

Person Centered Planning & Life Outcomes

In this unit of instruction we will be examining two examples of person-centered planning processes that are used to improve life outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The first of these processes that we will look at is called MAPS. This stands for Making Action Plans. MAPS is typically used for people who are still in school. You will learn about the steps the MAPS team takes to produce a positive experience in integrating a student with disabilities into the general education curriculum.

The other planning process to be examined is called personal futures planning. This is both a plan and a problem solving process. You will learn about who is involved in this process, what it looks like, and how it differs from other planning processes. Unlike MAPS, personal futures planning does not focus mainly on those who are still in school, but is used for individuals of any age.

Finally, we will be discussing life outcomes for people with disabilities, why it is so important to consider life outcomes, and help students to prepare for their future. Here we will talk about the concept of self-determination and why it is so beneficial for students to learn self-determination skills.

By completing this module, hopefully you will come to a greater understanding of how a person with a disability and the people in that person's life work to plan for that person's future. As you're reading, think about your own planning that you undertake as you are thinking about finishing high school and what will come next in your life. How is this different for a person with disabilities? How is it the same?

MAPS

Making Action Plans (MAPS) is a process of planning for the integration and participation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their peers. First, a problem-solving team must be established. This team will consist of the student, family members, peers, friends, and school personnel. It is important that the peers who are included know the student well, and that they are friends of the student (and not just acquaintances).

Once the team is assembled, a recorder and a facilitator are elected. This team will then work together to address seven major questions. The facilitator will guide the group through this process, and the recorder will write down the ideas and responses of the group members. The seven key questions that the group must examine are as follows:

1. What is the student's **history**?
2. What are the **dreams** for the student?
3. What are the **nightmares** for the student?
4. **Who** is the student?
5. What are the student's **abilities, strengths, and talents**?
6. What are the student's **needs**?
7. What would the student's **ideal day** look like? (This is the **Action Planning** step).

The student's history would involve things that have affected the student's life to this point, and generally the parent gives the student's history. Examples would be milestones, periods of hospitalization, critical illnesses, etc. It is important that everyone

understand “where the student has come from” and what his or her life has been like up to that point.

Dreams for the student will differ depending on the different people responding. A teacher’s dream may be that the student successfully completes high school, and finds a job. On the other hand, a parent’s dream for the same student may be that his or her child goes to college after high school and lives independently in the community. A peer may hope that student will always have friends that he or she can talk to. Everyone should participate in this step and the steps that follow, including the student for whom the MAPS is about!

Nightmares can consist of anything from worrying that a student will not have any friends to the fear that the student will one day be institutionalized. Nightmares can be difficult to face, but we have to acknowledge that without careful planning, our fears may be realized.

When answering the question “Who is the student?” the members of the team have the chance to mention any and all of the student’s characteristics of which they can think. Examples may be that the student is cheerful, a good friend, helpful, stubborn, playful, funny, sometimes lazy, has a good memory, loves animals, enjoys cooking, etc.

Once the team has taken a good look at exactly who the student is, they then examine that student’s strengths, abilities, and talents. Gifts are important in each of our lives, but especially for students with significant disabilities, for whom people may have always spoken mainly of their weaknesses and deficits. We need to acknowledge those gifts, and we do so in this step!

The sixth step is to identify the student's needs. All of us have needs, and each of our lives can be better if we can meet those needs. For a student with a significant disability, those needs might include being able to communicate better with his peers, having the appropriate modifications and supports to succeed in a general education class, being able to participate in extracurricular activities that he enjoys, or having friends over during the weekend.

The last step to the MAPS process is asking what an ideal day would look like for the student; this is the action planning step in which we address the student's needs. When thinking about this "ideal day", it is most important to consider what has to be done to make this happen. With dedication, teamwork, and care, this can be done to ensure that the student is getting the most out of his or her educational experience, including extracurricular activities. Remember that in planning for the ideal day, everyone on the team – including the student's peers – should play a role in coming up with the Action Plan. Do not let this last step involve just the adults!

MAPS helps to make the philosophy that "everybody belongs" come alive. It helps students not only become more included in their school, but it also allows them to bring their gifts to the general education classroom, and their peers. The quality of education is enhanced for *everyone*.

Now that you have learned about a planning process that is typically used for people who are still in school, you will be able to complete the activity below and then we will move on to another planning process that can be used with persons of any age.

