

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Disabled Adult Child (DAC) Benefits: The Social Security Upgrade Most Families Miss

Your adult child may be entitled to Social Security benefits based on your earnings record, not theirs, the moment you retire, become disabled, or die. Most families never hear the term until it's almost too late to plan around it.

BY JIM PALASTY · 11 MIN READ · A BENEFIT MOST FAMILIES DISCOVER BY ACCIDENT

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PERCENT OF A PARENT'S SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFIT A DAC AWARD TYPICALLY PAYS

A Disabled Adult Child benefit typically pays 50 percent of the parent's Primary Insurance Amount, or up to 75 percent if the parent is deceased. It comes with Medicare, not just Medicaid.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

SSI alone caps out low

Many Level 2 and 3 autistic adults rely on SSI, a means-tested benefit with a hard \$2,000 asset limit and Medicaid only.



STEP 2

DAC pays from a parent's record

When a parent retires, becomes disabled, or dies, a disabled adult child can collect based on that parent's earnings history instead.



STEP 3

The eligibility bridge starts early

Establishing an SSI disability determination at 18, even for a modest amount, creates the documented finding DAC eligibility later depends on.

DAC versus SSI, side by side

Funding source	DAC: parent's SS record. SSI: general federal funds
Asset test	DAC: none. SSI: \$2,000 limit
Health coverage	DAC: Medicare. SSI: Medicaid
Marriage impact	DAC: usually lost if married to a non-beneficiary
Trigger event	DAC: parent's retirement, disability, or death

THE LETTER THAT DOUBLED HER SON'S BENEFIT

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Carla's son had received a modest SSI payment since he was 18, and Carla assumed that was simply the amount he'd always get. When Carla filed for her own Social Security retirement at 62, a caseworker mentioned DAC almost in passing. Her son's benefit, recalculated from her earnings record, came out to roughly double his prior SSI payment, and Medicare replaced Medicaid as his primary coverage within months.

NOBODY HAD EVER MENTIONED THE WORD DAC TO HER IN OVER A DECADE. ONE CASEWORKER FINALLY DID, AND IT CHANGED EVERYTHING.

What matters, at a glance

DAC pays more than SSI, often

Fifty percent of a parent's benefit, or 75 percent if deceased, frequently exceeds a typical SSI payment by a significant margin.

Medicare, not just Medicaid

DAC eligibility brings Medicare coverage, a meaningfully different benefit than SSI's Medicaid-only pathway.

No asset test, but a marriage trap exists

DAC has no \$2,000 asset limit, unlike SSI. But a DAC who marries a non-beneficiary typically loses DAC benefits entirely.

The SSI-to-DAC bridge

Establishing disability determination through SSI at 18 creates the documented finding DAC eligibility relies on later.

The transition needs benefits counseling

When a parent retires and triggers a shift from SSI to DAC, Medicaid status can change too. Get counseling before the parent files.

No work history required

Unlike standard Social Security benefits, DAC doesn't require the adult child to have built their own earnings record.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

☐ Your adult child's SSI disability determination documentation

☐ Confirmation that disability onset occurred before age 22

☐ Your own Social Security earnings record and estimated benefit

☐ Contact information for a benefits counselor (WIPA program)

☐ A plan for the Medicaid-to-Medicare transition timeline

YOUR MOVE

When you're planning ahead for this transition, here is what to do

1

Confirm your adult child has an SSI disability determination on file.

2

Ask specifically whether the disability onset was before age 22.

3

Before you file for your own Social Security, request benefits counseling.

4

Ask how the SSI-to-DAC transition will affect Medicaid coverage.

5

Understand the marriage rule if your adult child has a partner.

6

File the DAC application promptly once your qualifying event occurs.

A disability determination at 18 isn't just about the SSI check. It's the paperwork that makes DAC possible decades later.

SOCIAL SECURITY AND BENEFITS PLANNING RESOURCES

The Social Security Administration's Disabled Adult Child provision (ssa.gov) governs DAC eligibility, applications, and the marriage rule.

Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) programs offer free benefits counseling on the SSI-to-DAC transition, and the Special Needs Alliance can advise on coordinating DAC with trusts and ABLE accounts.

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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