As parents, one of our goals — and often one of our more difficult tasks — is helping our kids launch into adulthood. A successful launch means they are ready to lead an independent life, have the skills and tools they need to be self-sufficient, and have goals in place for their future. Each family can have a different timeline for when a child should launch. Cultural norms or financial restrictions could mean that some families expect a child to be independent at 18, while for others, the mid-20s is a good goal.

Regardless of those initial expectations, parents of transgender, nonbinary, or gender-expansive youth may find that it's hard to reach that goal because there can be additional challenges along the way as they navigate their child's gender journey. An adolescent struggling through puberty before coming out to their family might have poor grades and the need to retake classes. A child who excelled in sports might suffer from depression if legislation bans them from participating. Waiting until 16 or 17 to start hormone therapy and progress through puberty might cause too much anxiety for a teen to contemplate their career goals or have the drive to study for an ACT or SAT test. These and other typical milestones can be delayed by several years while a family navigates barriers that society continues to put in place for trans youth.

Understanding that the teen years and beyond can hold special challenges for transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive young people is the first step in preparing to meet those challenges. A launch can be successful with a plan.

Dealing with transgender children going off to college is the same as with cisgender children, just with some extra steps.°

-Stephen Chukumba, father of Hobbes Chukumba

HOW TO BEGIN PLANNING FOR THEIR FUTURE

One major goal of launching into adulthood is reaching financial independence from one's parents. It's easy to find tips and guidance on how to achieve this goal online, with steps to take like opening a bank account, building a credit history, having the teen or young adult take on one or two expenses — such as their portion of car insurance or a mobile phone account — on their own first, and establishing a budget.
Each of these steps is relatively simple — unless your child’s identity documents do not match who they are. Transgender people who do not have accurate or consistent IDs can find it difficult to open a bank account, present two forms of ID for the tax forms required when starting a new job, or have their credit history accurately follow them throughout their lives. Establishing a budget can become complicated if the young person will need to move to a different state to feel safe on their own.

If you have not started the process of updating your young person’s birth certificate, driver’s license or state ID, school ID and records, or obtaining a passport as an alternative main ID, now is the time to do it. In many states, you can request that name-change records be sealed to give your child a completely fresh start. Even if that is not possible based on where you live, having some consistent IDs to use will ease many of the other steps in launching. A passport can be used in place of a birth certificate and is an easier document to change both a name and gender marker than IDs in many states.

The next thing to consider is what state you live in, how safe it is for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and the transgender community specifically, and if your young adult wants or needs to move to another state to achieve independence. If education, employment, and housing options are limited in your state, start putting funds aside as soon as possible to cover the costs of a move, if feasible. Research housing options and expenses in safer states, as they tend to have a higher cost of living. There are budget-friendly areas in all states, but be sure to check tools like HRC’s Municipal Equality Index to see how your child’s top choices of cities score.

THE EDUCATION PATH: HOW TO FIND SUPPORTIVE COLLEGES OR TRADE SCHOOLS

If your young person’s goals include continuing their education, either with a degree in mind, with general classes so they can explore career options, or in a trade school to receive hands-on training in a specialized industry, some considerations should be universal:

✚ Is the school located in a state where access to gender-affirming health care is secure?

✚ Is the school located in a state that supports Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives in higher education?

✚ Does the school itself have a mission or value statement that prioritizes equality and social justice issues?

✚ Does the school and its campus have resources specifically for LGBTQ+ students and are LGBTQ+ student groups welcomed and active?

✚ Does the school have gender-neutral restrooms or a policy that allows transgender and nonbinary students and faculty to use the restrooms where they feel most safe?

✚ If your young adult will need school-provided housing, are there LGBTQ+-specific options and policies that protect a trans student’s privacy?
If the school provides healthcare services and/or has a medical clinic, does it have supportive policies and does it offer gender-affirming care options?

