One of the most difficult tasks during transition after high school is deciding just how much involvement should be expected from the student with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Because the autism spectrum includes a wide range of skills, abilities, cognitive levels and communication proficiency, there is no one-size-fits-all formula for determining how much to involve each individual. One common mistake, however, is for parents and professionals to underestimate the degree to which the student can actively participate. To assure that your child’s interests are fully covered, it is imperative to involve him as much as possible. This will increase the overall success of the transition plan; your child will feel as if he is an active participant and therefore be more apt to cooperate in its development and implementation.

There are certain fundamental considerations to keep in the forefront when considering involvement of your child with an ASD. One of the first questions that needs to be asked is, “How well can he truly understand the transition process?” If he has a dual diagnosis of an ASD and an intellectual disability (mental retardation), his cognitive limitations will inevitably influence his ability to fully understand the overall process, as well as to follow along during discussions regarding possible vocational or living arrangements. At the same time, never assume that an individual with an ASD cannot participate at all if he has intellectual deficits. Rather, transition team members need to be creative in thinking of ways...
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to allow choice making and help the individual understand discussions and decisions.

**Specific Issues to Consider**

**Literal Thinking**

One of the more consistent characteristics of individuals with ASDs is that they tend to think very literally. Therefore, it can be incredibly difficult for them to imagine themselves in various employment or living situations.

This tendency toward thinking concretely can drastically hinder the transition process if the team relies on describing vocational and living options during planning. Individuals with ASDs usually need to see and experience potential work and living situations personally before they can provide genuine feedback regarding their preferences. Although the most common way of providing this experience is personal exposure, watching a videotape or looking at pictures of the prospective work or living situation can sometimes be sufficient.

A related recommendation is to carefully choose your wording during your interactions with the person with an ASD. Try to avoid idioms or unclear statements; instead rely upon clear, concrete terms to try to help the student understand your point.

**Rules to Follow**

When making transition decisions regarding a student with an ASD, there are certain general axioms that tend to ring true.

_Do not overtax social skills_. Focus on vocational and living situations that do not demand excessive social interactions or the ability to interpret interpersonal nuances. Most individuals with ASDs find it exceedingly difficult to perform successfully in social situations. Therefore, they are more comfortable in less socially oriented jobs or living situations. Directly observe the individual’s social skills and his interest in social activities, and interview people who know her well to help determine how socially demanding the chosen work or living situation should be.

**Consider passions and preoccupations.** It is often helpful to take advantage of any specific areas of interest and try to customize your child’s employment or living situation accordingly while still accommodating his overall skill level. For example, a student may be especially interested in trains and want to be an engineer, but does not have the cognitive skills for this to be a realistic goal. You could explore other vocations that are linked to trains but are more within the individual’s skill set.

_Remember to respect the need for routine and predictability, _by focusing on vocational and living situations that are generally routinized and predictable. People with ASDs are usually more content when each day at work and home is relatively consistent with a minimum of surprises. Clear structure and predictable schedules tend to be appealing and lead to greater success.

As a general rule, you will want to avoid jobs that demand quick changes in routine or multitasking, and it might...
**Strategies to Increase Student Involvement**

**Work with Mentors**
Many highly successful adults with an ASD cite the support of a mentor as one of the major reasons for their success. Once a potential employment situation is chosen, the transition team should try to identify a mentor in the field who is willing to work with the individual. If your child will be working with a mentor, it is beneficial for people who know him to meet with the mentor ahead of time to provide relevant information, such as your child’s communication style and potential behavioral quirks. The transition team needs to provide mentors with sufficient information and training in order to assure that they can be as effective as possible. Provide the mentor with guidance in terms of what types of language and supports should be used and the level of commitment expected.

**Provide Guided Choices**
When helping a student with an ASD choose a vocation or living situation, it is usually better to provide guided choices rather than asking open-ended questions. Individuals with ASDs usually find questions such as “What kind of job do you want?” or “Where would you like to live?” to be highly confusing. Therefore, it makes sense to generate a list of potential jobs or living situations and then present them to your child in groups of two to four possibilities so that she is not overwhelmed. When a student with an ASD is able to generate her own list of potential careers, it is important for everyone on the transition team to take these options as seriously as possible.

**Use Visual Supports**
Most people with ASDs take information in more effectively via visual input than through their other senses. As a result, various techniques have been developed. For example, *Social Stories™*, created and refined by Carol Gray, involve writing an individualized storybook from the perspective of the person with an ASD. These stories provide information in written and/or icon form to help the individual understand the social expectations of a given situation and the effect of his own behavior on others. They can also address the person’s specific fears.

*Spotlight*

make sense to sit down with someone in the community who has the same job to learn more about what a typical day looks like or to observe them in the work setting.

**Avoid overtaxing communication skills.** Consider vocations and living situations that do not require ongoing or sophisticated communication. A work setting that requires a lot of talking during the day will be highly taxing to most individuals with an ASD. Quiet work that the individual can focus on without any demands for language is usually a better fit. Similarly, a living arrangement where the other housemates are generally quiet and do not feel the need for ongoing conversation will probably be less anxiety-provoking compared to a setting where a lot of dialogue is expected.
or idiosyncrasies. During the transition process, it can be helpful to write Social Stories about potential vocational or living situations (for more information, visit thegraycenter.org).

