Supporting Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders through Postsecondary Transition

Contributed by Anna Merrill, Graduate Assistant

As rates of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) continue to rise not only are more and more students in public schools affected by an ASD, but more and more will be exiting public schools in to the workforce or postsecondary education. Calculated projections predict there will be 747,124 adults over 22 years old with an ASD in 2030; numbers that reflect a 625% increase from 2010 (Rogers, 2011). There is evidence that high-functioning young adults with an ASD, in particular, may fall through the cracks of the education system when success after schooling is considered. High-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger’s Syndrome includes individuals with ASD that have average (or above average) intellectual ability (Hartley & Sikora, 2009). The stark difference between cognitive skills and social skills often results in increased levels of loneliness and isolation in this population because of their desire to form meaningful social relationships, but their inability to do so (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003). Adolescents on the high end of the spectrum often participate in general education due to their intellectual capabilities and the decision is often made to put them on the “diploma track” to graduate from high school. Earning a diploma is an impressive and well-earned accomplishment for these students, however there is room for concern regarding their future beyond graduation.

Generally speaking, individuals with ASD have a hard time finding employment and the number of young adults with ASD searching for employment just continues to rise. The number of youth with ASD who closed out of Vocational Rehabilitation programs tripled between 2003 and 2008 (Smith & Lugas, 2010). When comparing the outcomes between young adults with ASD and young adults with other disabilities the numbers can be deceiving if not examined closely. While 63% of young adults with ASD who received VR employment services exited the VR system with employment, compared to 55.6% of individuals with other disabilities, young adults with ASD are working on average eight hours less a week and earning $120 less per week than individuals with other disabilities successfully exiting VR programs (Smith & Lugas, 2010). The inverse relationship between the rate of employment and hours worked and wages earned has many possible explanations that require further investigation. For example, it could be that low-paying jobs with limited hours are easier to find and require fewer skills. It could also be that these jobs tend to be more forgiving of the problematic behaviors we see in individuals with ASD (Cimera & Cowan, 2009).

In this article I have provided information and resources concerning several topics relevant to supporting an individual with ASD through the transition from school toward postsecondary goals. First, there is a discussion of predictors of positive transition including
teaching social skills, promoting self-advocacy skills, encouraging work experiences, and enhancing collaboration between schools, families and counselors. Next, for use in the school setting there are tips for writing transition IEP goals for a student with ASD. Third, is a discussion of the factors to consider when making the choice between employment or postsecondary education. Finally, there is a timeline for supporting an individual with ASD from diagnosis to adulthood. It is never too early to consider what can be done to ensure that all individuals with ASD move closer to a meaningful adult life.

To Learn More About Specific Topics Regarding Transition See Below:

1. Predictors of Positive Transition
2. Tips for Writing Transition IEP goals
3. Employment or College?
4. Timeline for Supporting an Individual with ASD Through Transition

Resources for Supporting Individuals on the Autism Spectrum through Transition


Indiana Secondary Transition Resource Center: [www.iidc.indiana.edu/instrc](http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/instrc).
Predictors of Positive Transition

1) Social Skills Intervention

Communication and social deficits are the biggest obstacle to successful employment of individuals with ASD (Hendricks, 2010). For example, difficulties with communication may include issues with understanding and reading facial expressions, inappropriate tone of voice, asking too many questions, difficulty understanding directions, and an inability to “read between the lines.” Similarly, difficulties in social impairment and independent-living skills can also get in the way of successful employment outcomes for individuals with ASD. This may include things like inappropriate hygiene, inability to follow social rules such as acting inappropriately with individuals of the opposite sex, difficulty understanding affect, and wanting to work alone. Difficulties with communication and social functioning can be an issue in the hiring process as well, for example, when interviewing with a potential employer.

Evidence-based practices for teaching social skills such as social narratives, peer mediated instruction and intervention, social skills groups, and video modeling are all supported by The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders. However, individuals working to teach social skills need to read up on which intervention strategy may best meet the needs for the individual they are working with and is most feasible with resources available to them. For example, video self-modeling is more accessible than ever with the presence of iPads, and other hand held devices capable of recording video, in many schools and can be very successful in teaching simple social and adaptive skills such as joining in during conversation or table manners.

Resources


Teaching Self–Advocacy

When a student exits the school setting it is imperative that they have learned how to talk about their diagnosis. Stephen Shore (2004) defines self-advocacy as, “Knowing when and how to approach others to negotiate desired goals, and to build better mutual understanding and trust, fulfillment, and productivity.” This means that when entering the work force the student is ready and able to ask for what they need to be successful. This may include teaching:

- What it means to have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (Strengths and Weaknesses)
- When and How to Self-Disclose (and When Not to!)
- When and How to ask for Accommodations
- The ins and outs of the Americans with Disabilities Act
By incorporating these lessons into a transition plan, the student is armed with the tools they need to advocate for themselves. It may be useful to include the student in the IEP process as well as a way of beginning to empower them to identify and understand their goals for the future.

