

“**Autism** is a disorder of neural development characterized by impaired social interaction and communication, and by restricted and repetitive behavior. These signs all begin before a child is three years old. Autism affects information processing in the brain by altering how nerve cells and their synapses connect and organize; how this occurs is not well understood. It is one of three recognized disorders in the autism spectrum (ASDs), the other two being Asperger syndrome, which lacks delays in cognitive development and language, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (commonly abbreviated as PDD-NOS), which is diagnosed when the full set of criteria for autism or Asperger syndrome are not met”.

(Wikipedia, p.1) Someone with autism can often appear virtually like any other confident person for much of the time but are left to be taken advantage of simply because others failed to grasp the full symptoms of their disability or have used it as an excuse to exploit their weakness.

(Fleisher, p. 19)

For most high school students, getting into the “right” college is what they worry about most. For a high school student with autism, the number of “changes” that they will go through after school is their biggest fear. For the past 13 years of their life they knew that their daily schedule consisted of getting up and getting ready for school. In elementary school, they were in the same classroom for the majority of the day. In middle school, they began to switch classes, but had the same classes for the entire year. In high school, they may not have had the same classes for the year, but their classes were contained within the same building and they had guidance from a special education teacher during their career. Now that high school is done, what will they do? College? Job? Independent living? Social relationships? Health support?

These are just a few of the challenging areas that an individual on the autistic spectrum and their families must face after high school.

“In the next decade, 4 million people will be diagnosed with Autism according to the National Autism Society”. Out of those diagnosed, eighty percent of those between the ages of 19 and thirty will live at home with their families”. (Goshorn, 2009)

“Statistics also show that 3% of individuals on the autistic spectrum (AS) are able to live independently and are self supporting”. (Geigerman, p. 1) So how can families with children who are considered to be high functioning individuals on the AS prepare their child for the world after high school and possible independent living or semi-independent living? Is this something that they need to do on their own or are there resources out there for them? According to the Autism Society, these issues should be addressed in the students IEP as soon as they enter high school. “The federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), requires that schools are to develop and annually update a students transition plan by the age of 14 (Baker, p. 7) and transition plans be included in a student’s IEP by the time he or she is 16”. (Autism Society, p. 1) “The purpose of transition services is to prepare the child to live on their own. The transition plan is based on the students needs, preferences, and interests. (Baker, p. 8) Services must be provided through the age of 21 or until the goals and objectives are met”. (Sherman, p. 1)

The first step in planning the transition from high school to “adult life” is to set goals for the individual. Will the individual obtain a higher education such as college or join the workforce after graduating from high school? If they attend college, will they attend a four year university or a community college? Will they live at home, on campus, or independently not on campus? (Autism Society, p. 2) Many colleges and universities are offering accommodations to students

on the AS but where do parents begin to look for these accommodations and what accommodations can be made? This is the most important step, as it sets the future for a student on the AS, and it can help prepare them for lifelong skills to live independently even after they complete college.

If a student on the AS decides that they would like to attend college, a post-secondary portfolio should be developed. This should include the child's study team records, which would include their IEP's, and a copy of the WAIS-R (Wechsler Adult Scales of Intelligence) or another form of familiar testing. (Baker, p. 34) For some, it may be best to consider a community college or a smaller school with more individual attention, as well as consider your child's level of participation. (Palmer, p. 12) But if your child decides to attend a college or university and live on campus, then the next step that the child's family needs to do is research the different colleges and universities to find out what accommodations can be made for a student with a disability. The internet is a wonderful source to find out what is offered. In doing a search, I found one website that listed a large number of colleges/universities. Most of them offered individual dorm rooms, help with time management and organization, and how to budget money. (Laprsperner) Talk to your child about the different expectations with high school academics and college academics. Even though many of the colleges/universities on the list I found offer a number of accommodations for a student on the AS, an autistic young adult living on a college campus still needs to know the rules of the dorm, where to find their meals, what to do if they get sick. They will be responsible for their own personal hygiene and laundry. It is very important to practice these skills, along with taking several tours of the college/university, before the student is living independently on campus. (Autism Society of NC, p. 3) When the student starts classes, they need to be upfront with their professors and let them know that they are on the AS. Additional help may be given by the professor or they may be able to lead the

student in to the proper place to go for it. (Rudy, p. 1) Regardless of whether they attend a college or university, live at home, or on or off campus, great care will need to be given to help manage the workload. (Fleisher, p. 16) If they do live at home, they will also need important skills so that they can live independently. The paragraph that follows will list the important areas that will need to be taken into consideration if the autistic child does decide to live independently after attending a college or university.

If your child chooses to join the workforce and live independently, there again are several things that need to be done before the autistic person does join the workforce. One of the first things is in regards to transportation. Is your child capable of driving themselves to and from work or can they take public transportation? If they take public transportation, such as a bus, will they feel comfortable or will it cause other problems to arise? Another option would be to have your child “buddy” up with another person to drive with to and from work. Transportation will help determine where the autistic person lives and works. The next step to look at is healthcare. Once an autistic young adult turns 18 they should apply for Medicaid through the state. Then after they apply for Medicaid, they should also apply for a case worker or service coordinator. This person can help the autistic young adult and their family with any questions and additional services they might be eligible for. (Goshorn, 2009) The next step would be, if they are able to live fully independent, what they will need to feel comfortable. For example, would they be better to live in a community that teaches them life skills before they live by themselves completely independent? Or are they high functioning enough to where they could live independently on their own? (Sherman, p. 2) Other skills that need to be taught, that are not just basic life skills, are banking, making appointments, and grocery shopping. These three things should also be considered when looking at where they will live and what their

transportation will be. Banking is something that can be included in the student's high school IEP goals to ensure mastery of this skill. During a child's teen years, teach them how to make appointments. Take them to the store with you and show them different foods that can go in the pantry, freezer, and refrigerator. Teach them how to cook four to five simple meals that they can make on their own. (Geigerman)

In conclusion, whether a student on the higher function end of the AS decides to go to a college or university after high school or join the workforce, it is important for their parents to teach them the skills they will need to be as successful as possible. In both cases, teaching life skills such as cooking, medical care, and banking are necessary. It is important for the autistic person to be open and upfront with their professors and supervisors about their disability because they may be able to offer them additional help in different areas or point them in the right places to go.

Parents of an autistic student should never feel alone and they should know that there are hundreds of resources available to them. The starting point is with the student's high school IEP. Set goals for your child and do not be afraid to speak up as to what you think your child is capable of. You are, after all, your child's number one advocate!

Since I have a son with PDD-NOS, which is on the AS, I found all of this information very useful and interesting because he will be a sophomore this coming school year and will also turn 16. As much as I try to educate myself, I must admit that this topic was not something that I really thought of until now. I now know how much I need to prepare him for the outside world; whether he chooses to live independently or at home while he attends college, because he is very high functioning and I know that some day he will be on his own.