

What is Travel Training?

Introduction

There are many times when teachers of older special education students are asked questions about activities and experiences that will enhance a student's independency. One of the more important activities that expand a student's safety zone is being able to venture out into the community. Travel Training is a service given to students with special needs that helps them learn everything they need to feel safe and comfortable venturing out. This article deals with the concept and will alert parents to the opportunity of such services.

Travel Training

Travel training is short-term, comprehensive, intensive instruction designed to teach students with disabilities how to travel safely and independently on public transportation. The goal of travel training is to train students to travel independently to a regularly visited destination and back. Specially trained personnel provide the travel training on a one-to-one basis. Students learn travel skills while following a particular route, generally to school or a worksite, and are taught the safest, most direct route. The travel trainer is responsible for making sure the student experiences and understands the realities of public transportation and learns the skills required for safe and independent travel to refer to a program that provides instruction in travel skills to individuals with any disability except visual impairment. Individuals who have a visual impairment receive travel training from orientation and mobility specialists. Travel trainers have the task of understanding how different disabilities affect a person's ability to travel independently, and devising customized strategies to teach travel skills that address the specific needs of people with those disabilities.

Individuals who need assistance to learn the public transportation system can receive one or both of the following types of travel training (GATRA, 2003):

Destination Travel Training. This type of training teaches the individual to go to and from a specific destination, usually on a daily basis.

General Travel Training. This type of training provides the individual with more complex instructions. The individual is taught to use the bus and other public transportation for general travel, selecting destinations of his/her choice. Included in this training is learning to read the bus and other public transportation schedules.

Interest in travel training has increased in the 1990s. Recently enacted federal legislation clearly intends to ensure that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate independently and successfully in society. Of significance are the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the 1990 passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which reauthorized and amended Public Law 94-142.

The ADA recognizes the critical role that public transportation plays in the lives of many people and mandates that public transit systems become accessible to people who have disabilities and that paratransit services are available and accessible to individuals who are unable to use public transportation. In recognition of the ADA, architectural barriers are being removed, new transit vehicles are being purchased, equipment is being modified, paratransit certification and eligibility practices are being established, and transit personnel are being trained to provide service to people who have disabilities. Nationwide, the transit industry is expecting to serve increasing numbers of individuals who have disabilities.

Together, the ADA and the IDEA provide individuals with disabilities, their families, school systems, service providers, community agencies, and transit systems with compelling incentives to work together to ensure that students learn how to use accessible transportation.

Providing students with travel training can reduce expenses for school districts, local governments, transit providers, agencies, or any organization that provides transportation. The cost of using public transportation is significantly less than the cost of using a contracted private car or private bus service. While the cost of training a student can be substantial, in the long run that cost is a worthwhile investment, since the student will gain independence and henceforth will assume responsibility for the cost of using public transportation.

Skills Required for Traveling Independently

Experienced travel trainers agree that simply teaching students to follow a route is not enough to ensure safe travel. A quality travel training program will require students to demonstrate certain skills before travel training in real life situations begins and will require students to practice certain skills with 100% consistency before they can be recommended for independent travel. For instance, Pierce Transit's Training Program (2003) consists of four components:

- General Instruction – basic orientation to the mechanics of the bus system, fare structure, reading a schedule, calling a Customer Service Representative for a trip plan, and one-on-one training for specific trips.
- Group Orientation – basic orientation to the mechanics of the bus system, fare structure, reading a schedule, calling a Customer Service Representative for a trip plan in a group setting.
- Mobility Training – teaches participant to utilize the fixed route system with a mobility device
- Destination Training – a participant is trained to travel to specific destinations gaining the knowledge to use the fixed route system for some or all of their needs.

Before being allowed to enter travel training, students should possess three general skills. These are:

- An awareness of personal space, meaning a clear idea of where their personal space ends and that of others begins.
- An awareness of their environment.
- The ability to recognize and respond to danger.

Before being allowed to travel independently, students should demonstrate a number of other skills. Specifically, they should be able to:

- cross streets safely, with and without traffic signals
- board the correct bus or subway
- recognize and disembark at the correct destination
- make decisions
- initiate actions
- recognize the need for assistance and request help from an appropriate source
- follow directions
- recognize and avoid dangerous situations and obstacles
- maintain appropriate behavior
- handle unexpected situations, such as re-routed buses or subways, or getting lost

- deal appropriately with strangers

Before graduating from a travel training program, students must demonstrate mastery of these skills and employ them with 100% consistency. Although students find it useful to be able to read, tell time, and calculate simple math, these skills are not mandatory for independent travel or for travel training, and no individual should be denied training if she or he lacks these skills. A good travel training program accounts for a student's disabilities while making full use of a student's abilities.