

Life after High School... So Now What?

Contributed by Kim Davis, M.S.

School is the beginning of formalized education. For students on the autism spectrum, their education is planned very carefully to meet the goals and objectives that parents and teachers create as the school journey begins. Most parents want to ensure their child has as much access to as many academic courses as possible. The emphasis can become focused on a year-to-year plan that incorporates academics and, hopefully, building friendships. As parents and teachers focus on the annual goals and objectives, the bigger picture of the future can become lost. The focus on the here and now becomes primary rather than looking at the true big picture of what the future will hold for each student. Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals might be written with a priority on the student to graduate with a diploma. Parents work hard to oversee that homework is completed on time, to stay on top of assignments and when exams will occur, and what to study in hopes of obtaining high marks to ensure the diploma. Parents know that raising a child with ASD (or any child for that matter), is a huge responsibility that has many ups and downs. To finally reach high school with the prospect of receiving a diploma is a dream that can come true for many children with ASD and their families. But, then what happens?

There is a process called Transition Planning and it legally begins when the student turns 14. At that point the IEP begins to incorporate an ITP or Individual Transition Plan. While this process legally begins at age 14, transitioning from public school into the adult/real world is a process that teachers, and especially parents, must consider from an early age. The Transition Plan is a process, not just a meeting, that happens once a year. Teachers and, especially, parents must be extremely thoughtful when making decisions about the child's goals from an early age. They have to envision the future. As time presses on towards the end of the public school years, parents will have to decide which tract (diploma or certificate) their child will follow. Their decisions will impact the life of their child. Sadly, many support teams do not think about the future outside of the school years. So when the transition plan "suddenly" happens, parents are ill prepared to make life altering decisions.

There is a passage in the law that states the transition IEP is "driven by an understanding of the student's needs once s/he leaves high school." That statement may not always receive the attention it deserves. While predicting the future is difficult, it is important to begin to prepare the child for the future early on. There is a saying, "you can't prepare the road for the child; but you can prepare the child for the road" and this is true for students with ASD. They may need more support to participate in life after high school with all of its opportunities as well as the challenges. The transition IEP can establish ways in which each student will receive the educational components that will help prepare him/her for life after school.

Many times there is little concentration on what happens once high school is completed. When is there time to talk about the future? The sad fact is the future arrives too soon and any preparation that the student with ASD needs in order to be successful in life may happen too late, if it happens at all. This is especially true for those students who are on the diploma track in high school. Everyone works incredibly hard in order to make graduation with a diploma happen. Graduation itself can be a great celebration. However when the balloon pops and the

reality of no more classes, daily routines, or consistent interaction with friends sets in; life can become overwhelming once again for the student, family, and friends.

How can the team (school and/or community members) that supports an individual with ASD and the family contemplate the future and also implement the teaching of necessary life learning skills? It is not an easy question to answer because every student is different and therefore, their future needs are different. The first step is involving the student in those conversations when possible. These conversations should include any communication accommodations that are necessary so they are actively involved in the conversation. Topics might address what they think they would like to do once school is finished. Do they want to go on to college? Do they want to take classes online instead of going to an actual school, or do they want to work? If so, what type of job are they interested in, etc.? What can the local community do to support the individual's interests and strengths? These are questions that parents explore with their non-disabled children but frequently omit in discussions with their child with ASD. Asking these questions are those that can bring about great success or great challenges for the child's future. It is a time when reasonable and realistic decisions should be discussed as a group that always includes the person with ASD. In the article, "The Puzzle of Lifestyle Planning" (IRCA), Author Nancy Kalina states "Everyone makes choices daily that impact life. . . . For individuals with autism spectrum disorders these decisions are often made by others and without the person's input." The article goes on and proposes numerous questions that have a critical impact on the future of any student, especially those with ASD or other developmental disabilities. This is a way for the individual to be involved in planning their life with the support of those around him/her. It is an excellent way to structure conversations about life after high school. The article covers further education, employment, communication, transportation, residential, travel, relationships, community perception, and supports. If we look at these topics and consider what is taught in school and required for a diploma, where does the student with ASD get to discuss and learn about these lifetime skills?

The transition from high school to the rest of one's life is enormous. If there have been no plans created and no ideas generated before graduation happens, what looms ahead in the future can be frightening and overwhelming. The strict concentration on academics can certainly be a benefit in some areas such as math skills and reading, but does knowing a line from Shakespeare, learning the state capitals, or a theorem contribute to life after high school? Academics are vital but in looking to the future, what skills *in addition* to academics are going to be critical for independence, happiness, and success in adult life?

Not only do the students with ASD need to be informed about their future and the questions they must answer, but parents must also begin to make their plans for the future. Unfortunately, parents may not always be around to protect and care for their child. One of the best precautions they can take is to be sure that their child receives the education and skills that will be necessary once high school is completed. How will their child handle money? Who will do the banking? How will their child get from place to place? Who will cook or do the laundry or mow the yard? Can the child use a telephone, text, or use the internet? The activities of daily living are often, just as critical for students with ASD to learn as reading and math.

It is a delicate balance between academics and functional life skills and one that can be challenging to achieve. When possible their strengths, interests, and preferences should always be infused into this balance and their daily plan. If students with ASD are to be truly prepared for life after high school, that balance is vital. As one parent put it, "He learned Shakespeare and passed Algebra, but now what?" There must be a plan for each aspect of the future, so the student, your child with autism can be better prepared to live a full life.

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