

Preparing for the Transition to College for a Student with ASD

Increasing numbers of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders are finding it possible to attend higher education following high school. Parents and professionals have a responsibility to help make the transition to college as successful as possible for these students. Preparation is the key to a successful transition, not only for students on the autism spectrum but for any student with a disability. If possible, preparation should start early when the student, parents, and educators first realize that higher education could be an option.

As part of this preparation process, students and their parents need to learn about all the different options that are available for higher education. Students can choose between community colleges, technical schools, and private or public universities. Depending on the individual needs of the student, they may consider attending college part-time or full-time, living on campus or commuting to school. Online courses and video courses are also available at some colleges. There are many different options available and all should be explored.

Self-Advocacy and Self-Awareness

One of the most dramatic changes for the student with a disability entering college is the new emphasis on self-advocacy. A student on the autism spectrum in college who is eighteen years old or older is legally considered an adult, and is treated as such. Students are responsible for making their own decisions and choices related to their academics. Students are expected to initiate requests for accommodations if needed. If the student is struggling in a class, they are expected to approach the professor and ask for help. Many students with ASD may have difficulty with these new self-advocacy responsibilities.

To be a good self-advocate, a student should have some understanding about their disability and how it affects their learning, their communication with others, and their ability to be independent. They also need to understand their personal strengths and challenges. When they ask for help, they should be able to explain why they need that help. The more experience the student can have with asking for help and explaining their disability when younger, the more comfortable they will be when self-advocating as an adult.

There are ways that we can help prepare a student for this new self-advocacy role. Throughout the earlier years of school and especially in high school, the student should be involved in his or her Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings at whatever level is possible. Being involved as a member of the team can help students understand more about their disability, their strengths and weaknesses, and how the autism may affect their learning. Practicing speaking up about their needs, what they enjoy and what is challenging, helps prepare students for advocating for themselves in college. The level of participation the student has in their school meetings will vary, depending on the student's age and the individual needs of that student. But whatever level of participation the student has can be beneficial. The Transition Plan process during high school is another excellent opportunity for students to practice their self-

advocacy skills. It is very important that the student plays an active role in the Transition Plan meeting and be able to express his or her dreams and plans for the future.

Another way to build self-advocacy skills is to provide opportunities for the student to communicate with others. Students can be given tasks that require them to initiate communications with teachers or other school personnel. Delivering attendance reports, volunteering on campus, or assisting teachers can increase the student's self-esteem and at the same time provide helpful practice in communicating with others.

Organizational Skills

In addition to improving self-advocacy skills, preparation for college should include learning academic skills that will help the student be successful at the college level. It is important in middle and high school to build on the student's organizational skills and independent working skills. They need to learn how to break up a lengthy assignment into manageable parts and how to organize their time appropriately to complete the task. Basic skills such as key boarding, note taking, and computer skills are all necessary for college students.

When deciding if college is an appropriate option for the student, parents and the student should consider the differences between high school and college academics. They should understand that in college although they will spend fewer hours in actual classes during the week, the student would be required to work more hours on the academics outside of the classroom. The student must be able to keep up with course work independently and initiate requests for help when they are struggling academically. Attending college is considered a privilege. Schools do not have to serve a student if they are not able to meet the academic criteria required to be a student of the college.

There is help available for the student with a disability who may have difficulty with the academics at the college level. Many of the academic accommodations available at the high school level, such as extended time for testing and separate setting for testing, are also available for college students. There are accommodations to help students who struggle with note taking such as providing hard copies of notes, note takers, and tape recording lectures. The process to receive accommodations typically involves the student and the Disabilities Services provider from the college. They decide together what accommodations the student may need. Current documentation about the disability that defends the need for these accommodations must be presented to the Disabilities Services Office.

Preparing Families

Except for their involvement in providing the necessary documentation, parents are often not a part of the accommodations process. They do not communicate with professors and often have no idea how their son or daughter is doing academically. Many parents are surprised by this significant change that takes place in their role once their son or daughter enters college. A parent often goes from being a very involved advocate for their child throughout their earlier years of school, to an "advisor" to their adult child. This is a difficult transition for most parents. This transition can be easier if parents are aware of the differences at the college level and the limitations on parent involvement in

that setting. Anything educators can do to prepare parents for this change can be very helpful.

Educators can also help prepare parents for the possibility that for some students with ASD, the academics may not be the most difficult part of college. Often more challenging are issues related to self-care, staying safe, and dealing with the many details of daily life on a college campus. While academic skills are important, it is equally as important for students to learn the functional skills that are crucial for survival as an adult. The primary responsibility for teaching these functional skills will fall on the family. Families don't always realize the importance of teaching these skills early, before the student transitions to college.

Whether the student goes to college or to work, he or she will need to have functional skills to be as independent as possible. Students should be able to prepare meals or find places to eat. They will need to handle their own finances and know how to use a credit card for making purchases. If they live on a college campus they will need to understand the dormitory rules, deal with fire drills, use communal bathrooms, and get along with other students living in the dorm. They will need to know how to take care of themselves if they get sick and where they should go for medical attention. Students will also have to take care of their personal hygiene and their laundry. If students have not previously practiced some of these functional skills at home or in the community, they may have an especially difficult time.

In closing, please know how important your work is with students on the autism spectrum and their families. Being able to attend college is an incredible accomplishment for these students. Without the wonderful efforts of professionals and teachers working with these students, many of them would not have the opportunity to attend college. Thank you for all you do and for all the ways you can help prepare these students for success at the college level.