



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Issues and Trends in Post-School Outcomes for Students with ASD:

A Review of the Literature

By Cathy Lang

Success in post-secondary environments for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder may entail additional planning and the need for ongoing support than students without ASD. The transition of students from high school to adulthood can also be a stressful time for families and present challenges for students with autism spectrum disorder. This issue of **NASSET's Autism Spectrum Disorder** series was written by Cathy Lang. It focuses on issues and trends in post-school outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Issues and Trends in Post-School Outcomes for Students with ASD

Abstract

Success in post-secondary environments for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may entail additional planning and the need for ongoing support than students without ASD. The transition of students from high school to adulthood can also be a stressful time for families and present challenges for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Literature Review

Transition is defined as the act of including education, employment, community living, and community integration. These areas are crucial to success in adulthood for young people with disabilities, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009) Adolescence has long been described as a period of “storm and stress” (Hall, 1904) even in neuro-typical populations. For students with disabilities, the emergence of adulthood often involves a series of educational occupational, residential, and relational transitions during which adolescents develop new roles and identities (Arnett, 2000). Navigating these transitions can be a challenge for many young people, and making the transition from high school to a post-secondary environment can be a challenge for even the most prepared student.

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For students with ASD, the challenges associated with the transition to adulthood are compounded by additional difficulties associated with having autism. Student achievement, effective transitional planning and educational services influence post-secondary school outcomes for these students.

The post-school ambitions of students with ASD vary widely: some identify college as a primary post-secondary goal, while others pursue work, and yet others may seek inclusion in a range of community or residential options. Some may often enter college or the workforce with limited knowledge of expectations, traditions and appropriate patterns of behavior.

Rates of post-secondary educational participation for youth with ASD are substantially lower than the general population, with previous studies indicating 40% or fewer ever attending college and very few receiving a degree (Shattuck. et. al. 2012). Young people with ASD had the highest risk of being completely disengaged from any kind of post-secondary education or employment. This risk remained greater than 50% for the first two years after high school. It appears that youth with ASD are uniquely at high risk for a period of struggling to find ways to participate in work and school after leaving high school. These findings point to potential gaps in transition planning, specifically for youth with autism and barriers for participation that may be specific to this population (Shattuck. et. al. 2012).

Improving post-school outcomes including related services and support systems for students with disabilities is a primary goal of special education teachers and vested stakeholders. Accordingly, as students prepare to transition from secondary to post-secondary environments, it is important to identify what support systems the individual requires for a successful transition. To be most effective, transition services must be provided to help the individual develop the skills and relationships to best utilize the support provided in order to achieve their post-school goals.

Individuals with ASD can be faced with many obstacles as they attempt to negotiate their way into college, work, community participation and independent living. According to Adreon and Durocher (2007) some major issues include:

- deciding what type and size of college to attend and where the student is going to live,
- assessing/teaching independent living skills,
- discussing when and how to disclose one's disability,
- identifying appropriate academic supports and accommodations,
- identifying necessary social supports, and
- identifying strategies to assist in adjusting to the college environment

With appropriate training and education that actively address these potential issues, individuals with ASD can integrate meaningfully into the community (Schall et. al. 2006) and engage in an educational and/or a collaborative work environment with their non-disabled peers.

The role of the family in the transition process has been shown to impact the development across adolescence and into adulthood. Parental expectations and involvement is a strong predictor of overall achievement and has been associated with higher levels of self-esteem and improved adult relationships, despite any potential disability status. Parents are often the driving force in securing vocational and educational placements and promoting a high quality of life for their children after high school. During the transition period to adulthood, families often take on a role of advocating for post-secondary educational and vocational opportunities for their child. In the absence of school support, the family becomes the primary advocate for finding, organizing, and maintaining services for educational and employment activities for their children with ASD.

The noted role of the parents in allocating and financially supporting post-school outcomes for their children puts a strain on the family (Smith & Anderson, 2013). The families of children with ASD face other challenging factors that can contribute to parental stress such as those associated with the educational and transitional planning. In general, the parents of students with disabilities do not feel as comfortable with the transition process as the parents of students without a disability (Whitney-Thomas & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996). Specifically, the parents of children with ASD reported higher levels of anxiety prior to the student exiting high school as they anticipate what will happen in the future; and have concerns about their child's readiness and skills in addition to how they will handle social situations (Lounds et.al., 2007). These worries are not without merit, as accessing services after high school can be particularly challenging for individuals with ASD.

Parenting an adolescent with ASD is highly stressful as parents must address challenges common to all parents of adolescents in addition to the difficulties specific to the autism (Smith & Anderson, 2013).

Meaningfully involving the families of students with ASD in the transition process is essential; although there is limited research as to how schools can best support and include families in the transition process. The literature does indicate that it is helpful for families of children with ASD to increase their social network. It is also recommended to explore the existing research pool for families of high-school aged students transitioning into the adult world, regardless of specific educational labels, since it can provide some insight that can be generalized across disability categories, including ASD (Taylor, 2009). In particular, some general best practices for effective and sustainable post-school outcomes include providing education and support programs for families which incorporates problem-focused coping and provides mechanisms for expanding social support networks (Smith et. al., 2014). In addition to having educators be aware of the challenges that face families of children with ASD during the transition from high school to a post-secondary environment and maintain a positive outlook with families.

In conclusion, finding a means for students with autism spectrum disorder to successfully leave high school and enter into the adult world still poses challenges. Education as a whole owes these young adults a change in the transition planning to help better support both the families and the student. It is imperative that educators take the time to ensure that these young adults have the necessary skills and that they are provided with the opportunity to learn and be challenged. This in turn, allowing them to reach their full potential that reflects their expectations needed to be successful to achieve their dream.

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About the Author

Cathy Lang has been an Exceptional Student Education teacher for twenty-one years. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Salve Regina University, and in December 2016, she received a Master of Science degree in Special Education with an emphasis on autism from Florida International University. She and her husband of five years (also an educator), share a passion for teaching children with special needs. Cathy also has a love of tennis, and she and her husband have been coaching the sport together for over a decade.