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AUTISM TRANSITION CHALLENGES: NAVIGATING LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Courtney Byrum
ccarnebl@murraystate.edu

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AUTISM TRANSITION CHALLENGES: NAVIGATING LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

By

Courtney N. Byrum

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Abstract

High school graduation is a significant milestone that signifies the end of one journey and the beginning of a new one. It is a time for students to celebrate their hard work over the past four years and look forward to the new opportunities that lie ahead. However, it can also present challenges, especially for students with developmental disabilities like autism. Leaving behind familiar surroundings, beloved friends, family, and teachers can make this a bittersweet occasion. After graduation, students with autism may face many obstacles, such as completing their coursework, finding and maintaining employment, taking care of their mental health, and establishing meaningful relationships. To help these students continue to develop and succeed as adults, society must recognize their difficulties and provide them with the necessary resources, time, and support. With appropriate care and assistance, we can ensure that every student, regardless of their limitations or impairments, can achieve their full potential.

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Introduction

High school graduation is a significant event that often marks the end of one journey and the start of another. It is a time when students celebrate their hard work over the past four years and look forward to the new opportunities that lie ahead. This is a beautiful time, but it could also pose challenges. These children are leaving behind beloved friends, family, teachers, and a familiar setting. So, while it is an occasion for celebration, it can also be a time of challenges and adjustments, especially for students with developmental disabilities such as autism. After high school, students with autism could face many obstacles, such as completing their coursework, finding a job and maintaining it, taking care of their mental health, and establishing friendships. In order to help students with autism continue to develop and succeed as adults, society must acknowledge the difficulties these students encounter and provide them with the necessary time and resources. We can guarantee that every student, regardless of their limitations or impairments, may succeed and realize their full potential by providing the appropriate care and assistance.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) summarizes a range of developmental obstacles characterized by struggles in social interaction, communication, and engaging in repetitive behaviors. Some students with autism show very different symptoms. Autism can have a direct impact on all individuals, regardless of their age, sex, or race. However, autism is diagnosed more often in males, who are approximately four times more likely to receive an autism diagnosis than females. (Shannon, 2011). People who are diagnosed with autism will always experience challenges as it is a life-long condition, and there is no cure for ASD. However, certain therapies and behavioral interventions have been designed to alleviate particular symptoms, which can significantly improve overall symptoms (Shannon, 2011).

While the transition from high school to life following graduation is exciting, it can also be challenging for certain adolescents, particularly those with autism. These students may face academic, social, and employment-related obstacles while dealing with mental health issues. Helping these students requires a collaborative effort from educators, counselors, parents, and the community. As educators, it is crucial to have a greater understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to help guide these children through their transition, ensuring they have the proper tools and support to be successful in all that they do.

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is Autism?

Deficits in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behavioral patterns characterize autism spectrum disorder. Additionally, it may be linked to cognitive impairment and hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory stimulation. ASD is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that affects approximately 1% of the global population. It is commonly known and well-documented that ASD is more common in males than in females, with roughly 70% of cases reported to be male (Napolitano et al., 2022). However, it has also been suggested that females often go undiagnosed or are diagnosed at a much later age compared to men. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the condition is found among all racial and ethnic groups, with Asians and Pacific Islanders being the highest group at 3.3%.

Before child psychiatrist Leo Kanner first diagnosed it in 1943, many often deemed autism spectrum disorder as a form of childhood schizophrenia marked by detachment from reality. Kanner described these children as exhibiting characteristics such as “extreme autistic aloneness,” delayed echolalia, and an “anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness.” He also stated that these children were often brilliant and had extraordinary

memories (Zeldovich, 2018). The number of autism diagnoses seems to have skyrocketed in recent years; more recent estimates put the number between one in 68 and thirty in 10,000 (Zylstra, et al., 2014). More healthcare professionals, educators, and the general public know of ASD. According to Table 1, the number of children being diagnosed with autism has increased significantly (CDC, n.d.). As a result of the increase, there have been more attempts to identify autism as a separate disorder accurately. Due to a rise in awareness and understanding, there are now more services and support options available for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families.

Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder
ADDM Network 2000-2020 Combining Data from All Sites

Surveillance Year	Birth Year	Number of ADDM Sites Reporting	Combined Prevalence per 1,000 Children (Range Across ADDM Sites)	This is about 1 in X children
2020	2012	11	27.6 (23.1-44.9)	1 in 36
2018	2010	11	23.0 (16.5-38.9)	1 in 44
2016	2008	11	18.5 (18.0-19.1)	1 in 54
2014	2006	11	16.8 (13.1-29.3)	1 in 59
2012	2004	11	14.5 (8.2-24.6)	1 in 69
2010	2002	11	14.7 (5.7-21.9)	1 in 68
2008	2000	14	11.3 (4.8-21.2)	1 in 88
2006	1998	11	9.0 (4.2-12.1)	1 in 110
2004	1996	8	8.0 (4.6-9.8)	1 in 125

Table 1 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

What Causes Autism

Although the exact cause of autism remains unidentified, it is believed that ASD is a result of both genetic and environmental factors. In terms of etiology, researchers widely accept that genetic factors play a significant role in autism. It has become clear that, aside from a small percentage of cases (about 1%) where a single gene alteration causes the phenotype, the genetic component leading to autism is complex. It involves interactions of multiple genetic changes and/or epigenetic regulation of gene expression (Gurrieri et al., 2009). Current research on the cause of autism explores genetics, immunology, neuroanatomy, and neurochemistry. Our understanding primarily centers on the disorder's genetic roots. While the definitive cause of autism remains unidentified, several myths have been dispelled regarding the cause. Dr. Kanner formed one of the initial misconceptions. He noted that ASD stemmed from "refrigerator mothers," implying emotionally distant or unavailable mothers as the culprits. However, what Kanner failed to take into account was the limited size of his sample; numerous "refrigerator mothers" did not have children with ASD, and the absence of warmth and attachment might have been a consequence of ASD-related behaviors rather than the root cause (Laidor, 2004). This theory of blaming mothers was widely accepted for several decades, causing significant harm to families with children diagnosed with ASD.

