

From the Executive Director

Hello TNSTEP Community:

Well, we're in it now! The fall school semester is underway and the calls and emails have been coming in fast.

I hope you all are getting an opportunity to spend some time outside during some of the prettiest days of the year, even as you work through the challenges of a new school year, interacting with new teachers and other school staff, and playing catch up after a tumultuous couple of years of remote learning. We feel the pain here too, as several of our TNSTEP Team members deal with their own kids, of various ages, who are trying to navigate a changing environment, and several new or updated policies. It's a lot!

Please feel free to reach out to us if you need help understanding anything about special education, issues you've encountered since the school year began, or if you just need someone to listen. Please know that whatever you're experiencing, we've likely "been there," and had to figure out for ourselves how to make our kids' educational experience more successful. Let us help.

In this Fall issue of our Newsletter, we give you articles on a new extended TEIS services option, school safety for students with disabilities, the vital role that siblings play in the lives of their brothers and sisters with disabilities, and what we're currently hearing about the new school year from families and youth with disabilities. We hope you'll take a few minutes to read these offerings, and if you're inspired, please let us know what you think.

As always, we hope you'll stay healthy, safe, and happy. If you can, take a short walk outside to feel the fall breezes and see the beautiful leaves before it gets too cold!

Gratefully,

Karen Harrison

Executive Director, TNSTEP



SCHOOL SAFETY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Nobody wants to think about schools not being a safe place for our children to learn. But unless you've stopped reading news sites you can't escape the reality that schools are just as vulnerable as any other public setting to abrupt violence or devastating natural disasters.

School emergency procedures are crucial to the safety of all students. And when it comes to students with cognitive or physical limitations, there may need to be even more advanced, individualized planning to help ensure their safety. Families, teachers, school administrators, School Resource Officers, and even students can play key roles in helping develop, practice, and implement these plans when a crisis hits.

It helps to think about what might happen during an emergency. School emergency procedures often call for students to move or change locations quickly and without prior notice, often into spaces that are crowded and uncomfortable. Children may be expected to hide or possibly remain completely silent, which may be a challenging request especially for children with intellectual disabilities who might have trouble grasping the gravity of a particular situation. Additionally, students with temporary conditions such as broken bones, or those who are English language learners may require specialized assistance in an emergency.

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SCHOOL SAFETY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES *(continued from page 1)*

An Individualized Education Programs (IEP) catalogs a student's specific learning and support needs. In the same way it's possible, even necessary, to develop a specific safety plan which may be distinct from or included in the student's IEP. While there is no designated section in the IEP for individual emergency plans, this information can be included in the student's IEP under Related Services. It will be essential to document what a particular student can do independently, what they might need help with, and who might provide that help, especially in a quick-reaction, high-stress scenario. Once completed, consider giving individual copies to each instructor and paraeducator, or keeping copies in each classroom.

Looking for solutions during that high-stress scenario is not the best time to develop a plan. Instead, use the student's IEP and schedule and the school's physical layout to conduct a step-by-step review of what might happen or be expected in an emergency. Note a particular student's communication needs, physical supports, and behavioral support needs. Consider any barriers to the student's ability to move throughout the school facility, and then problem solve potential solutions to those barriers.

Additional considerations

Good communication. Communication among schools, students, and their families is essential. Confer with students and parents regarding their preferences for assistance in emergency situations.

Engage local first responders in the process. Schools should discuss evacuation preferences with local first responders and ensure they understand the needs of students with disabilities. It may be beneficial to provide training for first responders on various disabilities and anticipated behaviors, and how those behaviors might impact a student's ability to follow emergency procedures.

Include all students in emergency drills. Regular practice with students with and without disabilities can help students and staff be prepared, and can help identify possible safety gaps. Procedures and protocols for evacuating individuals with disabilities should be developed with key school stakeholders and local first responders.

Technology and materials. For children who are deaf, consider using strobe lights or other alerting devices such as vibrating pagers to supplement audible alarms. For students who are blind, consider using Braille signage or audible cues. Consider color-coding escape doors and routes. Consider having emergency go-kits with emergency information and supplies, like stuffed animals, stress balls, headphones or other objects to help lessen potential anxiety; masks for those with respiratory difficulties; snack items for those with diabetic conditions. These go-kits can be stored in backpacks or buckets that can be easily moved.

Specialized transportation. Specialized transportation will be needed for those students who cannot be accommodated on a standard school bus. Transportation coordinators can provide specially equipped buses, but need to know in advance how many individuals will require special transport.

Medications and equipment. Some students take regular medications during the school day. Others need specialized medical equipment. In an emergency situation, these students and staff may need additional assistance from others to bring their equipment or medications to an evacuation site.

Additional trained adults. In an emergency, it may be necessary to place additional trained adults with students to help them and their teachers in a crisis. Special education teachers, classroom teachers, parents, and student support staff should be consulted when designing plans for students needing additional supervision.

We're hoping this article is helpful, but it is by no means comprehensive. So much of your planning, practicing, and decisions will be based on a particular student's disability, limitations, and support needs. The most important thing is to consider these strategies in advance, before a plan needs to be implemented in a moment's notice.

