, that is an opportunity to tell about exciting plans for college, career, or a gap year full of travel. For others…CRICKETS.

You probably wouldn’t be reading this if your kiddo graduated with honors and is well prepared to attend a prestigious university with a big scholarship and bigger dreams. Let’s look at some other possibilities and how families might work with their newly minted young adult to provide adequate support without taking over. I have divided these into four possible types of transitioners, although there are many more in-between.

COLLEGE BOOT CAMP -- First, your child did ok and plans to go to college locally or live on campus. You are worried because they lack some skills- self advocacy, organization and time management, laundry and self-care - but you have high hopes that they will learn with a supportive roommate and RA or a well-designed student support plan.

How can you support and prepare them for success in the college environment? I love the idea of a little summer “college boot camp.”

- Put them in charge of waking up on time, taking their own meds, handling their own laundry, filling out all the necessary college forms, scheduling doctor visits for those forms and meds to take with them, etc.

- Since you need to keep a watchful eye to ensure that they are getting things done so meet weekly (or twice a week) to set goals, review documents before they are submitted, and teach them how to avoid having all purple clothes.

- Require that they fill out FERPA forms so that you have access to financial, medical, academic, and disciplinary records, but promise that you won’t be calling professors or intruding unless they need you.

- Insist that they connect to Student Support Services (or whatever it is called at their school) and share information about their diagnoses and access accommodations and resources.

- Require regular check-ins with you and with Student Support in the first semester to see how it goes. Student Support is not going to go knocking on your kid's door if they don't go to class, but for some clients it provides a trusted adult on a campus with lots of unknowns.

- Make the above conditions of going. Your young adult may not like it, but they will do it if you make it clear that you expect them to access support on campus so that you don't need to go to class with them (I usually threaten to go with them in my housecoat and fuzzy slippers).

- Buy tuition insurance. Some schools are a very expensive "experiment." Don't tell your kid that you bought it unless you think it will take the pressure off. You don't want them to think you are planning for their failure. In this first year, let them navigate things like roommate drama, talking to teachers about a bad grade or confusion regarding an assignment, but be sure they know you are willing to act as a sounding board, editor, whatever they need.

High school and below are super structured environments with a clear start and stop time, defined homework, other activities that the child often has been doing for a long time like soccer or band, and mostly people who your kid has known for a long time so they get each other's quirks.

Often, the change of the entire playing field is what creates challenges in college - new people, new places, no structure unless they create it. Even for highly skilled young adults, the transition creates anxiety and discomfort. If your young adult has other issues, they need as much support as they can get in the transition.

PART-TIME COLLEGE AND/ OR A JOB -- A second possibility is that your child has a plan for college because it is the logical next step but you are seeing lots of red flags. The paragraph above might be helpful to you, but you will likely need to do more.

Talk to your young person and see what they really want. If they lived in a world where anything is possible, what would they choose (rather than follow the expected norm of their high school peers)? Do they want college? Would they be willing to try one community college class to see if they like it? Would they prefer to get a job first and then maybe try school part time?

They will need your support in creating routines and setting goals in a supportive and loving way. Also, set clear expectations and follow through on consequences (no car, no Wi-Fi) if they aren't meeting them. For example, it is totally appropriate to have a set time by which your child will need to wake up each day, set chores and responsibilities. In our program, we often set up contracts for young adults who struggle with scaffolding their own day and it can be quite effective.

Sometimes parents are unwilling to set behavioral expectations or use the levers (money, car, Wi-Fi, cell phone, etc.) at their disposal to ensure some routines are kept. They end up feeling angry and taken advantage of in their own home. Curiosity, support, and some clear expectations are a great way to avoid falling into that trap.

GAP YEAR -- Option three is that your child has a vague plan for something, but you haven't seen anything concrete whether the something is college, job, or gap year. Once again, this type of graduate can certainly benefit from some of the thoughts in the previous two paragraphs but will need a more direct approach.

Gap years are not unstructured time to float around whatever looks interesting. I typically encourage parents to go through a college application college whenever appropriate, choose a school, and then defer enrollment to participate in a gap year.

Find a structured gap year plan- study abroad with a legitimate company, a service program, an internship (30+ hours/week), etc. I could make some more specific recommendations but start with Google! Make sure that wherever your child and you choose, the program understands their neurodivergence and provides appropriate support.

Give your child the opportunity to make something with their own hands, give back to a community in need, or find personal growth. It is critical that your child is excited about this step and can work with you to do any preparation needed.

Many students have vague plans after high school that never materialize. They turn into long stints of unproductive behavior and may even lose skills that they had developed in the structured environment of school. For example, after Covid, many of our neurodivergent clients had lost their tolerance for non-preferred environments or activities. They forgot the skills that don't come naturally to them- time management, social behaviors- and lost stamina for those more challenging activities.

If a young person already has some trouble in these areas and has developed stamina or specific skills over time, it is critical to keep them sharp. I think the same can be said regarding employment. Ask your child what they might be interested in doing, let them talk to people who might be willing to let them shadow or intern if they just aren't sure. You may need to use some of your resources- called a trusted friend who works at the bank or the news station and might be willing to show them around.

I am always a little fascinated to think about the number of possible jobs/careers out there that no one really thinks about. Sure, everyone knows about doctors and nurses, but did you know that there are people in hospitals who work in labs or provide technical support for the equipment? The same can be said for every industry, jobs and careers that no one ever thought to do exist in abundance.

Thrive uses a tool called The Highlands Ability Battery to look at psychological drivers, personality types, and learning channels that are naturally wired into the brain and then connect these abilities with careers. If your young adult just doesn't know, this is a great place to begin.

TAKING A BREAK -- One final profile is that your child barely squeezed out of high school and just wants to rest now that it is done. They have no desire to do anything more than surf the couch and play video games. My husband's grandmother (who lived to 103) often said to "never stop moving." She was known to walk on the treadmill or use the stationary bike well past her 100th birthday. She believed, and I agree, that it is hard to break inertia.

Once a person has stopped doing, starting again is just hard. But your kiddo might be burned out from the effort that was required to push through the finish line.

Lots of parents want to give their child a break. In this case, see the paragraph above regarding setting expectations. Yes, you can have a break, but it will last until a preset date. On that date, you need to have a job or a concrete plan for something meaningful. If not, we will be creating an environment where meaningful activities happen at home.

BUT…in that time, we will make sure that we aren't setting you up for failure by allowing you to stay up all night and sleep all day, stop all physical activity, and trash your room with dirty dishes and smelly laundry. Set up a clear list of rules for how an adult in your home is expected to comport themselves and follow through if they aren't able to meet it.

THRIVE EMERGE

IF YOU NEED SUPPORT… There are lots of issues that I haven't addressed including screen addictions, substance overuse, dysregulated behavior, refusal to follow rules, danger to self or others. Each of these further complicates the profile of the graduate.

It is likely, in the event of the more extreme possibilities above and some of these compounding issues, that you and your young adult are going to require some support. Don't feel like you have to tackle this all alone. There are free groups through CHADD or NAMI that can help you or you can look for mental health providers in your area that specialize in the neurodiverse client/family. Please know which red flags to look for with your child and seek help early when you begin to see them pop up.

Congratulations to you and your high school graduate!!