Although the leading causes of ASD are unknown, research indicates that a person's genes and environment might interact to influence development in ways that result in ASD. The following are some variables linked to a higher risk of developing ASD:

- Having an ASD sibling
- Having elderly parents

- Having specific hereditary disorders (like down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome).
- Being extremely underweight at birth

These risk factors do not always result in ASD development (NIH, 2022).

How Autism is Diagnosed

An individual is diagnosed with childhood autism or autistic disorder when they exhibit clinical impairments in communication, social interaction, restricted and repetitive behaviors, and interests (Kent et al., 2013). ASD symptoms might differ from child to child, but some common ones include avoidance of eye contact, inability to react to names, extreme fear, and a lack of pretend play and interaction. Early diagnosis and proper therapies are made more accessible when caregivers and healthcare professionals recognize these symptoms (Okoye et al., 2023). Autism is typically diagnosed in early childhood.

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5 2013) provides the diagnostic criteria for ASD that physicians in the United States most frequently use. The DSM-5 lists anomalies in nonverbal communication behavior and understanding, an inability to initiate and/or reciprocate emotional and social interactions, and/or difficulties establishing and maintaining relationships as examples of ASD deficits in the social-communication domain. A minimum of two out of every three of the following criteria are present in the DSM-5 for restricted interests and repetitive behavior: rigidity in routine, abnormalities in domain or intensity of interests, abnormalities in reactivity to sensory input, and/or stereotyped or repetitive movements or speech (e.g., flapping arms back and forth or repeating the exact sentence/phrase) (APA, 2013).

ASD is highly variable since it encompasses a wide range of symptoms, behaviors, and features that can present differently in each person, making each individual with a diagnosis unique. This variability also means that responses to treatments and therapies will vary from person to person. What works well for one person may be ineffective for someone else. For this reason, interventions must be tailored to each specific individual.

Challenges in Autism

Challenges in Social Settings

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often encounter significant challenges related to social cognition and social skills deficits throughout their lifetime. Difficulties in understanding social cues, initiating and maintaining social interactions, and developing a theory of mind can make it challenging for individuals with ASD to form meaningful social relationships and interact with others in everyday situations. These challenges manifest as restricted verbal and nonverbal communication, lack of eye contact, limited reciprocal conversation, and lack of insight (McVey, 2016). Even highly functioning individuals with ASD may struggle with these issues.

According to research, people with autism spectrum disorders frequently face the most obstacles because of their poor social skills, which can make it difficult for them to form and sustain meaningful connections (Laugeson et al., 2015). Body language plays a significant role in helping individuals interpret social contexts. Among the primary cues mediating non-verbal communication are gestures and posture shifts, which give viewers useful social indications about the subjective and emotional states as well as the intentions of other individuals. On the other hand, individuals with ASD have trouble interpreting nonverbal signs, including gaze

direction and facial emotions (Centelles et al., 2013). Not being able to interpret nonverbal signals causes those with ASD to encounter barriers in forming relationships.

Some individuals with autism may find it challenging to comprehend the feelings of others due to difficulties with social cues. This can lead to the misconception that individuals with autism lack empathy. Empathy involves recognizing and resonating with the emotional experiences of others and responding in a manner that acknowledges and respects their feelings. Empathy can be separated into two components: cognitive and emotional. Cognitive empathy (CE) is the capacity to understand what another person is thinking or experiencing, whereas emotional empathy (EE), also known as affective empathy, is the capacity to react appropriately to another person's mental state (Shalev et al., 2022). While it is true that being diagnosed with autism can present obstacles in understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, it is essential to recognize that empathy can manifest in various ways. Despite these challenges, individuals with autism are fully capable of experiencing and expressing empathy towards those around them. Gaining a deeper understanding of empathy is crucial. By doing so, people can better support individuals with autism, recognizing and valuing their unique talents for connecting with others.

Deficits in social skills are a distinguishing aspect of ASD, impacting individuals across the spectrum. Social difficulties remain a crucial cause of impairment for individuals with ASD, regardless of their cognitive or language abilities. Moreover, individuals with ASD may think in highly concrete and literal terms, which can pose challenges to their social functioning. For example, research indicates that young people with ASD frequently struggle to understand and use humor correctly (Laugeson & Ellingsen, 2014).

Sensory Sensitivities and Challenges in Navigating Social Environments

Many people diagnosed with ASD have unusual responses to sensory stimuli such as lights, noises, textures, and smells. This is another significant feature of autism (Tala-Ongan & Wood, 2000). Sensory issues relate to the five primary senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. Individuals with ASD may experience sensory sensitivities in different ways—some may be hypersensitive, while others might desire sensory input. Such sensitivities can make one feel anxious or apprehensive. This could look like heightened sensitivity to bright, flashing lighting or loud music or being overwhelmed by certain smells or the feeling of certain clothing materials. Participating in social settings can be difficult or impossible for ASD individuals who are hypersensitive to fragrances or sounds. They may feel overwhelmed in crowded spaces or avoid specific social activities because of sensory discomfort.

Individuals with autism use various coping mechanisms to control their sensory sensitivity. Some people use noise-canceling headphones to drown out loud noises, while others seek peaceful places to manage stimulation. It is essential to provide sensory-friendly environments that accommodate those with ASD. This could include decreasing sensory inputs, making sensory-friendly accommodations, and providing sensory breaks during social activities to help people regulate their sensory experiences and feel more comfortable participating. Sensory sensitivities can have a considerable impact on social interactions and daily functioning for people with ASD.