ACTIVITY

Try to become involved with the MAPS process. Perhaps you could be the recorder for a student's MAP, lead a portion of a student's MAP, or observe during a MAPS session. Talk to your teacher about possible ways to participate.

Personal Futures Planning

Personal futures planning is two things. It is a plan, and it is a problem solving process. It begins with a small group of people who get together and brainstorm to develop strategies for success for a person with disabilities. From these strategies they take action to accomplish positive changes for the person with whom they are concerned. You are probably wondering who this group of people consists of:

The people involved in this planning process are those who care about and are close to the focus person. This can include family, friends, advocates, service providers, etc, and of course, the focus person himself. This small group focuses on opportunities for the person so that he or she may successfully develop relationships, be involved with the community, have control over his or her life, and develop the skills and abilities necessary to reach his or her goals.

A personal futures plan is a vision. It is a person's vision of what that person wants to be and wants to do. The plan changes accordingly as new opportunities and

obstacles arise. The main focus is on the skills, talents, and abilities of the person—never on what he or she can not do. Personal futures planning is “person-centered”. It differs from other planning programs in that the focus is not on services. Rather it focuses on exactly what needs to be done to allow the person to fully participate in society. Once this is determined, the individuals involved in the planning do what they can to make it happen.

Now that you have an understanding of what person centered planning is all about, let’s look at some of the dynamics of this process.

Who’s Involved?

Besides those mentioned above, there can be others involved in this process as well. For example, potential allies may be asked to participate, as well as people who provide direct support, and/or people with technical or resource expertise. And of course, the person for whom the plan is being made should always be involved in the planning process!

Where to Meet?

The meetings should be held in a casual, comfortable setting, in which the focus person feels ‘at home’. It is also important that meetings are held on the focus person’s own territory. Some examples may be his or her home, a library, or a church. A *bad* example of a meeting location would be an agency conference room. Meeting locations should be convenient as well.

When to Meet?

Quite simply, meetings should be held as needed. Whenever there is a need for change is when the group should meet for discussion. Meeting times need to be convenient to all

parties involved. It is always a good idea to schedule a date for the next meeting at the end of each meeting, if possible. The group shouldn't limit itself to meeting only in times of need, but to celebrate accomplishments as well!

The personal futures planning process involves three main steps. These steps are:

1. Creating a personal profile. This should include comprehensive information about the person for whom the plan is being created, including but not limited to: past events, future ideas and desires, opportunities, and obstacles. This information can be obtained through a group interview.
2. Planning. Based on this collection of information, a plan is developed. First the personal profile is reviewed. Then, environmental trends are considered. For example, depending on the current state of the economy, funding may be an issue. Next, the team needs to identify obstacles, opportunities, and strategies for getting started.
3. Commitment. The group forms a support network to help the person carry out the plan. This support network is there to make sure that the plan really happens.

Personal futures planning is a reflection of a changing belief system regarding individuals with disabilities. In the past, people with disabilities were often ignored and had all of their decisions made for them. We now realize that this will not work. If plans are to be made for a person, that person should be involved in the making of that plan, and the plan should revolve around the focus person's wants and desires. This is exactly what personal futures planning is all about. Finally, personal futures planning is about not always relying on the formal service system, but relying on friends, neighbors, family, and others in the community who can often accomplish

what the formal service system cannot. Personal futures planning does not start from the idea of what services are available (and then fitting the person into the services), but rather what the person wants and needs, and then building a life around those dreams.

So far we have been talking about planning processes that aim to ensure positive life outcomes for people with disabilities. Once you have completed the following activity we will then move on to a discussion about life outcomes for people with disabilities in general.

ACTIVITY

Write a one page description of why you think this planning process is important for students with disabilities. Also, imagine using this for a person *without* disabilities and include your thoughts and/or ideas about this.

Life Outcomes

As you near the end of your high school education you begin thinking more about your future. Will you go to college right after high school? Will you take some time off? Will you work full-time? Will you work part-time and go to college? It's an exciting time and the options available to you are endless.

But what about your fellow students with disabilities? Have you considered their lives after high school? Do they have the same opportunities as you do? Anybody, a person with or without disabilities, can of course pursue life to the fullest and accomplish their dreams. But there are certain steps that help a person access those finer opportunities in life. For example, obtaining a high school diploma is a very important step in accomplishing personal success.