Comic Strip Conversations, also developed by Carol Gray, rely upon simple sketches as the primary means of providing information to the individual with an ASD. Stick-figure drawings with prescribed symbols help the individual understand what other people may be thinking within a given social context and also provide alternative behaviors the student can use during similar situations in the future. Color coding may be used to help the student with autism understand the other person’s feelings.

For students who are transitioning, Comic Strip Conversations can be developed to address many issues:

- how a job coach may react if the student refuses to cooperate,
- what a prospective employer may be thinking during a job interview, or
- how parents and potential housemates may be feeling during an initial visit to a supervised apartment setting.

Another visual support that is often used with students with ASDs is a written schedule, which can consist of custom-made schedules involving pictures or words, or commercially available calendars or appointment books. They may be used to help the student understand the sequence of events involved in the transition process, as well as mini-steps within each step of transition. For example, your child’s transition team can develop a calendar that notes the dates of important transition events such as upcoming job interviews, visits to potential work settings and visits to supervised living arrangements.

Power Cards are another visual strategy that can help the transition process go more smoothly for students with ASDs who are overly focused on certain objects, celebrities, fictional characters, etc. The Power Card concept was developed by Elisa Gagnon to increase motivation when teaching people with ASD to respond appropriately, especially during social situations.

To use this strategy, the transition team would first identify the student’s particular passion (such as a favorite celebrity or topic), then write up a one-page story incorporating the passion and focusing on the appropriate behavior. If a student with an ASD can associate the desired appropriate behaviors with her passion, she will sometimes be more motivated to use those behaviors.

Finally, video modeling is one of the more recent innovations that can be used to promote a smooth transition. This strategy involves making a short film that focuses on the specific aspects of a given task or social situation that you want to emphasize to an individual with an ASD. For example, you can make a videotape of someone taking turns during a conversation or performing a certain task.

For best results, make sure that the actor(s) in the videotape are especially appealing to the student with ASD. If your student or child enjoys watching himself on tape, you can create a videotape that depicts him performing the desired task. For example, one student took 30 minutes to get through his morning routine even though each step was well within his abilities. Staff created a videotape filming the student with gestures from behind the camera as he went through the morning routine at a more reasonable pace. The student then watched the videotape and was soon completing the routine in 5 minutes or less.

Responding to the Emotional Aspects of Transition

Transition can be a difficult time for many students who are nearing graduation from high school, especially those on the autism spectrum. As the final days of transition approach, your child may feel anxious, confused, resistant to the idea of change or disappointed that her hopes for the future turned out to be unrealistic.

Starting the transition phase early in adolescence assures that your child will have the opportunity to be gradually exposed to the idea of leaving school and entering adulthood. It is also important to continue to revisit transitional themes to remind your child what people do when they “grow up.” For example, allow her to frequently watch a videotape of her prospective workplace, revisit a future group home, or visit adult siblings at their workplaces or homes.

Assisting Your Child in Articulating his Feelings

Your child needs to be able to discuss his feelings and concerns about transitioning out of high school. However, even the most adept students with ASDs often
have trouble identifying and expressing their own emotions. Therefore, your child may benefit from having specific IEP goals that focus on identification and expression of emotions as early as possible in his educational experience. This skill can be taught a variety of ways, including via Social Stories™, software programs, role playing, social skills groups and the like. Some students have learned to identify their own emotions using visual cues such as “emotional thermometers,” periodically recording their emotional state on a pictured thermometer that shows various levels of emotional states. Once your child has learned to accurately express emotions, it is important to touch base with him every so often to assess his feelings regarding upcoming experiences within the transition process. Parents need to be highly sensitive to behavioral changes that reflect their child’s emotions as transition steps take place.

**Helping Your Child Cope with Change**

For students on the autism spectrum, just coping with the mere idea of change can be problematic. One characteristic of these students is a tendency towards rigidity of thought and daily routine. Therefore, it is often necessary to teach these students to be more flexible and open to change.

One technique that can be helpful for parents is “cognitive restructuring,” which is a therapeutic method that can teach students to change the way they think. For example, you can give your child cue cards that list adaptive, flexible thoughts such as “Change is okay” and “Life is full of surprises.” If your child reads these cue cards frequently, the thoughts become ingrained in her cognitive processes, which can help her become more open to the changes that come with transition.

**When Making Choices is Difficult**

It is often difficult for students on the spectrum to communicate their choices. The IEP transition team must be especially careful not to make choices for your child and to involve him in the decision-making process at all stages of the transition plan to the highest degree possible. It is also important to teach your child to advocate for himself by recognizing that it is acceptable to disagree with the IEP team’s ideas during transition and understand how to do so appropriately.

If a student is completely nonverbal or minimally verbal, the transition team can prompt him to use other modes of communication such as signing, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or gestures to convey his wishes. Providing him with guided choices rather than open-ended ones can increase his comprehension and ability to respond. For example, ask “Do you like working at McDonald’s or Pizza Hut?” while showing him pictures of each option, rather than “Where do you like to work the best?”

**Concluding Comments**

One of the major axioms when involving students with autism spectrum disorders in the transition process is to “think outside the box.” The transition team needs to be highly creative and individualized as they develop strategies for helping the student understand the many options available to her after high school. For the greatest chances of success, make sure that the student is as fully involved in the transition process as possible, regardless of her “functioning level.”