Portions of this article appeared in the following resources:

School Safety for Students with Disabilities: bit.ly/schoolsafetysolutions

School Safety and Students with Disabilities: bit.ly/schoolsafetywisconsin

Protecting Students with Disabilities in an Emergency: edweek.org



TABS

TN Adult
Brothers and Sisters

Supporting siblings of
people with disabilities

Supporting Siblings Across the Lifespan by Emma Shouse Garten

For most of us, our sibling relationships are our longest-lasting ones. We know our siblings long before we meet our partners or have children. Often, our siblings are in our lives after our parents pass on. For siblings of people with disabilities, these relationships have a lifelong impact. Many siblings eventually take on some level of caregiving for their brother or sister. Some siblings find themselves providing support to aging parents, siblings with disabilities, and their own children – all at once. (In the sibling support world, we sometimes call ourselves the “club sandwich” generation!)

For more than a decade, the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities have supported Tennessee Adult Brothers and Sisters (TABS). TABS is a statewide support and information network of siblings of people with different types of disabilities. For many years, TABS hosted annual weekend conferences for adult siblings. TABS has also promoted the growth of “Sibshops,” events that offer fun and peer support for young siblings.

At Sibshops and TABS events, we frequently from participants what a big relief it is to be around other people who “get it.” Through TABS, we’re often meeting people who never knew that a network for siblings of people with disabilities existed. They finally feel like they’ve found people who understand some of the unique joys and challenges of growing up with and supporting a brother or sister (or multiple siblings) with disabilities. It’s also a safe space to tell all the funny or awkward stories that can come with growing up as the brother or sister to someone with a disability. (My go-to story is the time my autistic brother Evan yelled out “Kill the beast!” during a solemn prayer at church when he was younger – a reference to his Beauty and the Beast phase!)

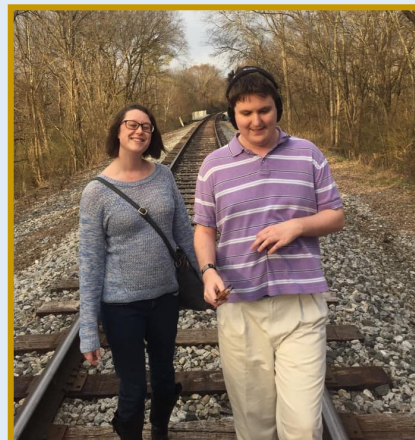
My favorite part of these sorts of meetings – and most sibling gatherings in general – is how siblings who are further along in their life journey are eager to give reassurance, wisdom, and advice to younger siblings. The younger siblings are often uncertain about how their role as a sibling to someone with a disability fits into their plan for the future. How will their sibling role impact their decisions about their careers, postsecondary education, romantic partners, and where they choose to live? Siblings who’ve been supporting and caring for their brother or sister for decades constantly remind these younger folks that they need to live their own lives and take care of their own well-being, in addition to providing love and support to their siblings. We know from research that the more support siblings of people with disabilities feel early in life, the more likely they are to remain lovingly involved with supporting their brothers and sisters in the future.

TABS welcomes anyone who identifies as a “sib” or is interested in learning more about sibling issues. We have participants whose siblings have passed away, those whose siblings were born with their disabilities, those whose siblings acquired disabilities later in life, and with a whole spectrum of different needs and diagnoses. We’re sometimes joined by “siblings-in-law” (partners of siblings), who often become key supporters of our siblings.

If you’re interested in connecting to TABS, you can email emma.shouse@tn.gov or follow TABS on Facebook. Look for ongoing posts with resources for siblings and information about future gatherings. Events are shared on the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center’s event calendar and on the TABS Facebook page. You can also find Sibshops near you on TN Disability Pathfinder’s event calendar.

Tennessee Adult Brothers and Sisters (“TABS”) is a statewide network that aims to empower and educate siblings of individuals with all types of disabilities by providing information and peer support. TABS is led and supported by the Council on Developmental Disabilities, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, and sibling volunteers across the state. TABS is the Tennessee state chapter of the national Sibling Leadership Network. Learn more at siblingleadership.org. You can also check out resources for teen siblings and resources for young siblings on the SLN’s website.

Emma Shouse Garten, in addition to her role as Public Information Specialist for the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, helps lead “TABS.” She has two younger brothers, Evan (pictured with Emma at right) and Brendan. Evan has autism and other disabilities.



Emma and her brother Evan

DECISIONS ABOUT SERVICES AFTER AGE 3: A NEW TEIS EXTENDED OPTION

by TNSTEP and The Arc of Tennessee Staff



Tennessee's Early Intervention System (TEIS) has traditionally served infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays from birth to age three. Tennessee is now offering to extend TEIS services for eligible children past their third birthday, up until the start of the school year following their fourth birthday. This extension offers families an additional option to consider as they help their children develop and prepare for the heightened demands of elementary school.