Without a high school diploma, college is out of the question. Job options are limited and they tend to pay very little. So, as I'm sure you know, obtaining a high school diploma is a crucial step along a successful path. For more than a decade, the number of students with disabilities who have graduated with a standard high school diploma is 25%: a low number indeed. This is just one aspect of obtaining a self-satisfying lifestyle. Percentages for independent living, employment, and community involvement are often much lower for persons with disabilities as well.

Having the ability to support oneself financially is a key component to being an independent adult. According to one survey of Americans with disabilities (Louis Harris & Associates; 2000), two-thirds were unemployed, 20% had full-time jobs, and 11% were working part-time. Approximately one-half to two-thirds of young people with disabilities who are employed work only part-time. Perhaps this is why the income for many individuals with disabilities hovers around the poverty level. To make matters worse, these individuals rarely receive health benefits, vacation time, or sick leave (Heward, 2003).

Why are the statistics so bleak for young adults with disabilities? Students with disabilities often face obstacles in their transition from high school to adulthood that you

may not encounter. For example, opportunities may be limited for a person with disabilities because of low expectations by others. Discrimination can play a significant part in finding a job or an apartment for a person with a disability. “Like other minority groups, persons with disabilities are often in the position of being the last hired and first fired” (Heward, p. 571). Or perhaps needed supports simply aren’t there for a person to function successfully in his or her society.

Enjoying independence and success as an adult isn’t limited to finding meaningful employment. Being an active member of society, owning a home or renting an apartment, and having a social network are all equally important. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Survey (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996), 37% of students with disabilities who had been out of high school for 3-5 years were living independently compared with 60% of the general population. Of course, there are some alternatives to independent living such as group homes, or foster homes. While both of these options can be beneficial, how would you like to live with a group of strangers that you did not choose for your roommates?

And what about recreation and leisure? The opportunities for a person with disabilities to participate in recreation and leisure activities may be somewhat limited. One obstacle may be a lack of transportation. Another inhibiting factor could be a lack of skill or ability to participate in certain activities. And in the case of activities that require multiple participants (tennis, basketball, chess, card games, etc.), it is necessary for a person to have friends who are willing and able to participate in activities with them.

It simply isn’t enough if a person only meets one or two of these criteria. In this case, it is necessary to have all of these factors in place. Most communities have

recreation and leisure resources available to their citizens. It is important that people are aware of these resources if they are in need of assistance or supports. If you work with, or are close to a person with disabilities, perhaps it would be helpful for you to become aware of your community's recreation and leisure resources so that you may help introduce that person to those resources.

So far, you have been given a fairly bleak outlook for the life of people with disabilities after high school. This actually doesn't have to be the case. One way in which students with disabilities can prepare to be more successful as independent adults is to learn self-determination skills while still in school. As a peer tutor, you can have a very important role in helping students with disabilities learn these skills. A person who is self-determined is aware of his or her likes and dislikes, preferences and interests.

Based on these factors, self-determined people are able to make choices that influence the events in their lives. They do not sit passively by while life decisions are made for them. They take action and initiate events to make the things they want to happen in their lives become a reality. They set goals for themselves, continually work on reaching those goals, and monitor their own progress along the way.

A recent study was conducted to determine whether or not self-determination affected the outcomes of adult life for people with cognitive disabilities (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). The study compared two groups: those with high self-determination and those with low self-determination. These groups were assessed one year after high school and then again three years after high school in order to compare their outcomes in areas such as independent living, maintaining a bank account, receiving job training, holding a job currently, working full-time, and working part-time. After being out of high school

for three years, the outcomes were significantly higher in every single category for the high self-determination group. Quite obviously, learning self-determination skills paid off in the long run for those individuals.

So as you can see, the life outcomes for a person with disabilities can go either way. Unfortunately, the trend has not always been positive for many of these individuals. This is why it is more important than ever for educators and peer tutors to focus on teaching skills that will help a person function successfully in society, instead of focusing only on classroom-related tasks and activities.

ACTIVITY

To learn more about self-determination and to get some ideas about how you can help teach students to become more self-determined, visit the following websites:

<http://ericec.org/digests/e632.html>

<http://ericec.org/digests/e633.html>

Then write a 1-2 page paper on how you can assist the students you work with in increasing their self-determination skills.

References

Blackorby, J. & Wagner, M. (1996). Longitudinal postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities: Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study. *Exceptional Children*, 62 (5), 399-414.

Harris Poll