Social Anxiety

Autism spectrum disorders and social anxiety (SA) frequently occur together. Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a mental health condition characterized by an intense fear of judgment and criticism from others, leading to a strong aversion to social interactions. On the other hand,

autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is distinguished by challenges in social communication and interaction, coupled with repetitive behaviors and restricted interests. While both conditions share commonalities in social interaction difficulties, ASD may also exhibit distinctive features such as atypical social cognition and a broader range of repetitive behaviors (Kleberg et al., 2017). It is well known that people who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) frequently have high levels of social anxiety. This is mainly explained by the socio-communication impairments that are common in autistic people, which frequently lead to issues with social competence. As a result, their interactions with others in social settings often cause discomfort and anxiety (Montaser et al., 2023).

Studies indicate a high correlation between anxiety and ASD, with anxiety being significantly more prevalent in children with ASD than in their typically developing peers. Anxiety disorders are present in 42–55% of young people with ASD, and enhanced autism spectrum traits are present in up to 62% of young people with mood or anxiety disorders (Settipani et al., 2012). Social anxiety can present itself in many ways in people with autism. Sensory sensitivity to sounds, light, or sensations (such as heat) can be upsetting or anxiety-inducing in social situations. Similarly, anticipatory anxiety about meeting new or familiar people can be triggered by aversions to very particular sensory cues. Avoidance can result from aversions and sensory sensitivities (Spain et al., 2018).

Addressing social anxiety in individuals with autism requires a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the intricate interaction among cognitive, sensory, and social factors. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is beneficial in improving social anxiety, social functioning, and overall mental well-being among adolescents with ASD (Bemmer et al., 2021). Social skills

training, along with sensory adjustments, has the potential to reduce symptoms of social anxiety and enhance the quality of life for those with autism. Due to the unique characteristics of each individual with autism, treatment approaches must be personalized to meet their specific needs and preferences.

Strategies for Improving Social Skills

It is essential to encourage greater inclusivity and understanding towards individuals with ASD in schools, businesses, and communities. Children on the autism spectrum rely on their parents for advocacy, teachers for support in school, and communities for acceptance and inclusion. Advocacy is essential when one is the parent of a child with autism. Some ways parents can advocate for their children are:

- obtaining support or service for their child
- promoting the child/family's welfare, well-being, and rights
- raising issues facilitating change
- being a voice for their child
- advocating for their individual child and on behalf of a broader group to which their child belongs
- Educating family/friends/others about the child's condition (Boshoff et al., 2016).

Video modeling (VM), a different method of teaching kids with ASD, has gained significant traction in recent years. Video modeling (VM) is a technique that has been used to educate a range of abilities in both adults and children. It involves showing participants previously recorded video footage of a model executing a specific behavior in order to initiate new behaviors from them (McDowell et al., 2015). VM allows those with ASD the opportunity

to observe and mimic social behaviors demonstrated in those videos, which helps prepare them for specific interactions they may encounter.

Peer-mediated interventions (PMI) are another effective way to help people with ASD develop their social skills. To enhance social engagement and skill development, peers who are typically developing are placed with individuals with ASD. Peers not only model proper behavior but also offer social support. This provides an opportunity to develop and improve social skills in an organic, relaxed environment. Engaging in PMI helps children with autism develop self-awareness and better understand how to act and effectively communicate with others in social settings (Xavier et al., 2023).

It is essential to create and promote activities that educate others about ASD, challenge stereotypes, and celebrate neurodiversity. It is vital to highlight the significance of building supportive communities and networks that provide emotional support, opportunities for socialization, and meaningful relationships. This can involve cultivating peer friendships, partnering with community organizations, and collaborating with stakeholders to establish inclusive environments.

Fostering Social Inclusion

People with autism face challenges in social communication and variations in socio-cognitive processing. These abilities are necessary for interpreting social cues and using nonverbal communication effectively in social situations. Furthermore, compared to their neurotypical classmates, autistic children and adults may have more limited interests, which limits their flexibility in terms of conversation subjects and leisure pursuits. When trying to interact and build social relationships with others, especially those who are not autistic, these

obstacles may lead to frustration and negative results for autistic children and adults (Bennett et al., 2019).

It is essential to be socially inclusive when interacting with people on the autism spectrum. This helps create a more diverse environment, which positively impacts everyone. By including autistic people in social situations, neurotypical individuals gain insight into the perspective of someone on the autism spectrum. It is equally important to have patience and understanding when interacting with someone on the spectrum and to use clear communication and visual cues. This, in turn, helps create an environment where autistic individuals feel valued, understood, and accepted.

Being socially inclusive also provides those with ASD an opportunity to practice their social skills in a supportive environment. Those who participate in constructive social interactions can learn important values, develop practical communication skills, and establish relationships that will help them navigate various social situations in the future. In order to promote the growth, well-being, and social involvement of autistic people in society, social inclusion is crucial. This creates an environment that is more accepting and supportive of everyone.

Social Skills Training

Every child on the autism spectrum is unique, with varying strengths and needs as they age. The family's challenge is to create a unique treatment plan based on various alternatives, from speech and language therapy to applied behavior analysis, from medicines to special meals. Among these strategies, social skills training stands out as an essential component.

Social skills training for people on the autism spectrum entails teaching those specialized social behaviors, communication techniques, and interpersonal abilities to help them manage social interactions more skillfully. A human or computer trainer can conduct training. In their experimental evaluation, the researchers recruited 18 members of the general population and 10 individuals with autism spectrum disorders. These participants were provided with the proposed multimodal system for use. An experienced human social skills trainer was tasked with rating the social skills of the users. The effectiveness of the system was assessed by comparing pre-and post-training scores, revealing significant improvements in social skills among users who utilized the multimodal system. The findings suggest that computer-based social skills training holds promise for individuals facing social difficulties. Such systems could serve as valuable tools for rehabilitation and as supplements to human-based training methods, accessible anywhere and at any time for use by teachers, therapists, and social skills trainers (Tanaka et al., 2017).

Autism is frequently characterized by a lack of intuitive social competence, consequently making social skills training a promising treatment. Many therapy programs frequently incorporate social skills training to address the issues effectively (Foden, 2011). According to Foden (2011), the IAN Research poll revealed that 14% of participating families used social skills groups as part of their child's treatment plan. This figure jumped to more than 20% for children aged 8 to 12 and exceeded 25% for those with Asperger's.