When your student finds a school that ticks these boxes — or the ones that are a priority for you and your young person — visit the school before enrolling, if at all possible. Most schools will have a variety of options: pre-scheduled information sessions, personalized campus tours, meetings with admissions staff, the potential to attend a class, and even the opportunity to spend the night in a dorm. Have your teen call the school to ask what options are available and to make an appointment. A step towards independence is taking the initiative to have these conversations on their own!

If an in-person visit is not a viable option because of time or finances, have your child inquire about speaking to current students on a phone or video call. Have them ask if there is the possibility of speaking with a student who is a member of the campus LGBTQ+ organization or any openly LGBTQ+ faculty.

“When I was looking at colleges, I was focused on schools with really good tech programs. For example, there’s Georgia Tech, which ranked 3rd for engineering programs in the US, but because it’s in Georgia, it’s off the list. I’m only interested in schools where my identity isn’t going to be an issue.”

–Hobbes Chukumba

“I’m really glad I was able to visit my top two choices for college. At one school, I struggled to make connections and feel like I would find friends with common interests. While the school looked good on paper, the atmosphere when I visited was very different. The school that I chose was further from home, but I immediately found like-minded people and knew I’d have a supportive community as well as a supportive school.”

–Conner McLaren

FINDING A JOB

Getting a job during high school is a great way to earn some spending money, to put some money into savings, and to develop interpersonal and time-management skills. Even without a high school work history, getting a job after leaving high school might be on your young person’s priority list. After all, spending years in college or attending a trade school are not the only options for having a career.
No matter when your child is ready to find a job, there are several things they should keep in mind…and yes, the list is similar to the one for checking out schools:

✚ Does the employer prioritize equality and DEI initiatives in their mission and values statements?

✚ What is the culture and work climate like in the organization?

✚ Does the company have LGBTQ+-inclusive work policies?

✚ If the company is a large organization, does it have an ERG (Employee Resource Group) specifically for LGBTQ+ employees?

✚ Can you see signs of an inclusive workspace such as pronouns in email signatures or on employee name badges and are their gender-neutral restrooms?

✚ If the company offers health insurance, does their coverage include gender-affirming or transition-related care?

Some of this information can be found in HRC's Corporate Equality Index report, which is an annual publication that scores the policies of many large employers across the U.S.

When your young adult is ready to apply for a job, you can help prepare them by role-playing an interview. Employers want to find people who are skilled and dependable, but who are also a good match for their culture. During an interview, there could be several “tell me about yourself” questions. These are not questions designed to dig into a person's full biography, family life, or hobbies. Teach your child how to answer in a friendly and professional way: why they are interested in the job, what their goals are for their future, or how previous school or extracurricular activities have prepared them for the job. They might be asked why they are interested in working for that company, and if research has shown the company to be good for LGBTQ+ employees, your child could bring that up — both to highlight that they have done their homework and to ask specific questions about policies or benefits. They should never feel pressured or compelled to out themselves during an interview process.

It's also important for them to know their rights as a transgender employee. Federal law protects LGBTQ+ employees in companies that employ more than eight people. The Supreme Court has ruled that Title VII’s protections from discrimination based on sex include LGBTQ+ people. This means that discrimination and any harassment that creates a hostile work environment is illegal. That does not mean that all workplaces will be safe or free from discriminatory behaviors.

Working in several states can be complicated as it can often be difficult to prove that discrimination, unfair disciplinary actions, lack of hours, or even being fired was due to a person's trans status. You should guide your child to find an ally and learn how to document any instances of poor or discriminatory behavior.
A “GAP YEAR” — PROS AND CONS

A gap year often refers to taking a year off between high school graduation and further education. But it can also refer to time spent between any life stages and it can last longer than one year. For young people, it can be a time to reinvent themselves if they weren’t happy with how they were labeled or pigeonholed in school — and for a young transgender or nonbinary person, that reinvention can be more involved than most!

Taking a year before moving into the workforce or diving back into school can give a young trans person the time needed for critical self-care. If identity documents weren’t updated before finishing high school, this year can offer the chance to finish all of the steps needed to re-enter the world with an ID that matches who they are.