**Resources**


The Integrated Self-Advocacy Curriculum:  


2) Career Awareness and Work Experiences

Exposure to different careers and life in the workplace helps to prepare all students for successful employment. Providing exposure to different careers and work experiences helps students with ASD to learn and practice employability skills in a hands-on setting. By taking part in experiences such as shadowing current employees, interning, or community-based employment, students can explore their own personal career goals and learn valuable skills that can lead to integrated or supported employment in the future. Students should be encouraged to explore their career interests by researching career options online.

**Resources**

Website designed to help individuals with ASD explore career interests, obtain employment, and maintain employment, Do2Learn Job TIPS: http://www.do2learn.com/JobTIPS/index.html.

Tool for Career Exploration, O'Net Online: http://www.onetonline.org/.

Online portal to connect job seekers with disabilities to employers, Getting Hired: http://www.gettinghired.com/.

3) School, Counselor, and Parental Collaboration

In 2004, the United States government updated the definition of transition services. “The term ‘transition services’ means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that:

- Is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment); continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;
- Is based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and
• Includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation."

[34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)]

Transition services are defined as a coordinated set of activities. In order to fulfill the objectives of successful transition, collaboration between multiple parties is essential. Communication between the student, the parents, the teachers, the vocational rehabilitation counselor, the service provider, and any other important people in the life of the student is the only way to ensure a seamless transition. It should also be understood that the process is continuous throughout middle and high school and preferably even before middle school. Federally, transition planning must begin when the student turns 16, but the age does vary by state. However, it is never too early to begin considering postsecondary goals and tailoring a student's education to meet their individual needs.
**Tips for Writing Transition IEP Goals**

One of the most important things to remember when thinking about the transition of a student with ASD is to consider the ultimate goal and how you are preparing that student for achieving that goal. One way in which the public education system has ensured that schools support transition is through the creation of transition goals for students within the Individual Education Program (IEP). Federal legislation requires that no later than when the child turns 16 (although age requirements vary by state) the IEP must include:

1) Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills; and

2) The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals.

**Tip 1: Talk to the Student**

When the IEP team begins formulating the transition goals the first step is always to *ask the student!* It may seem obvious, but sometimes teams can forget that the goals should be based on the dreams of the student - not their teachers or parents. Here are some examples of questions you may want to ask a student regarding employment, postsecondary education, and independent living.

**Employment**

- What kind of work would you like to do?
- What kind of training will you need for that work?
- What kind of environment would you enjoy working in?
- Will you need any supports on the job?

**Postsecondary Education**

- Are you interested in pursuing higher education after you leave high school?
- Have you investigated what types of colleges or universities would match your interests/needs/environment?
- What supports will you need to succeed in a postsecondary academic environment?

**Independent Living**

- Where would you like to live (with your family, on your own, with a friend)?
- What kind of skills will need to make it happen (cooking, cleaning, using transportation)?
- How will you take care of your health needs?
- How will you manage financially?

**Tip 2: Draft some Goals as a Team**

Once you have gathered information from the student and have a clear picture on the vision for their future it is time to start actually writing goals. The goal does not need to be perfect the first time you write it. The entire IEP team should be involved in crafting some goals that can then be
reviewed by the team and revised. Once the team has a list of goals consider the following questions as you revise:

- Can the goals be measured?
- Are the goals written to take place after the student graduates from school?
- Are there annual IEP goals that reasonably enable the student to meet the postsecondary goal (s) or make progress toward meeting the goal (s)?
- Are there transition services in the IEP that focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child to facilitate his or her movement from school to post-school?

Tip 3: Finalize the Goals and Match Them to Transition Services

Once the team has developed IEP goals that everyone is confident reflects the postsecondary goals of the student it is important to address what services will be needed to support that student meeting their goals. Consider the table below as a guide for what this might look like.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IEP Goal</th>
<th>Transition Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John will enroll at Ocean County Community College</td>
<td>Instruction in word processing, tutoring in reading comprehension strategies, self-monitoring instruction related to on-task behavior, self-advocacy training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John will attain a part-time position in a community retail environment independently</td>
<td>Travel instruction, hygiene instruction, instruction in functional math skills, personal banking instruction, social skills instruction tailored to school and work settings, community based instruction at Wal-Mart to introduce retail employment skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upon completion of high school, John will be able to use public transportation, including the public bus system</td>
<td>Instruction on community safety skills, travel instruction, math instruction related to money usage, literacy instruction related to word identification, instruction related to community safety and self-defense at the YMCA, math instruction related to telling time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center.
Employment or College?

In the process of preparing for transition it becomes important to examine what goals match with the abilities and needs of an individual with ASD. There is no one way to determine if college or employment is a better match for any particular student and the same is true for students on the spectrum.

Employment

If employment is the goal of a successful transition for a student with ASD, then the first step is to explore the individual’s interests, talents and skills. What would an ideal job environment look like to them? The next step is to formulate a list of realistic career goals. Many youth with ASD may want to be a video game developer or work on the NASA space station, but understanding the skills required to achieve such a job, and the number of jobs that exist, is important. Consider how you can use student’s interests to formulate career goals that match their interests but are realistically attainable. For example, can a student who wants to be a video game developer work in a store where video games are sold? Once the student has identified potential employers they will need guidance through the applying and interviewing process. When considering the questions asked in an interview, an individual with ASD may need coaching on how to answer questions about why they would like to work for their employer or how to describe their individual strengths and weaknesses. This is also an important time to discuss whether or not they would like to disclose their ASD to their employer. Discussing the pros and cons of doing so is important so that the individual can make this important decision.

