



The Impact of **Transitions** on Neurodiverse Young Adults

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As someone who has studied the impact autism has on human behavior for years and who is currently the Program Director of [The College Internship Program](#) (CIP) – a transition program for young adults with autism and learning differences – I have seen first-hand that there are far more resources on early intervention for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) than there are for young adults. This realization motivated me to create more resources for young adults.

In my time as a Behavior Analyst working with vulnerable populations in clinics, schools, hospitals and the community, I have been privileged to see thousands of “Aha!” moments. I have also seen the most difficult learning moments, such as when young people show minimal intrinsic motivation, non-existent social awareness, and fall into a continuous downward spiral. Based on these moments of celebration and uncertainty, I have identified a few key concepts that can help ensure progress through the transition from teenager to young adult.

Cut the Steel Umbilical Cord

Dr. Michael McManmon, founder of [CIP](#), teaches that young adults need to learn to cut their end of the steel umbilical cord by seeking assistance from *others*.¹ His book, *Made for Good Purpose*, would benefit all parents searching for post-secondary options. Cutting the steel umbilical cord seems almost emotionally impossible to a parent. You have watched your child grow and overcome insurmountable obstacles and challenges, and you have set up appointments and advocated for your child every step of the way. Now it is time for you to give your child space to flourish. In my experience, watching children in this particular transformation is truly remarkable. I know from first-hand experience the years of effort and grit required to get to this point. In this phase, students gain greater independence and develop new relationships and connections, which leads to innate intrinsic and extrinsic motivation without the presence of a parent. Parents often see their child increase in self-confidence and notice a decrease in dependency on parents. This creates a fresh start for the child and the parent. Learn to let go and give your children the space they need to make independent choices and decisions. They may make mistakes, but this will only help them to further grow. Let them know that you are only a phone call away. Set up regular meetings to check in on them, but do not hold on to them too tightly. Let them show you what they can accomplish.

The Power of Knowing

While young adults who enter the adult world through work or post-secondary education often say, "I have autism," it is less common for them to define how this impacts their life in the short and long term. What challenges do they have that they should share with an employer? What specific accommodations do they need to be successful in the classroom? Determining where your child is at with regard to self-acceptance can make the transition to independence easier. Since it is common for young adults with autism to avoid talking about these topics with their parents, the latter need to ensure that their child has the self-advocacy skills to speak up for his or her needs. In our practice, this level of knowledge helps our team of experts know where to begin. In my experience, it is too easy for individuals with autism to be misperceived because of controllable or uncontrollable characteristics. This is why self-acceptance and self-advocacy are so important.

Community

Throughout our lives, the experiences that we have help determine how we operate in the world. Many young adults with autism tend to avoid crowds and new people because of observable challenges and a history of disappointing interactions. However, it is necessary to interact with new people and foster relationships with peers, educators and employers in order to be successful in the adult world. In my experience, the best way to support success in the community is to teach your child or teen the following skills: use of nonverbal communication; developing and maintaining relationships; and understanding different perspectives. You can help with this transition by providing your teen with opportunities that offer public support, such as volunteer work, or student employment.

The End Goal

It is important to set goals with your child during each phase of life. When your child is young, a goal might be to learn how to tie a shoe, or to get dressed independently. As your child gets older, goals might include riding a bike around the neighborhood on his or her own, or maintaining a self-care routine. Since goal-setting and follow-through directly involve executive functioning and overall processing, building these skills is equally important to the success of a young adult. Such skills include task initiation, focus and attention, managing emotions, working memory, and impulse control. Targeting and addressing executive function challenges takes time. As you work on these skills, it is imperative to also evaluate the social relevance of the goals your children set for themselves. If your adolescent is beginning a post-secondary transition and a team advisor is assuming the goal-setting role, I encourage you to challenge the team to set goals that are measurable, realistic, and achievable. When unrealistic and unachievable goals are set that do not play to your child's strengths, it is very easy for regression to take place.



Specific (Who? What? Where?)



Measurable (How?)



Achievable and Action-oriented



Realistic/Relevant



Time-related (When?)

The transition from adolescence to adulthood includes ending a dependency on being prompted to act, and developing an increased ability to take direction from new and unfamiliar people. During this sensitive time of exploration and essential transformation, you and your child should research, collaborate, and make use of the support that is available to you. Ultimately, you want to ensure your child understands that — in the words of Dr. McManmon — “You were made for good purpose and are inherently valuable.”

References

1. McManmon, M. (2012). *Made for Good Purpose: What Every Parent Needs to Know to Help Their Adolescent with Asperger’s, High Functioning Autism or a Learning Difference Become an Independent Adult.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers. London.



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