

Topic Areas to Consider When Planning Transition From High School to Postsecondary Education for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

For many individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attending and completing postsecondary education is a viable option. However, success in postsecondary education for these individuals may require more planning and ongoing support than students without an ASD. This article provides educators and transition support personnel with a range of topics to consider when working with students with ASD and their families to develop a comprehensive transition plan. These topic areas include career exploration, academic goal setting and preparation, assessing and knowing learning styles, self-advocacy skills, reasonable accommodations, academic supports, interagency collaboration, technology, and time management skills.

Keywords

postsecondary education transition, autism spectrum disorders

For many individuals with an autism spectrum disorders (ASD), attending and completing postsecondary education is a viable option. However, success in postsecondary education for these individuals may require extensive planning and ongoing support because of underlying issues directly related to the individuals' disabilities—specifically delays in communication, social interaction, and behavior. Browning, Osborne, and Reed (2009) indicated that the transition from high school to life after high school leaves many individuals with ASD, and their parents, without *any* support. The authors suggest this may be because of the lack of a functional and informed plan to guide the students through the transition process. In this article, educators and transition support personnel will be provided with a range of topic areas to consider when working with students with ASD and their families to develop a comprehensive transition plan.

As an individual prepares to transition from secondary to postsecondary education, educators need to know what supports the student requires for optimal transition and success in postsecondary education. A good place to begin when developing a comprehensive transition plan is with the collection of such information. This should include up-to-date information on the individual as a whole, not just assessments based on clinical and/or psychoeducational tests. The information should be reviewed and utilized as the starting point from which training, education, and supports are determined and provided to facilitate

the successful transition, academically and socially (Glennon, 2001).

Transition planning is a process or *coordinated set of activities* designed to successfully move students identified under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) from school to post-high-school settings. Under IDEIA transition assessment, planning and services are to be included in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) no later than age 16 (and, when appropriate, as early as 14) and be reviewed on a yearly basis. Under IDEIA 2004, the transition plan should include (a) present levels of performance, (b) instruction, (c) related services, (d) community experiences, and (e) employment and other postschool adult living objectives that align with the student's personal goals and aspirations.

To be most effective, the transition plan should identify services to be provided, specify timelines and persons responsible for implementing these services, indicate coordinating agencies with key contacts, state the intended outcomes, and provide a plan for monitoring and following up on the implementation of activities. In addition, when

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appropriate, a statement of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation should be included (IDEIA, 2004).

It is important to note that the transition plan will be most effective if the person transitioning is well prepared to enter postsecondary education. The transition plan should include the steps and processes needed to ensure this preparation occurs. In addition, the transition plan should take into account the student's personal goals and aspirations and be developed based on his or her individual strengths, *not* on the strengths of specific systems or agencies. As Sterling-Turner and Jordan (2007) indicate, learning to transition between activities is a skill that must be learned just like any other skill. Although the authors were referring to activities within a classroom setting, I take this a step further to include any transition. Successful postsecondary education transition requires preparation and planning that, for the educator, begin with knowing the adolescent.

Topic Areas to Consider When Developing a Transition Plan

Getting to know the adolescent with ASD who is beginning the postsecondary transition process is the foundation for developing a successful transition plan. The following text provides a list of topic areas that educators and transition support personnel may want to consider as a means of doing this. These topic areas include career exploration, academic goal setting and preparation, assessing and identifying learning styles, self-advocacy skills, reasonable accommodations, academic supports, interagency collaboration, technology, and time management skills. This list is not exhaustive but should be considered a guide from which to begin taking steps toward achieving successful transition, including high-school-level training and education. The topics are not presented in any specific order. The value of each is dependent on the individual student and should be considered based on his or her strengths and needs.

Career Exploration

Career exploration is important for determining appropriate postsecondary educational placement based on a person's individual strengths and interests. Career exploration may begin with a self-assessment that includes looking at personal and work values. Values are a set of standards, beliefs, and ideas that are important to an individual. For example, a personal value may be that one should always be honest, whereas a work value may be intrinsic, such as wanting to help others, or extrinsic, wanting to make a lot of money. In addition to values, specific occupational considerations, such as annual salary expectations, employment outlook (i.e., Will there be jobs in the field in a few years?), education and training required, and specific job duties are all important

to consider. Once the career field is narrowed down through self-assessment, activities such as job shadowing, mentoring, and internships may help the individual further delineate career possibilities. Many states provide these opportunities in high schools or through community agencies. In most public schools, the guidance counselor will be able to assist with the self-assessment and the school-to-work coordinator (or similar position) with job shadowing, mentoring, and internships.