Early intensive behavioral treatments, such as applied behavior analysis (ABA), are frequently utilized with early-afflicted children to assist them in regaining their development, particularly their social and language/communication skills. The psychobiological idea bases itself on the notion that brain structure and experience are inextricably linked, particularly during

infancy and early childhood (Foden, 2011). Understanding this connection guides therapeutic treatments aimed at improving developmental outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorder.

Employment Challenges

Every year, nearly 50,000 kids with ASD graduate and are no longer qualified for special education programs offered by the public school system. Studies reveal that these young people generally fail to achieve desirable adult results in the areas of postsecondary education, integrated work, and independent living—all areas acknowledged by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Bross et al., 2021). It has been discovered during a study that there are many challenges that individuals with autism face when searching for employment. These challenges include completing job applications, conducting a job search, communicating, and interacting with supervisors (Lorenz et al., 2016). They also face many challenges once they gain employment, such as social interaction and communication, sensory sensitivities, and executive functioning.

Autistic individuals may find it difficult to communicate during job interviews due to their issues with social interaction and nonverbal communication. They may experience difficulty reading body language, making eye contact, and interpreting nonverbal cues, which are important during interview situations (Lorenz et al., 2016). Even when these individuals get a job, they face communication barriers with co-workers and possible customers. These communication challenges can make it difficult for those with ASD to obtain and retain employment.

Individuals with autism may experience sensory issues while they are at work. Certain environmental stimuli, such as sounds, sights, and smells, can overwhelm them. Depending on where they are employed, things like fluorescent lighting, loud ringing phones, and strong chemical odors or food aromas could distract this group. People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) report experiencing significant levels of stress and anxiety at work, which can affect their ability to do their jobs. Anxiety is a significant barrier to success in postsecondary education, according to numerous parents of these individuals (Hendricks, 2010).

The prefrontal cortex primarily supports cognitive control processes known as executive function (EF). These processes regulate lower-level processes (such as perception and motor responses) and enable self-regulation and self-directed behavior toward a goal. This helps break bad habits, make decisions and assess risks, plan for the future, prioritize and order actions, and deal with unfamiliar situations. Research has shown that executive dysfunction is a likely endophenotype in neurodevelopmental diseases, including autism spectrum disorder (Craig et al., 2016). An autistic person's capacity to manage workloads, fulfill deadlines, and perform consistently might be impacted by executive functioning issues, which include difficulty with planning, organization, time management, and task prioritizing. This may cause difficulties in multitasking and staying on schedule with projects.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, employers are making more significant efforts to improve prospects' access to jobs on the autistic spectrum so they may utilize their various talents. Numerous large and small organizations have modified their recruiting, onboarding, and recruitment procedures and policies to improve accessibility for this demographic.

Accommodations in the Workplace

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers must provide reasonable accommodations for qualified candidates and workers with impairments unless doing so would burden the company. Depending on the role, different accommodations are acceptable (Hansel, 2017). While some people with ASD will not require accommodations, many will. Successful employment for individuals with autism includes modification of the physical work environment, specifically as it relates to accommodating sensory sensitivities. For example, attention is paid to noise levels and artificial lighting (Hayward et al., 2019). These accommodations can help autistic individuals thrive in their jobs and succeed in their careers.

Fair accommodations will help autistic workers perform at their best at work and level the playing field so that having an autism diagnosis is not a disadvantage. Reasonable accommodations should also be affordable, simple to implement, and accessible to all workers (Petty et al., 2023). Due to the increase in autism diagnoses, it is more prominent now than ever that more employers are autism-friendly.

Job coaches are often used to help students who are going to be transitioning out of high school. They help ASD students find internships and job placements that fit their needs. Typical job coaching for students with autism often involves using strategies such as task analysis, prompting and fading techniques, verbal instruction, and demonstration to help students learn job responsibilities. While these supports can promote independence, one often overlooked component of their role is to help students socially integrate into the workplace culture and develop critical interpersonal skills (Gilson & Carter, 2016).

For adults with severe mental illness (SMI), virtual reality job interview training (VR-JIT) is an effective web-based tool. Assessments of VR-JIT have demonstrated enhanced interview proficiency and enhanced career opportunities for multiple cohorts of persons diagnosed with SMI and autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Through e-learning materials and hands-on training, VR-JIT teaches participants how to complete job applications and conduct job interviews. Feedback is provided to trainees in the form of critical analysis, suggestions for performance improvement, and nonverbal cues (Flower et al., 2019).

Providing supportive employment services for adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a beneficial investment. With the proper support, individuals with ASD can secure employment and make significant contributions to the workforce. Research indicates that employees with ASD possess many valuable skills that can benefit employers. However, despite their abilities, individuals with ASD face high rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to the general population (Griffiths et al., 2020).

Initiatives Promoting Inclusive Hiring Practices and Employment Opportunities for Autistic Adolescents

Currently, 35 percent of eighteen-year-olds diagnosed with autism attend college. Nonetheless, their unemployment and underemployment rates after graduation range from 75 to 85%. In general, current recruiting and interviewing techniques are not well adapted to the growing number of companies trying to expand their diversity and inclusion hiring initiatives to include neurodivergent people. Employers need to consider how to recruit from this talent pool in order to capitalize on a significant portion of the workforce, as over one-third of Americans identify as neurodivergent (Schneider & Bogden, 2021).

There are many advantages to hiring autistic professionals. According to experts, people with impairments can be just as productive as those without them, and absence rates for those with autism are either the same or lower than those of other worker groups. Employers who recruit individuals with autism frequently report that they are talented and creative and that hiring them has improved retention, company culture, and morale (Wright, 2016). Many autistic people exhibit excellent attention to detail and do well in jobs requiring concentration and precision.

