

# Making the Switch

*Practical tips for moving to an adult health care provider.*

By Susan L. Fitzgerald



It goes without saying that the transition from childhood to adulthood is a chaotic one for both parents and children. With too many changes to name — independence issues surrounding school, work, and friends — it's important to try to manage some things with a minimum of stress. And this is possible...as long as there's plenty of planning.

During this phase it's crucial to consider this transition's significance as it pertains to independence issues. "A well-timed transition from child-oriented to adult-oriented health care allows young people to optimize their ability to assume adult roles and functioning," declares the Consensus Statement on Health Care Transitions for Young Adults With Special Health Care Needs from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians and American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine. "For many young people with special health care needs, this will mean a transfer to an adult health care professional; for many others, it will involve an ongoing relationship with the same provider but with a reorientation of clinical interactions to mirror the young person's increasing maturity and emerging adulthood."

"For their part, parents are feeling their own doubts. The number one concern of families in this situation, is that the M.D. will not know their child and their needs," says Cyndi Fisher, R.N., MSN, CPNP, program director of the Hampton Roads Care Connection for Children at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters.

## ***From the Beginning***

With all of this in mind, where should you start? "Start early planning for transition," says Fisher. "Ask around of other parents with children with similar conditions to see which M.D. they are using." And start close to home. "Talk to your own adult doctor about the situation and get recommendations," notes Fisher. She also recommends getting a medical summary of your child's care needs, medications, and therapies that worked (or didn't) as well as tests and hospitalizations. The goal is to make as complete and succinct a record as you can for the provider to review. Fisher adds, "Be sure the provider can be responsive to your needs, such as

hours of operation, availability for prescriptions and sick calls."

## ***Insurance Concerns***

Don't neglect insurance issues...one area that might be overlooked, says Fisher. "Be sure the provider takes your insurance and be sure if your child loses Medicaid at age 19 that there are plans for insurance coverage."

If your adolescent has a special health care need significant enough to interfere with his or her ability to make financial and medical decisions, you may need to take additional steps. According to a booklet from the Institute for Community Inclusion at Children's Hospital, Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, you should file a petition to the court six months before your adolescent turns 18 to maintain guardianship or to initiate conservatorship. Be sure to talk with your own advocate or legal advisor to confirm this.

## ***Shared Responsibilities***

Together, you and your child can prepare for this change. And while it can certainly be an overwhelming time, if you start early and take things step by step, it can be less stressful.

One way to manage this time of growing independence is to work together. An article from the National Center for Cultural Competencies and its Division of Services for Children with Special Health Care Needs (MCHB) outlines areas parents and youth can work on together and separately.

## ***What parents and families can do to prepare:***

1. Find out the policies regarding the age and service policy limits for your child's pediatric/adolescent practice.
2. Find out your health care insurer's policy regarding the age limit of services under pediatric/adolescent care.
3. Begin discussing transition at 14-15 years of age with both your child and the health care provider.
4. Foster the development of an independent relationship between your child and his/her health care practitioner. This provides a foundation for developing future relationships with adult health care providers.
5. Request that your pediatric/adolescent health care practitioner recommend an adult provider who is sensitive