Academic Goal Setting and Preparation

Once a career path is identified, high school personnel should work with the student and his or her family to develop an academic plan that aligns with the chosen career path. One should consider two fundamental questions: Is the chosen career path vocational or academic? What high school courses will support the individual to succeed in postsecondary education? Whether the chosen career path is vocational or academic, it is important the student takes the courses aligned with his or her post-high-school goals. This should include ensuring that any college preparatory courses that are required to pursue the chosen postsecondary option are taken and passed while the student is in high school. It also may include taking college courses while in high school, on the high school campus, online, or at a local community college, depending on which setting will be most helpful in the eventual transition. For some individuals, this may be a continuum, beginning with taking a course on the high school campus, then the following year taking an online course, and eventually taking a class on a college campus. Some students may opt not to enter a traditional postsecondary education setting but may prefer instead to earn a degree online. Thus, it is important to provide the broadest possible range of postsecondary educational options while remaining acutely aware of the student's long-term goals.

As with any individual who has a desire to pursue postsecondary education, it is important to strive for grade-level academic achievement or higher. Assessing academic status early may help teachers, families, and the student better prepare for postsecondary education. Popular strategies that may support individuals to achieve their academic goals include tutoring, peer tutoring, and academic accommodations (e.g., taking more time on tests, making accommodations to take tests orally, the use of assistive technology [AT], and providing assignments in smaller sections). Individuals with ASD may have a propensity to align with a specific content area. In this case, the area of interest should be encouraged, but other academic areas *also must be addressed* in high school and the beginning years of postsecondary education if the individual is going to succeed in postsecondary education.

Assessing and Identifying Learning Styles

Knowing one's own learning style is important for maximum learning, maximum recall of information, and time management. For example, if an individual is a kinesthetic learner who prefers hands-on learning but is continually taught through lecture, there is a good chance that limited learning is taking place, in comparison to what might be achieved through a combined lecture and hands-on approach. Similarly, it is possible the amount of time this individual takes to complete homework will decrease when class materials are presented and reinforced in the preferred learning style.

Although there are many learning-style inventories available to help guide a person through the process of determining his or her own optimal learning style, this often can be determined through observation (Edelson, 2008). For example, is a student attentive during one type of learning activity (e.g., lecture) and not as attentive during another type of learning activity (e.g., conducting a chemistry experiment)? If the student is more attentive and engaged during a lecture, it is likely he or she is more of an auditory learner. Asking questions about various class activities and the degree of recall of each activity by the student can verify a student's individual learning style.

In addition to determining preferred learning style, it is important to remember that many, but not all, individuals with ASD enjoy working independently and may struggle with group activities. This is problematic when courses require group or collaborative work. Providing ample opportunities in high school for students with ASD to work and collaborate in groups, with appropriate support and guidance, may lead to greater success in postsecondary education.

Self-Advocacy Skills

Self-advocacy is the ability to understand one's own needs and effectively communicate those needs to others (Shore, 2010). Becoming an effective self-advocate is necessary for success in postsecondary education, including disclosing one's disability. In addition, a postsecondary education student with a disability must be able to inform those around him or her of specific needs and support requirements, if those needs are to be met and the support provided. This requires that an individual have a solid understanding of his or her own strengths and weaknesses. It is important to know the level of self-advocacy skills individuals with ASD have and, depending on their levels, provide instruction and opportunities to increase self-advocacy skills.

Reasonable Accommodations

Aligning with self-advocacy is the need for individuals with disabilities to be aware of reasonable accommodations

that are available and necessary to support their success in postsecondary education (Shore, 2003). Reasonable accommodations may refer to modifications or adjustments made to an educational institution's policy or specific supports or services provided to a student with a disability that enable the student to participate in school programs. Reasonable accommodations may include such things as accommodations for admissions (e.g., extended time to complete an admissions exam); alternative testing options; accessible housing, transportation, and classrooms; and available recreational and extracurricular activities. They also may include policies such as not assessing penalties for spelling errors on papers or exams, allowing substitutions for certain required or prerequisite courses, allowing a reduced course load, allowing extra time in which to earn a degree, providing assignments in smaller sections, using assistive listening devices, and electronically receiving text for use with text-to-speech and screen reading software. What is considered a "reasonable" accommodation for each student depends on the individual situation. However, the accommodation cannot be unduly costly or disruptive to the institution (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

One of the primary differences between high school and postsecondary education is the change in the law related to individuals with disabilities. For individuals in the K-12 public school system, services and accommodations are provided based on the IEP. As these individuals enter postsecondary education, they will be required to disclose their disability to staff at the campus disability services office, provide documentation of their disabilities, and express their accommodation needs. For many students, this change is significant and challenging for them to adjust to, especially if adequate planning does not occur. Helping students in high school begin to identify their accommodation needs and ask for the accommodations they need is critical to success in postsecondary education.