Before this change, children received services from TEIS until they turned three. Those services are referred to as Part C services, delivered in accordance with the Individualized Family Service Plan, or IFSP. After three, if deemed eligible, the children went on to receive services through the school system until age 22. Those school services are known as Part B, and the governing document is the Individualized Education Program, or IEP. The new extension of TEIS services allows families the choice to either continue services through TEIS or transition to the school system.

When making this important and consequential decision, the three most important things to consider are:

- Children cannot receive services through an IFSP and an IEP at the same time.
- If a family chooses to leave TEIS services after the child turns three, that child cannot return to TEIS services.
- If a child is referred to TEIS after their third birthday, the child will not be eligible to begin TEIS services. Instead, that child would work with their local school district to receive services.

To be eligible for the Part C Extended Option, a child must:

- Be enrolled in TEIS prior to the age of three
- Be determined to be eligible through an evaluation for special education services in their local school district
- Have turned three on or after October 15, 2022

To choose the Part B option, a child must:

- Be over age three
- Be determined eligible through an evaluation for school district special education services by their local school district, often referred to as the LEA, or local education authority

Transition planning

Before this new option, families with children turning three participated in a transition process to move eligible kids from TEIS services to school system services. Transition planning will continue as it does now. TEIS service coordinators will work with the family and the local school district to make sure the family has the most seamless transition possible.

IFSP option (Part C) through TEIS

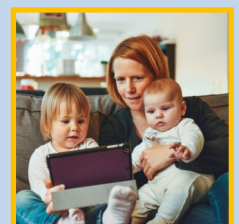
A TEIS service coordinator supports the IFSP development and the implementation of its individual goals. The extended IFSP process offers family support and training, including the promotion of school readiness by incorporating pre-literacy, language, and early math skills. This option often includes activities families do at home with their children between service provider visits. At any time, a family may terminate TEIS services and choose Part B services through the school system. IFSP services continue until IEP services are scheduled to begin, or until the beginning of the school year following the child's fourth birthday, whichever occurs sooner.

Individualized Education Program (Part B) option

In Part B, the IEP team, which includes the parent, members of the school district, and when appropriate the student, facilitates IEP development and implementation. The IEP addresses educational needs resulting from the disability by guaranteeing the child a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). All special education and related services are provided by the LEA in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), to the maximum extent possible.

Suggested action steps in the decision-making process

- Take a look at your child's current Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP). What goals are being worked on as they approach age three?
- Make a list of the types of activities you want your child to participate in to help them grow, learn, and develop. What types of supports would your child need to be successful in these activities?



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DECISIONS ABOUT SERVICES AFTER AGE 3 *(continued from page 4)*

- Check out the developmental, social, emotional, communication, and academic milestones of three and four-year-olds. A good resource is the Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards (TNELDS), which can be found at tn.gov/education/instruction/academic-standards/early-learning-development-standards
- Talk about your goals and list of activities with your child's TEIS Service Coordinator. What could TEIS services look like after age three?
- Find out what services and settings your child's school system offers. For example, how will your child receive therapies, like speech, occupational, or physical therapy? Will they take place in the preschool classroom or will they be offered in a separate setting?
- Consider visiting the location where your child may start school services. This may prompt more questions, allow you a chance to speak with staff, and help you picture what supports will need to be in place to help your child succeed.

Know your rights

Parents/guardians of children who receive or may be eligible for early intervention and special education services have rights under state and federal law. An important part of these laws provides parents with the right to participate in their children's services. Whether continuing TEIS services or starting in the school system, your child has the right to an individualized plan of support.

Resources

A free TNSTEP workshop on learning your rights and responsibilities related to services and protections for children under federal IDEA law from birth to age 3 (Part C) and Age 3 and up (Part B) can be found at tnstep.org/training/workshops

Information about the services provided in the school system for children ages 3 to 5 can be found at bit.ly/section619

You're Not Alone: What We're Hearing from Families

We at TNSTEP recognize the new school year has been off to a rough start. Teachers, administrators, and many of the families we serve are still adjusting to full in-person classes, after more than two years of shifting pandemic policies and circumstances. In addition, many family schedules have been disrupted anew, as moms and dads are expected to transition from remote work to their former office spaces.

Our Regional Directors in West, Middle, and East Tennessee have reported unusually high levels of parent calls and emails, as families try to regroup and move forward in a confusing and frustrating time. All across the country, school systems are frantically trying to recruit teachers to fill the slots of the large numbers of educators who exited their careers for different jobs or for their own safety and well-being. In several states, schools are hiring teachers who have not received the same levels of education, training, or certification as their predecessors. Unfortunately, this environment has created some unique concerns for families of children who experience disabilities, including:

- Escalated child negative behaviors and a lack of behavioral assessments or supports
- Lack of student progress after remote learning
- Lack of school staff in general, especially educational assistants
- New staff not understanding the student's diagnosis/disability/IEP
- Schools not following the IEP (Individualized Education Program)

We want you to know you're not alone. We are here for you. We don't have all the answers, but we can help you figure out some beneficial next steps. Please reach out to our Team members listed on the following page with any special education issues or concerns.



CONNECT WITH TNSTEP!

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