

Supporting Independence in Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum

Teaching for independence should become the focus of every activity for high school students with autism

The development of independent behavior is a critical, challenging process for all youth as they pass through the high school environment into adulthood. Although most high school students gain skills related to independence, the independent behaviors of their peers with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) plateau and decline. These deficits—and the resulting poor post-secondary outcomes for students with ASD—highlight the great need for programming in this area.

Independence and Adolescence

A major teenage developmental achievement is the ability to function in increasingly more complex settings without the support, monitoring, or close supervision of adults. Growth in behavioral autonomy during adolescence reflects improved cognitive developmental capacities to think, feel, act, and make decisions on one's own that occur in concert with greater opportunities and demands for independent behaviors in social settings.

Secondary settings offer a great deal of freedom and opportunities for behavioral autonomy, but these opportunities may involve potentially contradictory expectations for behavior and little adult guidance and support to ensure that students develop the capacity to engage in adaptive, independent behavior. The development of independence can be challenging for all adolescents as high school

students struggle to understand and respond to expectations of caregivers, multiple school staff, and peers, while also beginning to assert their own ideas and decisions. For students with ASD, however, these challenges in independence are compounded by characteristics related to the diagnosis of ASD.

Several studies indicate that adults with autism rely heavily on others for support in employment, living, and relationships. Yet, research also consistently indicates that students who demonstrate greater independence and/or behavioral autonomy during secondary school are more likely to be employed and live independently after completing high school than students who are more dependent on staff or caregivers.



Evidence-Based Interventions to Support Independence in Adolescents with ASD

Two overarching types of interventions can support students with ASD:

1. **School-wide interventions that have been implemented in high schools and are either appropriate for students with disabilities or for students who would receive the most intensive and individualized interventions.** School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is the most well-known approach for addressing the behavioral support

needs of students at risk for or with disabilities. SWPBS's team-based decision making, data-driven instruction, use of evidence-based practices (EBPs), and monitoring progress have direct applicability to school-wide programs supporting the behavioral needs—including independent functioning—of high school students with ASD.

- 2. Focused, evidence-based practices (EBPs) for people with ASD, derived from the new update from the National Professional Development Center on ASD.** The NPDC's review of the literature identified 12 EBPs that could be used to support the independent functioning or to reduce the interfering behavior of high school students with ASD, including: differential reinforcement, extinction, prompting, reinforcement, response interruption and redirection, self-management, task analysis, visual supports, work systems, antecedent-based interventions, functional behavior assessment (FBA), and social narratives.

Implications for Practitioners and Caregivers

The essential implication for all who support adolescents with ASD is to recognize the importance of independence as a curricular area for students in secondary settings. Teaching for independence should become the focus of every activity, and teams should examine whether current service delivery models encourage independence. Are systems set up to prepare students with ASD for adult life *and* to help them function in secondary school so they can graduate?

Process goals must be included in Individual Transition Plans (ITP) for adolescents with ASD in order to address underlying deficits in cognition and executive functions, with emphases on organization, planning, sequencing, and problem solving, each of which is critical in increasing independence. In addition, practitioners and caregivers also should capitalize on the known strengths of the student to support independent functioning.

The strict schedule of secondary settings, with the primary emphasis on obtaining credits to move toward graduation, makes programming for independence more difficult, but teaching for independence must be embedded across academic and vocational courses, implemented by team members across general and special education, and practiced across multiple settings.

In addition, family involvement can play an important role in promoting self-determination for adolescents with ASD. Parents can help adolescents with ASD to become more independent, but parental education and supports are needed to alleviate parent concerns.

Implications for Research and Practice

Next steps in research and practice regarding teaching independence to adolescents with ASD should: (a) include adolescents in studies of EBPs that currently only sample younger students; (b) expand contexts for interventions to include community and employment settings where adolescents with ASD access services, as well as homes; (c) extend the study of factors that impact implementation of EBPs and school-wide efforts to promote independence; (d) address the dearth of informal assessment materials available to describe and provide guidance; and, (e) devote more study to the use of innovative technologies.

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Full Article

Hume, K., Boyd, B. A., Hamm, J. V., and Kucharczyk, S. (2014). Supporting independence in adolescents on the autism spectrum. *Remedial and Special Education, (35)*2, 102–113. doi:10.1177/0741932513514617
<http://rse.sagepub.com/content/35/2/102.full.pdf+html>

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