Resources Regarding Transition to Employment


College

If a student is considering moving on to a college environment there are many important features that will be different from high school. For example, in college:

- Students’ schedules vary and usually have large chunks of unstructured time.
- Assignments and exams are significantly more challenging and students are required to seek out help on their own if needed.
- Course materials cannot be modified.
• Professors are only required to make *reasonable* accommodations.
• Parents have limited to no rights.

There is a distinct difference between a student’s education before college and during college. In high school, receiving education is a student's legal *right*. In college, you must apply, pay tuition, and pass entrance exams. School districts are also responsible for identifying disabilities, but in college it is the student’s responsibility to self-disclose and provide documentation of their disability. When they arrive on campus they will need to contact the office for students with disabilities to complete paperwork to receive accommodations. Also remember that the first step to choosing college programs to apply is to choose a career goal. Once a career goal has been chosen this can guide choices about the education required to reach that goal. A junior or community college program will cost less money and offer a smaller campus and smaller classes. However, a four-year degree may open the door to more career opportunities upon graduation.

**Resources Regarding Transition to College**


References


The journey toward transition begins when a child receives a diagnosis of ASD and continues into adulthood. Throughout the child’s development, it is important to continue reminding ourselves of the ultimate destination. Through encouraging independence and curiosity throughout the lifespan, we are preparing individuals for success as they move closer to their postsecondary goals and a meaningful adult life.

**TIMELINE FOR SUPPORTING AN INDIVIDUAL WITH ASD THROUGH TRANSITION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18 months - 5 years old</th>
<th>6-14 years old</th>
<th>14-15 years old</th>
<th>15-17 years old</th>
<th>18-21 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obtain ASD diagnosis</td>
<td>Support academic skills and identify academic strengths</td>
<td>Meet with case conference (or IEP team) to create transition goals (In Indiana, a team must be in place beginning at age 14)</td>
<td>Discuss Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) eligibility, applying for VR, and VR’s support role</td>
<td>Obtain State ID or Driver’s License</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apply for Medicaid Waiver</td>
<td>Teach functional skills when developmentally appropriate in school and at home (Examples: sorting items, social skills, taking turns, cooking, doing laundry)</td>
<td>Begin forming transition goals and discussing life after high school (Ask the student)</td>
<td>Identify school programs or workplaces that are a good match for the student’s goals and abilities</td>
<td>Register to vote</td>
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<tr>
<td>Note: Diagnosis can take place at any age. Since waiting lists for waiver and waiver services can extend for years, it is best to apply for the waiver as soon as diagnosis occurs, whether that happens at 2 or 17.</td>
<td>Foster curiosity and the development of unique interests</td>
<td>Introduce self-advocacy skills</td>
<td>Seek out volunteer and work experiences</td>
<td>If male, register for selective service (must be registered before the age of 25)</td>
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<td>Learn to use assistive technology if applicable</td>
<td>Continue practicing functional social skills — work toward independence (Examples: grocery shopping, taking public transit, menu planning, budgeting money, hygiene)</td>
<td>Determine if the student is working toward a diploma (if so, what kind) or certificate</td>
<td>Apply for Medicaid Disability through a local Division of Family Resource or Department of Children and Families Office</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage involvement in age appropriate recreational activities (Examples: swimming, bike riding, and martial arts)</td>
<td>Find opportunities for community involvement (Examples: volunteer positions, job shadowing, or extracurricular activities)</td>
<td>Apply for Social Security benefits in student’s name (Application should be submitted prior to student turning 18)</td>
<td>Submit application to VR (Application should be submitted during the student’s final year in school)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Meet with your state’s Developmental Disabilities Services Office to discuss what supports might be available (In Indiana: Bureau of Developmental Disabilities Services (BDDS))</td>
<td>Continue practicing social and functional skills during the school day and at home</td>
<td>After VR eligibility is established, select employment provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family should begin discussing where the student wants to live after high school</td>
<td>Encourage independence and reduce prompting whenever possible</td>
<td>With VR and employment provider, create employment plan based on interests and strengths</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Parents should decide whether they will apply for guardianship (Application must be completed before the child turns 18)</td>
<td>Promote financial literacy (Review credit cards, debt, taxes, etc.)</td>
<td>Prepare for interviews and complete applications for employment or colleges/training programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage independence when practicing social and functional skills</td>
<td>Family should begin discussing where the student wants to live after high school</td>
<td>Practice self-disclosure of disability for employment purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parents should decide whether they will apply for guardianship (Application must be completed before the child turns 18)</td>
<td>Teach responsibility and self-advocacy for health care (taking medications, talking with a doctor, making and keeping appointments)</td>
<td>Encourage independence when practicing social and functional skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>