It can also allow time to focus on healthcare. There are many benefits to having a year to prioritize one’s health. Gender-affirming care can require travel and time to heal. Hormones (or a second puberty) can cause swings in emotions. Surgical interventions require time for recovery with limited movement, bandage changes, follow-up appointments, and more. Recovering at home with parental support can be much easier than in a shared dorm room or in a small apartment with a roommate. Making the shift from pediatric care to an adult clinic can require research and appointments to ensure a good fit. And because of HIPAA, your young person will never need to disclose any of this to a future employer or college admissions counselor.

A focus on mental health during this year can also be hugely beneficial. If your young person was unable to socially transition during high school or faced challenges like bullying, non-affirming teachers, or exists in a state where even pronouns and LGBTQ+ books are controversial, having time to decompress, go to therapy, meditate, journal, and make plans for their future can be very affirming. Finding ways to be mentally and physically active is key and will lead to improved health. With time to focus on an exercise routine, volunteer activities, or practicing art or a new hobby, they can improve other important skills like time management, communication, and adaptability that will help them return to an academic or employment setting with renewed focus and purpose.

On the flip side, taking a year off can disrupt a person’s academic or career momentum. It could limit access to some scholarships and grants, creating a challenge to returning to a formal education setting. This could create a financial burden by increasing the need for more student loans or by prolonging the time needed to finish school, which translates into a delay in starting a professional career and lifetime earnings.

Emotionally, a person might struggle to see friends moving forward in their lives while their own progress is temporarily delayed. A lack of structure or missing the routine of a school or work schedule can make it challenging to stay organized and focused. These feelings can become overwhelming and create a sense of loss or even lead to depression. It is important to have social support and a well-thought-out plan for the gap year to ensure it is beneficial and meaningful to the individual.

Create that plan with a brainstorming session: Where does your young person see themself in four years? If they have a specific career goal in mind, think about what minimal things they can do during the gap year to keep their thoughts and energy moving toward that goal such as taking one college class in the subject they are interested in at a community college.
or looking for an internship in their field of interest. If they don’t have a specific career goal but have a few broad interests, this is a good time to focus on each one to see if one sparks joy. There can still be movement forward even as they take time for further development mentally and emotionally.

“I was really nervous to take a gap year. I was worried that being out of school for a year would make it hard to jump back into studying and being serious about school. Taking a gap year gave me the flexibility I needed to get medical care that was important to my transition. I took a few classes at my local community college to keep my head in the game for full-time classes in the fall.”

-Conner McLaren

MOVING OUT OF PEDIATRIC CARE

Transitioning from pediatric to adult medical care is an important step for young individuals. Here are some things that could help create a smooth transition:

Talk to your child about their healthcare responsibilities. Discuss topics like appointment scheduling, taking medications as instructed, and prescription refills. Teach them how to understand and use health insurance benefits including coverage, deductibles, and co-pays, and how to navigate the healthcare system for necessary approvals or referrals.

Work with your child to put together their comprehensive medical history record. Document their current medications, past treatments — what helped and what didn’t, allergies, and the often overlooked family medical history. They can also document any future healthcare goals that they may have to ensure there is a smooth continuity of care.

To ensure that continuity, help your young person build out an affirming healthcare team. This could be through offering to assist with researching clinics or individual healthcare professionals. It could involve seeking recommendations, checking reviews, and considering factors like location and specialized training. If your child will be moving to another state for school or a job, finding affirming providers can be a bigger challenge. Ask their current therapist or doctor if they can help get recommendations through their professional networks.

You could also help your child create a list of questions to ask clinicians during initial consultation appointments. But encourage their independence by letting them take the lead on this research or by role-playing some of those conversations. This independence is critical for the development of self-advocacy skills they will need when you are no longer with them during appointments. They will need to know how to communicate clearly and effectively with their doctors and behavioral health professionals, how to ask questions, and to feel confident in actively participating in their healthcare decisions.