Although each person on the spectrum is unique, it is not unusual for autistic people to devote themselves entirely to a subject they are passionate about. This could show up in the workplace as a worker who is an expert in their field and knows more than everybody else. Autism spectrum disorders are frequently characterized by focus, accuracy, meticulousness, the capacity to retain facts and figures, and a preference for regularity. These characteristics result in workers who are primarily engaged in doing their given responsibilities and being occupied at work, especially when combined with a strong work ethic and moral code. An employer is rarely concerned that a worker with autism is socializing too much while at work. Hence, they are frequently very productive workers (Schneider & Bogden, 2021).

Schneider and Bogden's (2021) research demonstrates that hiring people with autism improves market share and brand recognition. Businesses that actively hire people with autism show their dedication to diversity and inclusivity, which resonates with customers who value conducting business with socially conscious companies. Accepting neurodiversity in the workplace positively impacts corporate performance and has substantial financial advantages.

Beyond financial gain, these initiatives promote a more diverse and inclusive workforce, which in turn creates a more prosperous and peaceful community.

Transportation Issues

Transportation Accessibility

Obtaining a driver's license is a significant milestone for teenagers, providing them with increased mobility and independence. However, for individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, this may not always be the case. Research from Mental Health Weekly Digest (2018) revealed that only one in three adolescents with ASD acquired a driver's license, in contrast to 83.5% of other adolescents, and at a median delay of 9.2 months. This means that while approximately 30% of people with autism do get a driver's license, this number is significantly smaller than that of the general population. These findings align with the fact that being a passenger in a family car, a friend's car, or a volunteer's car is the most popular form of transportation for those with ASD, followed by walking and public transportation, with driving a car coming in last (Thériault & Morales, 2022). This discrepancy highlights the wide range of transportation barriers those with ASD must overcome, from sensory sensitivity issues to difficulties comprehending and utilizing intricate transportation systems. These obstacles prevent those with ASD from getting a driver's license and taking advantage of opportunities and necessary services, such as public transportation. As a result, these barriers will cause challenges in many aspects of life, such as the inability to live independently, reach employers and healthcare providers, and even engage in community and social activities. Addressing these hurdles is imperative to supporting the inclusion and well-being of people with ASD in society.

Transportation Barriers

People with ASD may encounter various challenges while driving or using public transportation. Sensory sensitivities to light and noise can be overwhelming and distracting, particularly for individuals with autism. It can be difficult for people with autism to integrate the vast amount of sensory information that driving requires at once. Overstimulation of the senses might cause worry or make concentrating on the present situation hard. These sensitivities not only affect driving but also make it difficult for them to use public transportation, especially in crowded spaces.

Successful driving requires the collaboration of higher-order executive functions (EF) to navigate a range of challenges and unexpected driving situations. Research suggests that individuals on the autistic spectrum may have difficulties with executive function, which can immediately affect their capacity to learn to drive and drive safely (Wilson et al., 2018). Individuals with ASD may perceive driving hazards but exhibit delayed responses in reacting to them. On the other hand, they could become fixated on one thing rather than paying close attention to their surroundings, which can cause them to wreck. This is thought to be linked to attention deficiencies and decreased processing of social stimuli, which is particularly difficult while learning to drive a motor vehicle. This process requires collaborative problem-solving abilities. Research supports the idea that individuals on the autistic spectrum have abnormal eye-gaze patterns, such as focusing on the speedometer for extended periods of time to check the vehicle's speed and frequently scanning traffic-related roadside objects like billboard advertisements, which further complicates these issues (Wilson et al., 2018). Autistic drivers were projected to have lower average monthly rates of moving violations, suspensions, and crash participation than non-autistic drivers. Autistic drivers were half as likely to be in an accident because they were speeding too fast, but they were far more likely to be in an accident because

they neglected to yield to oncoming traffic or pedestrians when performing left- or U-turns (Curry et al., 2021).

Driving requires a range of fine and gross motor skills, including controlling the steering wheel, applying brakes, and using turn signals at the same time. Individuals with autism may struggle to coordinate their movements, impacting their ability to perform these tasks smoothly. Additionally, people with ASD might find it challenging to multitask, such as monitoring traffic, following directions, and adjusting to changes in the environment, making driving more difficult for them.

A study was conducted using Pennsylvania Autism Needs Assessment (PANA) data, a survey that included information about employment and transportation preferences from 1,120 autistic individuals. The study found that those employed were more likely to choose personal automobiles for self-driving than those who were jobless (45% of employed respondents versus 21% of unemployed respondents; $p < 0.001$). Participants who were employed showed a decreased dependence on others for transportation; 62% of them used this option, compared to 75% of those who were jobless ($p < 0.001$). While 18% of the unemployed opted for this option, employed people were less likely to use service transportation—only 11% did so ($p = 0.001$). Employed respondents felt that there were fewer obstacles to using public transportation than unemployed respondents, as seen by their average barrier score of 1.98, which was lower for employed respondents than for unemployed respondents (effect size $d = 0.22$). The results imply that there is a direct correlation between work status and transportation habits. Autistic people with jobs are more likely to prefer driving themselves, rely less on other people for

transportation, and are less likely to use service transportation. In addition, they report fewer difficulties using public transportation than their unemployed peers (Pfeiffer et al., 2023).

Public Transportation

While many individuals with ASD find it challenging to obtain a driver's license and opt not to pursue one, they still desire the independence and accessibility that driving offers. Fortunately, public transportation provides valuable alternatives for them, including fixed-route buses, jitneys, shuttles, demand-responsive services, trains, and taxis (Sanchez, 2008). However, navigating these transportation options independently can pose difficulties for people with autism due to the social and sensory complexities associated with the condition. Research concluded that safety and spatial awareness are the two main worries that autistic people and their families have when using public transportation. Finding one's way to the bus stop, boarding the appropriate bus, and getting out at the appropriate stop are examples of specific issues. It is interesting to note that fear of unforeseen things also occurred. Similarly, sensory sensitivity was found to be a barrier (Rezae et al., 2019). It is vital to ensure that people with autism are safe when using public transit. Safety concerns are a significant obstacle to independent travel for a substantial portion of this community. Addressing these problems promotes greater accessibility and inclusivity within public transportation systems and develops a sense of security.

