

The Transition from School into Adulthood

Leaving school can be an anxious time for both people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their parents. The NZ Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline is an evidence-based summary of ASD, written by NZ experts. This Guideline has many recommendations for the transition from school into adulthood for people with ASD.

Leaving School

Change is difficult for people with ASD because common characteristics of ASD include restricted interests and activities. Leaving school results in huge changes in the daily activities of any person; the environment in which much of the day was spent, the activities that were done in this environment, when they were done, and who they did them with. In addition, relationships with people who have provided support throughout the individual's time at high school may be coming to an end, and there may be the prospect of unemployment or underemployment (working below the individual's level of skill).

Careful planning is recommended to minimise the anxiety that this transition may result in for people with ASD and their families and to make sure that the transition is as successful as possible.

Suggestions include:

- Making sure that the wishes of the individual with ASD are taken into account
- Carefully choosing the type and place of work or study
- Collaboration between the funders of adult services and the education sector
- Flexible commencement of further study or work, so that the person will not be overwhelmed
- Funding to help if the transition is gradual, for example, starting part time work as opposed to full time
- Anticipating problems before they occur and solving these problems creatively

Further Education

While further education should be an option for all people, regardless of ability, barriers are sometimes faced by people who are different. The symptoms of ASD that may affect the success of an individual's further education and should be included when planning for the transition include:

- Problems making and keeping friends, which may lead to social isolation
- A lack of initiative, using self help and independence skills
- Low levels of confidence and self esteem
- Odd use of language



- Very literal understanding of language
- Intense interests
- A lack in awareness of emotions of other students and staff
- Overreaction to change
- Poor understanding of non-verbal communication
- Poor motor skills
- Any other mental health problems that may be unrecognised

There are many aspects of further education environments that make the transition difficult for people with ASD. These environments are often crowded and noisy, and require the student to go to different rooms for lectures, tutorials, lab work etc. In addition, the main method of teaching is verbal communication.

Most universities and polytechnics have specialist student support services which provide extra help with things such as study skills, exam assistance and note taking. Other strategies of support that may be provided by the student support services or required to be organised by other sources include career counselling for course selection, a guide or buddy system for new students, mentoring, one-on-one tutoring, reformatting course materials, resources such as computer access and rest rooms, and telling staff about the ASD diagnosis. The NZ ASD Guideline has specific advice for the teaching of students with ASD directed toward tutors and lecturers, and ways that they can minimise stress for individuals with ASD during exams.

Work

It is a normal goal in life to become a worker. With work comes benefits such as success and status. Whatever their ability, all people with ASD can become involved in work that is meaningful. There are many characteristics of ASD that are related to work, some of which may help, and some which may hinder employment success. These include:

- Punctuality
- Attention to detail
- Loyalty
- Perfectionism
- Independence
- Enjoyment of routine or tasks that are repetitive
- Preference for structured time
- Preference for no interruptions
- Difficulties with social skills and working in teams
- Difficulties or stress reactions to multitasking, deadlines, and change in or conflict of priorities
- Reluctance to ask for help
- Low awareness of danger
- Difficulties with time management
- Difficulties with change in work mates, environment or conditions

Sometimes it is difficult for individuals with ASD to find and keep work. They are often underemployed and rely upon their families to help them find work. People with ASD require support in finding work, learning how to do the job, getting assistance in completing the job, addressing both work related and non work related issues, and transportation.



It has been found that when specialist employment services are involved, people with ASD are more likely to have positive work outcomes. The NZ ASD Guideline recommends that individuals with ASD have control of their occupational futures, can access specialist employment services, and receive follow up support. Employment specialist services can help by acting as facilitators, helping with social integration, taking account of the needs of employers, carefully matching jobs and individuals, clearly explaining duties and expectations, breaking down complex tasks, and organising one-on-one job training. They can also help by supporting the individual in deciding whether to disclose their diagnosis, educating employers and co-workers about ASD and the benefits of employing someone with ASD, and by educating the individual with ASD about ways that they may face discrimination and about their workplace rights.

Helpful strategies for work supervisors of people with ASD are:

- Modifying the job to keep the routine and duties consistent
- Keeping the social aspects of the job manageable
- Having others structure and keep track of the work
- Adding activities to reduce unstructured time
- Supervision that includes direct, specific instructions, verification of the understanding of communication, assisting the learning and understanding of social cues, and

explaining and helping the employee with job changes

- Helping to promote positive social relations by encouraging co-workers to initiate interactions, having several other employees to give advice on job-related matters and to 'look out' for the employee
- Support services to provide reassurance until the employee and other staff get to know one another, the transferring of the supports to other employees, the supervisor being available in case work problems arise, and also available to discuss non-work problems that may affect the job

If you would like a copy of the NZ ASD Guideline, you can order a hardcopy, or download it in PDF format from <http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/nz-asd-guideline-apr08>

References

Ministries of Health and Education. (2008). New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