Don’t forget to discuss what to do in case of a medical emergency; how would they access emergency services, who are their emergency contacts, and how much of their medical
history or medications should be disclosed to emergency personnel.

Offer your emotional support. The shift to self-advocacy and adult medical care can be emotionally challenging for any teen, but especially so for transgender and nonbinary youth who have been required to have extra parental involvement in our politicized healthcare systems. Provide emotional support and reassurance during this process, and talk through any concerns or anxieties your child may have.

“With your cisgender child, you'd ask about doctors and healthcare. With a transgender child, the conversation is the same, with a few specific things like gender-affirming gynecological care for trans man and hormonal treatments and therapies that you've got to consider.”

-Stephen Chukumba, father of Hobbes Chukumba

CLOSING

As you can probably see, helping your transgender or nonbinary child launch into adulthood isn’t that different from helping a cisgender child succeed. There are a few extra steps to take, additional conversations to have, and possible adjustments to timelines. If you’ve helped your child so far in their journey and through a social transition and possibly some medical steps, you’ve got this!

Reassure them and check in without smothering them. Be their resource if and when they need you. Let technology help you feel connected even when you are no longer physically close with family group chats and video calls. Out of sight does not have to mean out of mind, so encourage regularly scheduled conversations directly with you and with the entire family. Having a call on the calendar can be all the comfort a person needs to get through a few stressful days.

When you do talk, be sure to celebrate their successes. Taking on more responsibilities and making decisions on their own will lead to some mistakes. That is part of growing up. Open communication and encouragement about how to move beyond those mistakes will help them as each new challenge comes along. Celebrate their wins – big and small — so they can move confidently into the world.

They will likely experience things that all young people go through: a roommate not working out, loneliness as they find new friend groups, or just feeling unsettled because of change. Remember that you can’t save them from every uncomfortable situation. We are here to assist, to help them grow in strength mentally and emotionally. Fostering a sense of safety while they explore their independence is key.

Finally — and most importantly — remember that every young person is unique and their paths will not all look the same. Remind them that they are ENOUGH and that their existence in this world is making the world a better place.
Personal story

When our trans son was a senior in high school we had “what is going to happen after graduation” conversations. He was not sure if college was for him. Although we wanted him to attend college, we tried hard to listen and make all of his ideas valid and considered.

We mapped out 3 roads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1 Without school</th>
<th>He is an artist and had thoughts of being a YouTube influencer or an artist who took commissions. He loved to apply his art to clothes and create portraits.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#2 College</td>
<td>He would attend an art school and pursue the field of art that most interested him. He would also be able to be exposed to other forms of art that he might not be aware of at the moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Trade school</td>
<td>He had an interest in being a tattoo artist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I had him make a step-by-step guide for each road and embark on some of it his senior year. He had to start a YouTube channel and follow some humble beginning stories to get a behind-the-scenes idea of what it would take. He started an IG page and took on commissions from friends, family, and schoolmates while he grew his audience. He looked into what it would take to be a tattoo artist. And yes, he also applied to a couple of art schools. We talked about where he would grow most, what he had the most energy to follow through with, and where he would feel most safe and find his tribe.

In the end, he chose to attend art school. I felt it was such a smooth transition because he knew that he had a choice and that we offered encouragement without pressure. He could see for himself what moved him most, and we worked on making his dream come true including living on campus (although the school is within driving distance). The school he is attending does have a highly visible LGBTQ community. When applying to housing, they asked for gender preference and he indicated he would like other gender-expansive suitemates. His first roommate was also trans, but things didn’t work out and it was rough for a moment. But once that change was made he adjusted very well. The hardest part has been socially finding his tribe. We are so proud of him and we support him through phone calls and texts while also giving him room to reach out when it works for him. Even on the tough weeks, we keep assuring him that growing up is an incredible task and we are all still on that journey for as long as we are here on the planet. We hope to keep learning, growing, and discovering.

-Dahn, Mom to an 18 year old Trans Young Adult