Improving Transportation Accessibility And Accommodations

Encouraging the independence and inclusion of people with autism in communities requires significant improvements to transportation accommodations and accessibility. It is imperative to understand the unique obstacles individuals encounter while utilizing transportation systems, be it public transportation or driving, to create effective solutions. People

with autism face specific challenges when driving, such as managing sensory sensitivity and coordinating movements. Similarly, sensory overload and trouble communicating with others can make using public transit intimidating. Transportation settings can be made more accommodating of the various requirements of people with autism by putting accessibility measures in place and offering specialized accommodations, enabling them to travel with self-assurance and independence.

Activities of Daily Living (ADL)

AD Challenges

Adolescents with autism must develop essential life skills to facilitate their transition to independent adulthood following high school. These skills encompass a wide range of practical tasks, including money management, meal preparation, and personal hygiene. Research indicates that many individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often exhibit disparities between their cognitive abilities and their proficiency in daily living tasks (Bal et al., 2015). For example, difficulties with executive functioning, social communication, and sensory processing can pose significant barriers to mastering these skills. Therefore, it is crucial to offer personalized help and strategies that match the specific needs of people with ASD.

Money Management

Like their peers, young people with autism strive for more independence and self-reliance as they enter the next stage of life. However, they typically have difficulties in gaining financial independence, separating themselves from their peers, particularly those with additional specific health care needs. Understanding how to manage money is crucial for young adults with ASD as it helps them become more independent. This independence is essential for their success in

college and later in their careers. Additionally, studies indicate that adolescents with disabilities who can handle personal finances may experience enhanced independence, better mental well-being, and increased future income prospects (Morrow & Dees, 2020).

A study discovered that when it comes to the financial well-being of adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), only a small percentage of high schoolers had checking accounts (10%) or credit cards (0.5%). Even after two years, while access to checking accounts had risen to 33%, ownership of credit cards remained low (2.5%) (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2017). Setting up a personal bank account can feel daunting for individuals with ASD. One helpful strategy is to bring someone along for support in completing paperwork and opening the account. Some banks offer autism-friendly services, including quiet areas and sensory packs to ease potential feelings of anxiety. Online banking is another excellent option for individuals with autism, allowing them to manage their finances conveniently from the comfort of home. This eliminates the social pressures associated with in-person banking and provides a more comfortable experience.

Understanding complex concepts like budgeting and money management can be extremely difficult for a large number of people with autism. Their inability to understand financial planning may have a negative impact on their economic well-being. Understanding the flow of income and expenses each month is made possible with the help of a budget. It gives a clear picture of one's financial habits by outlining how much is earned, spent, and saved. Without this awareness, people with ASD could find themselves in a difficult situation and be unable to make wise financial decisions.

The absence of a budget can lead to unwanted overspending and financial stress. Without a clear understanding of their financial situation, individuals with autism may struggle to prioritize their spending, leading to impulse purchases and exceeding their budget. For example, they might regularly dine out without realizing how much they're spending on food, or they might make unnecessary purchases on hobbies or interests without considering their overall financial goals. Over time, this pattern of overspending can accumulate debt and hinder their ability to save for essential expenses or emergencies.

To put it simply, not only does the lack of a budget impact short-term financial decisions, but it also has long-term effects on emotional health and economic stability. Therefore, it is crucial to provide resources and support specifically designed to meet the needs of people with autism, helping them become financially secure and learn how to create efficient budgets.

Cooking and Nutrition Skills

People on the autism spectrum often encounter difficulties in cooking and maintaining a healthy diet, impacting their overall well-being. Research indicates high rates of overweight and obesity among individuals with ASD. Additionally, they are more vulnerable to eating disorders, affecting up to 90% of children with autism. These eating disorders are often linked to sensory issues, such as specific textures or food preferences. Some may struggle with eating, including refusing food or sticking to a limited variety. Certain behaviors like eating non-food items (pica) or vomiting for psychological reasons are also observed in this population (Goldschmidt & Song, 2017).

Sensory issues can significantly impact cooking for individuals with autism, as textures, smells, and sounds may be overwhelming or off-putting. For example, the sizzling of oil in a pan

or the smell of certain spices may trigger discomfort or anxiety. Moreover, using certain kitchen appliances, such as blenders or food processors, may pose challenges due to their loud noises or complex functions, further hindering meal preparation. Additionally, problems with executive function might intensify these issues by making it more difficult to properly plan meals, follow recipes, and manage time. This can lead to frustration and inefficiency in the kitchen, making it difficult to achieve desired cooking results and maintain a healthy diet.

Knowing how to cook and use kitchen equipment is essential to leading a healthy, self-sufficient lifestyle. Cooking allows individuals the opportunity to nourish themselves while also cultivating independence in their daily routine. People with ASD will face many challenges in this area. To address these challenges, it is important to consider strategies that accommodate the sensory and executive functioning differences experienced by individuals with autism. Incorporating familiar or preferred foods, utilizing visual aids to illustrate step-by-step cooking instructions, and offering structured meal planning with basic recipes can all help lower anxiety and boost participation in meal preparation.

Self-Care

Basic ADLs include fundamental self-care tasks that are necessary for independent living. Bathing, clothing, grooming, and using the restroom are among these tasks. Due to their difficulties with executive functioning and sensory sensitivity, people with autism spectrum disorder may find it difficult to take care of themselves. Activities like washing, grooming, and dressing can be difficult or stressful for those with sensory sensitivity. Some individual with autism may be sensitive to changes in water temperature, while others may be sensitive to the pressure of the water. Strong smells from bathing products, like shampoo or soap can also cause

discomfort, affecting their ability to properly groom themselves. Individuals with autism may experience discomfort due to certain fabric textures, tags, and seams in clothing. These sensory sensitivities can lead to feelings of discomfort and unease during dressing routines.

