Turning 18: A Checklist for Students With Disabilities and Their Families

California version. Provided free by Transcenders Inc, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit (EIN 99-3771541).

Start at 16 or 17. Do not wait for the birthday. Latest version: transcenders.app/turning-18/

This checklist is a starting point, not a complete list of every program, deadline, or option. It is general information, not legal advice, and not a guarantee of benefits or services. Rules change often, and every program decides eligibility on its own facts. Scan the QR code for the latest version and more resources. Confirm details with the agency listed for each item.

At 18, a student in California generally becomes the decision maker for school, health care, benefits, and money, unless a court has ordered something different.

1. School and your records

- ☐ Know when your school rights transfer. Beginning at least one year before you turn 18, your IEP must include a statement that you have been told your education rights will transfer to you at 18 (34 CFR 300.320(c)). In California, those rights do transfer at 18, unless a court has found the student unable to make educational decisions.
- ☐ Decide who can see school information after 18. After rights transfer, consent and decisions are the student's. If you want a parent or another supporter to keep receiving records or speaking with the school, sign the written consent your school or college asks for.
- ☐ Get your Summary of Performance before you exit. If your special education eligibility ends because you graduate with a regular diploma or reach the maximum age for services, the school must give you a summary of your academic achievement and functional performance, with recommendations for your postsecondary goals (34 CFR 300.305(e)(3)). It helps a college or agency understand your needs, but does not by itself guarantee accommodations, services, or benefits. Each decides on its own, case by case.
- ☐ Keep your own file. Save your most recent IEP, evaluations, and Summary of Performance in a folder you control, on paper and digitally.

2. Help with decisions

- ☐ Look at the least restrictive supports first. In California, options include a supported decision-making agreement (California law recognizes supported decision-making, Welfare and Institutions Code sections 21000 to 21008), a power of attorney, an advance health care directive, a representative payee for benefits.
- ☐ Understand the court option. For an adult in California, the court process is called a conservatorship. (Guardianship in California generally applies to minors.) A conservatorship removes some rights, so courts expect families to consider the less restrictive options first.
- ☐ Ask a qualified attorney early. Talk with a California special needs or disability rights attorney at 16 or 17, so documents are ready before the 18th birthday, not after. Legal aid organizations may help at no cost.

3. Benefits and health coverage

- ☐ SSI: expect an age 18 review. If you receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as a child, Social Security will review your case around age 18 and decide whether you qualify under the adult rules. This is called the age 18 redetermination. Social Security looks at adult medical rules and non-medical rules such as income and resources. Payments do not simply continue because you received SSI as a child. Keep treatment, your IEP or 504 plan, and evaluations current, and watch for Social Security letters. If the answer is no, the letter gives an appeal deadline (generally 60 days). Do not miss it.
- ☐ Ask about benefits on a parent's Social Security record. An unmarried adult whose disability began before age 22 may qualify for benefits on a parent's record if the parent receives Social Security retirement or disability benefits, or died and was insured under Social Security. This is often called a Disabled Adult Child benefit. Ask Social Security directly, because the details depend on the parent's record.

- [ ] Medi-Cal: renew, do not assume. Medi-Cal coverage does not end just because you turn 18, but the county reviews eligibility at renewal (usually once a year). Open county mail right away, return forms by the deadline, and report changes in income, household, or address. Adult income limits for income-based Medi-Cal are lower than children's limits starting at age 19, and other paths, such as SSI-linked or disability-based Medi-Cal, may apply. If you are told you no longer qualify, ask the county to check all Medi-Cal programs and ask about Covered California.
- [ ] Regional center: plan ahead, and know the eligibility rule. If you are a regional center client, your Individual Program Plan (IPP) should plan for adult services, and you can ask about the Self-Determination Program and orientation. If you are not a client, you can apply at any age, but California eligibility requires a qualifying developmental disability that began before age 18, is expected to continue indefinitely, and is a substantial disability. The regional center decides eligibility after assessment.
- [ ] Department of Rehabilitation (DOR): ask while you are still in school. Students ages 16 through 21 enrolled in school or an education program can ask for DOR Student Services: job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, help learning about enrollment options for college or training after high school, workplace readiness training (DOR calls this skills for work), and instruction in self-advocacy. You may have an IEP, a 504 plan, or a disability and still qualify. Adults can apply for DOR vocational rehabilitation services at any time.
- [ ] Families of veterans: check both programs, and check approval first. Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance (VA Chapter 35, or DEA) helps eligible children and spouses of certain veterans. A child generally must be between 18 and 26, and the veteran must meet VA service-connected disability or death criteria. The program of study must be approved for VA benefits. The CalVet College Fee Waiver waives mandatory system-wide tuition and fees at California Community Colleges, CSU, and UC for eligible dependents, in state-supported programs. It does not cover books, housing, parking, or campus fees, and generally does not cover self-supported programs, such as many extended education programs. Apply through your County Veterans Service Office, renew each academic year, and confirm coverage before you enroll or pay.

4. Money, ID, and civic steps

- [ ] Protect savings the right way. If you are eligible (your disability began before age 46), a CalABLE account lets you save in a tax-advantaged account that is partly protected from benefit asset rules. Only money inside the account gets that protection: for SSI, an account balance over $100,000 counts toward the SSI resource limit, and money kept outside the account still counts as usual. A special needs trust is a different tool. Ask a benefits planner or attorney which one fits before you move savings.
- [ ] Get a California state ID card if you do not have a driver license. You will need photo ID for benefits, work, banking, and college.
- [ ] Register to vote. Eligible 16 and 17 year olds in California can pre-register, and the registration becomes active at 18. At 18 you can register if you meet the voting requirements.
- [ ] Selective Service: register on time if required. Almost all men, including male U.S. citizens and male immigrants ages 18 through 25, must register with the Selective Service System within 30 days of turning 18. There are limited exceptions, for example a person who is continually confined to a home, hospital, or institution. Not registering can affect eligibility for some federal jobs, job training, and student aid programs. Check sss.gov for who must register.
- [ ] College: you start the process. Colleges do not use IEPs. The student contacts the campus disability office, provides documentation, and requests accommodations. The college decides what it can approve. Start the summer before you enroll, not after classes begin.

One place to start, always current
Transcenders helps families work through this list: benefits, education, and services for disabled youth moving into adulthood. Missing something? Request a checklist, guide, or topic for us to build next at the latest-version link.
Latest version: transcenders.app/turning-18/
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Latest version

For schools: a paragraph you can paste into your packets. Transcenders Inc is a nonprofit that provides a free Turning 18 checklist and family navigation help for students with disabilities moving into adulthood: benefits, education, and services. Families can find the latest version at transcenders.app/turning-18/. Printed copies may not include later updates. Transcenders is not affiliated with this school district, and the district does not endorse any outside organization.