

## Preparing for the Transition to Adulthood (Part 2)

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This is the second part of a three-part blog. If you haven't read the [first part](#), you might want to do so. The following is a list of questions to explore related to a student when they are in mid-high school to help consider what realistic options are for the next step post-graduation. Rarely have the students I have observed "pulled it together" in their junior and senior years of high school, given the tremendous increasing pressures they feel as they start to realize they will be graduating. While we want to include the student in these discussions, we also have to realize that many of our students cannot imagine something they have not experienced. Many students assure their parents they will figure it all out once they go to college; this is called "talking the talk". Until our students demonstrate they can understand the action plans they need to demonstrate in order to show themselves and us they are "walking the walk", it is overly optimistic to trust our students know how to problem solve what their next step past graduation should be. While the "next step" should not discount what the student is saying he/she wants to do, they can only really be given that choice after they have been exposed to multiple post-high school options.

Consider these questions:

1. Does the student keep track of his own homework assignments?
2. Does he create and implement plans, even if he doesn't do them to perfection that are reasonable for working through his short term and long term homework assignments?
3. Does he know how to ask for help?
4. Does he understand how to manage his/her anxiety when dealing with a stressful day? Or does he require adult intervention for him/her to implement self-calming strategies?
5. Does he/she have one or two friends he/she seeks out to initiate helping to maintain a friendship?
6. Can he/she do their homework assignments for language arts/written expression without regular adult assistance?
7. Can he/she make basic inferences, summarize stories, and understand there is a main idea?
8. Does he/she have an idea of maintaining his/her hygiene without constant reminders?
9. Does he/she understand his/ her need to help at home even if they don't want to?
10. Can they find their intrinsic motivation to make themselves do things they don't want to do?
11. Does he/she demonstrate a significantly improved attention span and willingness to learn/participate at harder tasks when doing specific visual-motor or technical tasks? (e.g., electronics, car repair, plumbing, computer programming, etc)
12. Do they say they hate school and struggle to wake up in the morning to go to school without parent intervention?
13. Are they asking to get a job in the community, even a basic job like working at Target or cleaning up a pizza parlor in lieu of going to college?

If the majority of answers to questions 1-10 was "no", then the student you are considering is at great risk for not making it in even the most understanding of college programs. College special needs programs do not "entitle" the student to succeed; a student needs to be able to learn the basic concepts of the college courses without modification and demonstrate knowledge of that learning only with accommodations (not course minimization) available to anyone with a proven disability.

If the answers to 11, 12 and 13 are mostly "yes" your student is implying that he needs to find a new path towards his own success outside of the traditional school or college experience.

High school offers a highly structured day; a school and homework routine the students should have adapted to for years. College life, even when commuting from home is not routine. There are large gaps in the middle of the day where students do not have classes, yet they are not used to doing homework at 10 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon. Many of our students do not know how to make use of all the time that they now have on their hands, nor have they developed strong social networking skills.

When attending a K-12 school day our students are surrounded by peers; even if they don't have a lot of friends people know who they are and notice when they are not present. Students are also told what classes to go to, attendance is monitored; students are accounted for. There is no such accountability system in a college program. Students decide whether they want to attend classes, adults do not follow up (usually) if they fail to attend. Other students may not take notice of our student, they may not notice if he or she doesn't go to class. The same goes for doing homework. The shift of responsibility for a student's work has shifted from the parents and teachers overseeing the student to the student themselves, almost overnight! Communication with personnel at the college from the special students departments to the faculty and staff, even for parents who want to stay involved with their student's workload, is not actively encouraged.

How to move forward with all this information based on my experiences?

Parents of upper elementary school and early middle school students who believe their child is college bound should read the book, Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel. It is a very friendly read and provides further insights into the real demands of succeeding in this environment post high school. An honest assessment of your child/student should ensue. If the team feels it appropriate to move forward with planning for the student to attend some form of college, begin to address goals towards helping the student to shift into their own self-planning and finding their own motivation to get their work done. Parents need to slowly begin to retreat from being the organizers of all information for a student and let their student take on more decision making and problem solving in their early years of high school. If a student is overwhelmed in his classes, rather than push teachers to find ways to help the student to pass with a decent grade, instead consider having the student take an easier class where he or she feels they can better succeed with less assistance. This is part of the "less is more".

Also, remember the requirements to attend junior colleges are far more lenient. Students don't need to take foreign language or meet the same math requirements, etc. No honors or AP classes are required to "look better" on paper in order to try and get into a competitive four-year university.

It may also be a good idea during the student's junior or senior year of HS to enroll in a college class on a college campus so they get an idea of how to move around campus, what it is like to sit in a larger lecture hall, how assignments are turned in, how to study off a syllabus, etc. However if you do this, then make sure the team does not help the student like they do with the high school class. Orient the student to how to use a syllabus, where they can study at school, etc; avoid the hand over hand assistance. See how your student feels working with this level of freedom. Some of our students love it and are more "able" when placed in an environment that encourages them to be more self-reliant; but many of our students struggle. This practice run gives the student as well as the family, a sense of this transition and whether going to a college setting is an environment they can continue "grow" in.

Don't minimize the importance of developing social networking skills and joining clubs, etc. Students are on their own to develop their own social networks on a college campus. Have your student/child sign up for a Facebook account in their last years of high school. This is the current way in which kids network the most, get included in events, etc. Have your student learn the hidden rules. Avoid, thinking that social learning and related social skills should not interfere with academic lessons. These skills, along with grit and tenacity, are the most important predictors of adult success!

If a student is feeling so much pressure they can't function, then the culture wrapped around a student needs to change. Students can only learn when they can concentrate. At times the culture of academic education, made even more profound by No Child Left Behind, fails to consider the whole child.

All this being said, there are programs developing on college campuses for students with Asperger Syndrome and related challenges. Some of these are tutorial based programs that also offer some social skills training while others are private programs that help teach students life skills along with academic and vocational learning. However, if you answered "no" to most of the questions 1-10 above, it is very likely these programs may still not be enough to help your child become a "college grad".

To sum this up:

Start early with not only having the student learn new and expanded skills sets, finding their own motivation to learn and "owning" what they need to continue to work on. Parents also have to learn to change their own parenting strategy. "Less is more" applies to parents as much as it applies to the student. Parents and teachers need to catch themselves from placing students in programs where they cannot do their own work and feel decent about the work they are doing.

A bird that does not grow wings cannot fly.

[To read part one of this article, click here](#)

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