In order to help people with autism achieve success with these self-care tasks, it is critical to offer tailored techniques and accommodations that take into account their particular sensory sensitivity issues and executive functioning difficulties. This could be utilizing bath products that are sensory-friendly and have subtle scents or textures, enabling gradual exposure to sensory stimuli to help people get desensitized to discomfort, and providing visual aids that explain the stages involved in self-care routines. Reducing anxiety and promoting independence in daily self-care chores can also be accomplished by providing choices and control over the process, establishing an organized and predictable setting, and introducing relaxing activities before self-care duties. By putting these helpful techniques into practice, people with autism can become more competent and confident in handling their own self-care requirements, which will increase their independence and general well-being.

Executive Functioning Challenges and Their Impact on ADL Skills

For people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), difficulties in executive functioning (EF) can significantly impact activities of daily living (ADL). Making daily schedules and setting priorities for tasks requires organizational and planning skills. Meal planning and appointment scheduling may become difficult due to problems in these areas. People with ASD may also face difficulty initiating tasks independently. This can cause delays in completing necessary tasks, such as getting dressed, completing homework, or cleaning. They may also avoid these tasks altogether.

Strategies for Developing Independence in ADLs

Empowering individuals with ASD to become more self-sufficient begins with implementing effective strategies that cultivate independence, allowing this group to thrive in their daily lives. Every person with autism is different, so different life skills will need to be taught. Beginning skill-building early on is crucial for individuals with ASD to learn and grow in independence. These skills can be taught at home, school, and in the community. Even Life Skills classes can be taken to help increase independence.

Life skills are vital for both individuals with and without disabilities, but they become much more crucial for those with disabilities once they graduate from high school. Teaching life skills is crucial for students with disabilities, as they may not naturally acquire these abilities independently. This practice is considered evidence-based, particularly in the context of secondary transition, to ensure individuals gain essential skills for navigating daily life effectively. It is important to teach life skills in both classroom and community contexts so that students can apply what they have learned to their everyday lives (Chiang et al., 2017).

One way those with ASD learn life skills is by self-monitoring interventions. These interventions involve teaching individuals to recognize and record their own behavior, which promotes independence as they become the agents of the intervention. To effectively self-monitor, individuals must pay attention to their behaviors, the conditions in which they occur, and their immediate and long-term effects. This heightened awareness can help individuals focus on essential aspects of their behavior. These interventions can aim to increase desired behaviors or reduce problem behaviors. Additionally, studies suggest that self-monitoring interventions may have positive effects on other areas of functioning beyond the targeted behaviors (Hume et al., 2009).

Transition Planning and Support Services

Importance of Comprehensive Transition Planning for Autistic Adolescents

For adolescents on the autistic spectrum, a common obstacle to effective post-school outcomes is a lack of transition planning. A series of planned activities known as "transition planning" help teenagers in secondary education make the transition from school to adulthood with success. It covers vocational training, post-secondary education, and becoming ready for the move into the workforce. Planning for a smooth transition has been associated with better self-determination, higher employment rates, better performance in post-secondary education, more satisfaction, and better community involvement (Hatfield et al., 2018).

For children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), transition planning services are important because they provide specialized support tailored to the unique needs and challenges these students face as they prepare for the transition to adulthood. For over twenty years, transition planning has been required by law and is theoretically and empirically associated with positive post-school outcomes for adolescents with disabilities. Unfortunately, students with high-incidence disabilities, such as ASD, continue to experience subpar post-school outcomes (Hughes, et al., 2023). Transition planning services go beyond academics to include things like social-emotional development, independent living skills, and vocational training. These services aim to help adolescents with ASD reach their full potential and succeed after high school.

In the state of Kentucky, when a child with a disability reaches the age of 14 years old, their IEP must include specific transition planning components that address the student's post-secondary goals. These goals should align with their intellectual capabilities to ensure that the goals are attainable and appropriate. The successful transition from high school to life thereafter

depends on the collaboration and teamwork between schools and community resources.

Depending on the specific goals of the child, a variety of resources are available to support them during their transition. The child should always be involved in transition planning.

Transition Resources For The Workforce

In Kentucky, a variety of transition resources are available to support individuals with disabilities as they transition to life after graduation. KentuckyWorks, in particular, offers a full range of services aimed at assisting individuals with disabilities in achieving their employment goals. These resources cover essential topics such as job readiness skills, workplace accommodations, self-advocacy, and disability awareness. Through training sessions, workshops, and webinars, KentuckyWorks provides individuals with the tools and support they need to succeed in the workforce. By collaborating with employers and agencies, KentuckyWorks also works to create inclusive work environments where individuals with disabilities feel supported and valued. Many of these resources are accessible to students while they are still in high school, ensuring a smooth transition to post-graduation employment opportunities.

Another valuable resource for individuals seeking to enter the workforce is the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). OVR offers vocational rehabilitation services, including assessments, job training, job placement support, and various other services aimed at assisting individuals with disabilities in obtaining employment. What sets OVR apart is its collaborative approach, where it aligns with the individual's Individualized Education Program (IEP), leveraging their strengths, interests, and needs to identify the ideal job match for each individual.

According to the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (n.d.) The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Training Center is a division of the OVC. It is a state-operated facility that provides vocational training to individuals with disabilities. The Perkins Center was established primarily to provide disabled Kentuckians with a singular location to obtain the necessary skills they would require to find employment. The center offers vocational training programs in several fields, such as healthcare, manufacturing, culinary arts, and more. The center provides life skills training in addition to vocational training to assist people with disabilities in acquiring the essential skills for independent living and successful employment. This may include, training in subjects like interpersonal skills, communication, problem-solving, and time management. By offering a comprehensive range of programs and services, the Perkins Center contributes to the successful transition of individuals with disabilities into the workforce.