One way to begin having students understand and request accommodations is to include the students in the IEP process and include the required accommodations in the IEP documentation. Having students actively participate in the IEP meeting (and, as appropriate, lead the meeting) will help students identify their accommodation needs (Shore, 2010). In addition, it may be necessary for the educator to provide direct instruction on how to ask for accommodations. Role-playing in this case frequently works well.

Academic Supports

It is important that individuals with ASD know what academic supports are available in postsecondary education and which ones work for them. Providing opportunities in high school to explore and become aware of various academic supports is key to successfully acquiring and utilizing

these supports in postsecondary education. Some of the academic supports that may be considered during transition planning include tutoring; exam proctoring, which may include extended time for completing exams or taking exams at alternative times and locations; testing that occurs orally; utilizing a note taker; and academic advising. These, as based on the individuals' specific needs, should be used throughout high school and discussed with the students so they become familiar with the academic supports available, their benefit, and their need to request these supports.

Interagency Collaboration

Transition plans are most effective when developed by many people working together. Members of the transition planning team should be determined by several factors, including the following:

1. Who are the people who are most involved in the student's life?
2. What agencies may benefit the individual now and during postsecondary education?
3. Who are the people who will support the student while in postsecondary education?
4. What supports are needed?

The answers to these questions should drive any interagency collaboration. A representative from any agency a student may use while in high school or beyond should be invited and encouraged to attend IEP transition planning meetings. Agencies may vary from state to state but commonly include the department of vocational rehabilitation, the state agencies for the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals With Disabilities Act of 1988 (2004), the developmental disability council, postsecondary education disability support personnel, community mental health agencies, and the local independent living center. Bringing everyone to the table and defining roles and responsibilities are important for establishing a continuum of support and a successful transition.

Technology

General technology and AT should each be assessed to determine (a) if the individual knows how to use technology that will be required in postsecondary education (e.g., a word processor and electronic databases), (b) if there is everyday technology that may be beneficial, and (c) if there is AT available to assist the individual in maximizing his or her full potential.

General (everyday use) technology such as computers, personal digital assistants, MP3 players (which may be used

to listen to electronic text), and electronic day planners may be useful tools for individuals with ASD. Individualized training and ongoing support may be necessary to ensure optimal access and use. This should occur within school as well as at home and in other environments.

Technologies specific to postsecondary education also should be assessed. These may include electronic databases, microfiche, and online tools used for class registration. Many postsecondary educational institutions offer classes to incoming freshman on how to use the technologies required to be successful in postsecondary education. If available, these courses might be a good option for students with ASD who are entering postsecondary education.

In addition to general technologies and specific postsecondary education technologies (e.g., online research search engines), specific AT devices may be beneficial for individuals with ASD. ATs are defined as "any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities (Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals With Disabilities Act of 1988, 2004). Each state and U.S. territory has a "Tech Act Project" funded under the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Most Tech Act Projects have lending programs, where an individual may borrow and use a piece of equipment for a set amount of time. This option provides users with a trial period to see if they like the technology and to determine their ongoing use and need. AT also should be addressed in the IEP transition meeting. If AT is deemed necessary for an individual to receive a free appropriate public education, then it should be written into the IEP. The school district will be responsible for the assessment of the student's AT needs, purchasing the AT, and training the student on its use.

Time Management Skills

For many individuals with ASD, time, routines, and schedules are the backbone of each day. This may be problematic in postsecondary education as schedules, which appear to be "set," frequently change. For example, class is held at 8:00 a.m. on Monday, the student arrives to find a note from the instructor stating that because of illness today's class is cancelled. What should the student do? Learning how to manage these unexpected blocks of time and how to deal with the schedule change will help reduce anxiety as well as increase efficiency. Assessing this type of time management skill while still in high school and providing opportunities to apply it may help the individual with ASD begin to prepare to better meet unforeseen schedule

changes. This is another area where role-playing can be effective.

Summary

A range of topic areas to consider while helping to prepare an individual with ASD to successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education were provided in this article. The topic areas presented and the use of the subsequent data collected, where relevant and applicable, should be integrated into the IDEIA-required transition plan. The transition plan should include action steps and identify the persons or agencies responsible for completing the action steps to increase the student's opportunity for success in achieving his or her educational goals.

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