

Preparing Your Son Or Daughter for College: Suggestions for Parents of Children with Intellectual Disability

David L. Westling, Ed.D. and Kelly R. Kelley, Ph.D.
The University Participant Program
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

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It is not uncommon for us to receive each year five to ten times the number of applications to the University Participant Program, our postsecondary education program for students with Intellectual Disability (ID), for the number of slots we have available. Parents are quickly learning about the availability of college programs for their children with ID, and they are seeking admission to them at an unprecedented rate. As they do, they often ask us, “What can we do to increase the chance our child will be admitted?”

Unfortunately, when they ask the question, it is often too late for them to do the kinds of things that will ready their child for college. The kinds of attitudes and activities that are most important should begin early in life and continue until the young man or woman is ready to enter college. So through this paper, we are reaching out to parents to tell them what we think will best prepare their child for college. We hope you will find these suggestions useful.

- 1. Know that the family is the key to success.** The clearest lesson we have learned is that the family is the key to what their child can accomplish. There is nothing we can teach in our program, or that students can learn, that will lead to positive outcomes if families don't support these outcomes. Families have to realize the potential of their son or daughter from early in life and promote their full participation in life so that they can achieve as much independence as possible. Without this attitude by families, there is little we can do. So if we do not recognize this attitude in the family, and know that it has been present from the beginning, we will likely not admit an applicant.
- 2. Know that the role of parents must change during the child's life.** It is very natural for all parents to want to nurture and protect their children. This is what good parents do. But good parents also give their children lots of chances to learn, let them find their interests, let them practice their skills, encourage them to try new things, and let them test their wings. If parents stop at the point of “nurturing and protecting,” their children will not gain in learning new things or acquiring independence. Even though the mental development of your child may not be the same as that of others, your development as a parent must progress so that your child *can* progress as much as possible. We are most interested in applicants who have done as much as they can with what they have to work with.
- 3. Be future focused.** If you have not already noticed, soon you will: Life happens very fast. For many parents, the activities of life are so overwhelming that it is difficult to look beyond each day. But days go by and before you know it, you have a young man or young woman living under your roof, and you are trying to figure out what the rest of his or her life will be

like. Even though you might not know exactly what the future holds, start getting ready for it. Make sure your son or daughter is fully involved in family activities, community organizations, and is taught in inclusive schools and classrooms. He or she should have chores and responsibilities, should learn that work is part of life, and should think about career options. We can usually tell when a person has been immersed in life activities, and this is the person we want in our program!

- 4. Have high expectations.** Everyone progresses to the highest level they are able to achieve if there is a clear expectation by those who matter that they should do so. Not everyone will be a nuclear physicist or a Nobel prize winner. But everyone can go to school, have interests, find a career (or two or three) and have a happy life in a happy home. This is not too much to ask for anyone. The only thing that can get in the way is if there is not an expectation for this to happen, or worse, if there is an expectation that it cannot! You might not know now exactly how it will happen, but if you expect it to, it will. When students apply to our program, we ask them why they want to come. When they have a clear picture of what they want in life, we know that they are more likely to be successful in our program.
- 5. Let your child take chances and make mistakes.** We know that safety and security is the number one concern for parents, but opportunities to take risks are also important. And sometimes these risks will lead to mistakes. But if there are no risks being taken, and no mistakes being made, there is no learning occurring. On our college campus, we expect that our students will venture into new settings and activities, and that some of these will be a little risky. We try to guide them and help them avoid big mistakes, but at the same time, we know that what they have experienced earlier in life will better prepare them for life on campus. When we view applicants as having experienced a relatively sheltered life, we suspect that our program might be too overwhelming for them.
- 6. Allow voice and choice.** Individuals need to learn how to make their own decisions, have a say in their life activities, and know that risks and rewards can be a part of every decision. We often see applicants for our program who turn to a parent or guardian every time they are asked a question. They do not trust their own judgment and feel they will be more correct if they rely on what mom or dad tells them. You have to realize that you will not always be around to make decisions and that the more practice your son or daughter has, the better they will become at it. We like to see applicants who, even though they might struggle, try to figure out for themselves what they want and what they should do. And we know if this is going to happen on campus, it has to start happening early in life.
- 7. Inclusion is essential.** You cannot teach someone to live in a typical, heterogeneous world... they have to learn it through experience. We can tell when applicants are comfortable around others on our campus, and when they have not had the experiences to help them do so. The best kind of experience for them to have is to go to school with kids without disabilities in inclusive classrooms. As we look at conditions around the country, we know that some states and school districts include a lot of kids with ID and some do not. But we also know this: if parents are steadfast, their kids will be included. Don't accept anyone telling you your child cannot be included. With adequate support, everyone can! Even though it might take extra

effort on your part and on the school's and teacher's part, inclusion is the best education for someone who wants to go to college.

- 8. When the time is right, get a job!** One of our outcome goals is for graduates to work in a career of their choice in a community-based job after leaving our program. And the best predictor of getting a job later is getting a job sooner. Kids in high school work at grocery stores, fast food restaurants, and lots of other places. Having a job teaches responsibility, independence, good decision-making and a lot of other soft skills that people need to be successful in the world. Use your network of friends, relatives, and acquaintances to help your son or daughter find a job during after school hours and on weekends and holidays. We find it hard for students to be successful in our job training component if they don't know that working is an expectation. Let them know, when the time is right, that it is!

- 9. Take advantage of "natural supports."** Parents often try hard to get their son or daughter every type of service that is available. Either through the schools or in addition to them, they pursue speech and language therapy, physical and occupational therapy, music and art therapy, dance therapy and hippotherapy, and various other kinds of therapeutic services. Although there is nothing wrong with this, it often results in the person with ID having more professionals in his or her life than non-professional people. In our program, we recruit numerous college students to hang out with and support our UP students. You can do the same by enlisting friends, schoolmates, neighbors, relatives, church members, scouts, and anyone else to spend an hour or two with your child every week. Not only will he or she be in a position to develop more friendships, but will also benefit from learning to engage with a variety of individuals, an expectation on our campus.

- 10. Share your success stories.** Lots of times, when a person applies to our program, they have already been successful and have acquired celebrity status. When they apply, they include their newspaper clippings and their videos of television interviews, and we are generally very impressed. When your son or daughter achieves success, if you can, get it publicized. This accomplishes lots of things. It lets the world know that your son or daughter is a capable person, and maybe more important, lets the everyone learn that people with ID can be successful. It also reinforces the notion of success in your son or daughter which will help him or her grow in confidence and pride. And most importantly, it tells the world, and us, that you are a great parent who is proud of your child and will do everything you can to help him or her be a successful person! This is the type of *parent* we want in our program!

We wish you the best in preparing your child for college or for whatever kind of successful life awaits. For more information about the UP Program, please visit up.wcu.edu. And for more information about all college programs for students with ID, you can visit thinkcollege.net.