Transition Services for College

The number of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has increased. To cater to the social, communicative, and executive functioning requirements of students with ASD, institution-based support programs have emerged across the nation, to help this expanding student population and encourage college success (Viezel et al., 2020). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with impairments in public settings. Universities must comply with the ADA by addressing organizational and social issues faced by the ASD community. In recent years, self-help websites from parents of adults with ASD and children with ASD have proliferated, offering advice on how to succeed academically and socially, as well as navigating the university admission process. The increase in available resources reflects the growing recognition within educational literature of the anticipated demand

for support services aimed at helping students with ASD transition smoothly into higher education (VanBergeijk et al., 2008).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that school districts develop transition plans for students as an integral component of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) starting at age 14. For higher-functioning students on the autism spectrum, it is crucial to incorporate exposure to college-level curriculum during their high school years. This exposure familiarizes students with the academic expectations of college and helps reduce the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed when transitioning. Additionally, experiencing college-level coursework in high school can boost students' confidence in their ability to succeed after high school.

Individuals who wish to pursue higher education can find valuable guidance in The Autism Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). The organization has published a handbook titled 'Navigating College: A Handbook on Self-Advocacy Written for Autistic Adults from Autistic Adults.' The book provides an overview of college life and is authored by autistic individuals who share the advice they wish they had received before attending college (Arky, 2023).

Role of Parents and Educators in Supporting the Transition Process

Parents and education professionals collaborate to ensure a smooth transition for autistic students. They work together to create a plan that provides continued support for the student, regardless of their chosen path after high school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes the importance of considering parents as equal partners in the IEP process (Cavendish et al., 2016). This involves close cooperation between parents, special education teachers, therapists, and guidance counselors to make the transition as effective and seamless as

possible. Parents must advocate for their children, making sure that their needs and preferences are being considered in the transition meetings.

Regular education and special education teachers have a crucial role in helping students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) prepare for life after high school. They start by developing the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and identifying their strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Based on these aspects, they determine the best approach to support the child's education and career goals. Educators can then prepare students with ASD for life after high school by implementing transition-focused curriculum and instruction. This may involve teaching self-advocacy, self-determination, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

Many school districts employ professionals called "Transition Specialists" who collaborate with parents, vocational rehabilitation services, colleges, and community agencies to ensure that students with disabilities receive the necessary resources and support while they are in school. These specialists work with educators to conduct assessments and identify the students' skills, interests, and preferences. Additionally, they work with the community by connecting students with agencies where they can obtain part-time jobs, internships, skills training, and more. The role of transition specialists is crucial in ensuring a successful transition for autistic children.

Addressing Mental Health and Well-Being

Adolescents with autism are at a higher risk of developing mental health issues compared to their peers. Those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders like Asperger's disorder, autism disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, are more likely to experience co-occurring mental health issues. Up to 70% of these young people may have at

least one co-occurring mental illness that requires treatment. Mental health services are frequently provided to address aggressive behavior and other behavioral issues, which are commonly associated with autism-related diagnoses (Narendorf et al., 2011).

Furthermore, there is a growing enrollment of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in academic post-secondary institutions. However, studies show that postsecondary students with ASD are facing greater difficulties than their peers who are typically developing. These difficulties include high rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, as well as a higher likelihood of dropping out before completing their degrees (Jackson et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to promote resilience and provide adequate support for these individuals.

Anxiety Disorder

In clinical samples of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), anxiety and inadequate stress management are prevalent problems. Adolescence is a time when anxiety can intensify as a result of the complicated social environment that young people face, as well as their increased awareness of their differences and interpersonal challenges (White et al., 2009).

Social challenges, such as interpreting social cues, navigating social interactions, and forming meaningful relationships, often lead to feelings of isolation and rejection, which can further exacerbate anxiety in social settings. Additionally, communication difficulties and the heightened sensitivity of senses can intensify the anxiety. People with ASD may experience severe sensory overload, which can trigger anxiety. Furthermore, individuals with executive functioning difficulties may experience anxiety when working on certain tasks.

Supporting Autistic Adolescents with Anxiety

There are various ways to provide support to a child with autism who is also dealing with anxiety. It is important for people to learn about autism spectrum disorder and make an effort to comprehend the difficulties and strengths associated with the condition. When interacting with individuals who have ASD, it is essential to show empathy and patience, recognizing that they may perceive the world differently. When communicating, use clear language and concrete examples. Adjust communication styles to accommodate the person's preferences and abilities.

It is crucial to educate children with ASD about proper coping mechanisms to help them manage anxiety and stress. Therapy is also a valuable support avenue. Individual, group, and family therapy can be helpful in addressing stress in individuals with ASD. While Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a commonly used treatment for anxiety symptoms in the general population, recent studies suggest that modified CBT can effectively reduce anxiety symptoms in children with ASD (Reaven, 2011). This comprehensive approach ensures that the child receives tailored support to meet their unique needs while addressing their anxiety concerns.

Conclusion

The transition from high school to life beyond can be a daunting and difficult experience for anyone, but particularly so for teenagers diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD is a condition characterized by deficiencies in social interaction, communication skills, and repetitive behavioral patterns. It's important to note that ASD is not always severe, and oftentimes, people with the disorder may not even be aware of it. Autism affects approximately 1% of the global population.

It is crucial to recognize the difficulties that individuals with ASD face during their transition period after high school. These challenges encompass various aspects, including social

interactions, employment opportunities, transportation access, activities of daily living (ADL), and mental health issues. For example, people with ASD may find it hard to understand social cues, secure meaningful employment, access transportation independently, manage daily tasks, and cope with mental health concerns such as anxiety or depression. To promote inclusivity and create opportunities for success in the post-high school life of individuals with ASD, it is important to provide them with tailored support and resources that cater to their unique needs. Furthermore, ongoing research and advocacy efforts must be continued to better understand and address their specific needs. This will help improve outcomes and promote their meaningful participation in society.

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