

Equipping Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders for Adulthood

Promoting Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships

Promoting “rigor, relevance, and relationships” is crucial for improving in-school and post-school outcomes.

Preparing students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) for employment, postsecondary education, and life in the community after high school is the overarching goal of special education services and supports. Despite this emphasis, achieving positive outcomes has proven to be especially difficult for students on the autism spectrum. Addressing their needs during adolescence may be particularly challenging as it is a time of considerable transition and change, both of which can be difficult for students with ASD. Additionally, the heterogeneity of this population and more limited availability of services in adulthood add challenges. Although several promising frameworks for supporting adolescents with disabilities in transition have been developed, an emphasis on promoting “rigor, relevance, and relationships” within a more comprehensive transition framework for students with ASD will be important for improving in-school and post-school outcomes.

Rigorous Instruction

One key factor for promoting transition success is to provide strong, individualized instruction that reflects high expectations for all students. Instruction should be evidence-based, focused on the unique needs of each student, and be delivered by highly qualified educators. It is also important to increase overall expectations about postsecondary possibilities



for individuals with ASD. This is especially important, because research has shown that both the amount of participation in general education settings and parental expectations are associated with more positive outcomes.

Relevant Instruction

Instruction and learning opportunities must be relevant to the lives of students, both during and after high school. Three critical areas of relevant instruction are career development, self-determination, and recreation and leisure.

Providing school-based learning and activities that promote career development, vocational skills, and early work experiences has been linked to improved employment outcomes. Although high schools offer myriad opportunities in this area, many students with ASD are not participating in these activities. It is important to increase student participation in a range of career-focused activities that align with their future employment goals.



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Self-determination skills, such as self-advocacy, goal setting, and problem solving, are especially important both during and after high school. However, many students with ASD have limited opportunities to learn and practice these skills. Helping students become active members on their Individualized Education Program (IEP) process has been successful in promoting self-determination among these students.

Engaging in recreation and leisure activities will also be important after high school. Although high schools tend to offer a variety of extracurricular activities, students with ASD rarely participate in these activities. Schools can support engagement in recreation and leisure activities that align with the interests and strengths of individual students by “mapping” opportunities in the school. Also, students with ASD may benefit from direct instruction in this area.

Fostering Relationships

The final piece of the transition framework involves strengthening supportive relationships for students with ASD. Four types of relationships may be especially important. First, families are often the most prominent and most natural relationships for students; thus, it is valuable and important to engage families as “allies and advocates” in the transition process. Second, peer relationships also have great potential for positive influence during adolescence, impacting learning and social-emotional well-being. Schools, therefore, should consider a coordinated, multifaceted approach to encourage positive peer relationships. (See *Snapshot 75*.) Third, it is also important for schools and agencies to make efforts to build strong partnerships and offer students opportunities that develop connections with formal agencies and service systems for employment, education, and community living—and to do so early and often during the transition process. Finally, considering relationships with natural community supports, or more informal supports, is an often overlooked but critical part of promoting successful transitions. Mapping potential community resources and hosting “community conversations” have promise for fostering such relationships in the community.

The Importance of Assessment

Although rigor, relevance, and relationships are key pieces of supporting transition, there is an enduring need for individualized assessment in order to plan and implement successful transition services and supports. Assessments should cover a range of areas (e.g., academic, career, self-determination, independent living), integrate multiple perspectives—including the student and family—and incorporate both formal and informal assessments. Assessment and planning are foundational to the success of transition.

Future Research

Research should address the transition-related needs of adolescents with ASD. It is important to identify tools, practices, and methods for implementation for comprehensive models of secondary education that promote positive postsecondary outcomes in employment, education, and community living.

Corresponding Author

David W. Test
Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
dwtest@unc.edu

FPG Contact

Kara Hume, Co-Principal Investigator
Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders
UNC’s Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute
919-843-2291 | kara.hume@unc.edu

Full Article

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Snapshots 72–77 provide brief synopses of articles from the special issue on “Autism, Adolescence, and High School” for *Remedial and Special Education*. Kara Hume, the issue’s guest editor, serves as co-principal investigator of FPG’s Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Access Snapshots 72–77

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