

Hannah's next steps

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Everything is moving along smoothly in Hannah's life. She is in year 8 at a local high school along with her friends from primary school. She is in a mainstream class with students her age. The school is being supportive. Hannah is happy.

This is an amazing achievement for Hannah.

Hannah's school experiences have been broad and rich. From the beginning, we made it clear that the most important part of school for Hannah would be to develop her communication skills and be involved in all areas of school life. The school listened and understood that it was important for Hannah to have the same opportunity as everyone else to see what she enjoys, to try new things, to have opportunities for different kinds of social interaction.

Hannah has been on excursions to the beach, on overnight camps, she has been in dance eisteddfods, she is in the year 8 band, she takes part in the swimming carnival and in the athletics carnival. Everyone finds a way for her to take part.

For all of Hannah's life, the focus of our family has been on achieving this kind of school experience – on starting school, being well included in school and now on the transition from primary to high school.

We are beyond pleased to see the positive results of the thinking and planning.

But we know that this is not the time to become complacent. Now is the time we need to start thinking about life after school.

In starting this process of consideration, we have gone back to basics. What do we know about Hannah? What would be important for any girl of her age?

We have been doing lots of talking about Hannah's future so that it's not just my husband and I who are deciding. We've been including Hannah's brothers and family friends.

We have also attempted to think long term. Where will Hannah live and how will she be spending her days?

Hannah has always done what the rest of the family has done – what her brothers and their partners do. Along with her school experience, this has exposed her to a range of life experiences and contexts. It has helped her develop her sense of who she is.

We know that Hannah loves people. She is a social person. She enjoys being in the town engaging with people her age. She also loves shopping.

One small thing we have started doing is making sure that we go to town regularly – to shops where young people are working. We make a point to stop and say hello – to engage. We go to the same shops.

This is giving Hannah the pleasure of going shopping, the experience of a work setting as well as interaction with other young people. It is also helping her to be better known in her community.

This is particularly important as one idea we are tossing around is starting a small business in the main part of town. Given Hannah's love of people and shops, this makes sense. We are still thinking about the exact form of the business but it is clear that it should be one that involves interacting with people.

Even though it is a long way off, we are also starting to plan for where Hannah will live. We know she will be happiest if she is living with other people her age and if she is close to action. We are also thinking it would be helpful to continue to live in the community where she grew up so that people will know her.

Regarding the kind of home – it will be one that is in a location where other people want to live. This will be good for Hannah and make it easier for her to attract house mates who will want to share with her. It will also make social interactions more likely.

We have always had informal networks of support but we are now thinking about having something a bit more formal. We will probably start with a gathering that brings together Hannah's extended family to start the conversation about our thinking for her future.

If we start planning and acting now, it will give Hannah the best chance to have the kind of life that suits her and for us to feel confident and unrushed.

We don't know what the future will hold but we hope that Hannah's next steps will include the kinds of experiences that any young woman would want – friends, family, stimulation, a good place to live, travel and, of course, shopping.



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