

# The Transition Process

Helping ASD high school graduates progress from a structured environment to the unpredictable world at large

## A Seat at the Table

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**Y**our young adult graduates from high school and everyone is ecstatic. Family, teachers and friends congratulate him or her and there is a big party. However, after the graduation celebration reality sets in—your young adult has nowhere to go in the morning, nothing to get up for.

You no longer have to wake up at the crack of dawn, but the sacrifice you make for not having to be an early riser leaves you longing for the old days. As the truth sets in, you realize that after all the years of meeting the bus, attending annual IEP meetings (where everyone squeezes into one room to discuss your child for hours on end), advocating and fighting for services, you have come to the end of the road in the public school system.



When our youth graduate from high school, they have three path options: 1) attend a higher-level secondary education program, 2) enroll in a day program, or 3) begin a career pathway that will lead to meaningful employment in the future.

The special education movement has progressed from a position of “separate but equal” after the Civil Rights Movement to an inclusion model after the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications and governmental activities); yet, our students currently find themselves at an employment crossroads.

Even though marginal progress has been made in the years following the 1997 federal IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) enactment of the mandated Individual Transition Plan (ITP), we still find our students underserved. The amended IDEA of 1997 requires students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to have an ITP in place by the time they are 16 years of age (in some states, like California, Indiana and North Carolina the process begins at age 14).

The goal of the ITP is to prepare the student not only for life after high school, but also for a job. First a standardized assessment tool is used to assess a student’s baseline employment skills, then the assessment results are used to help determine the academic curriculum path that the student will take in order to be successful in the “real” world after graduation.

According to a study cited in the Autism Speaks online journal, “In the first two years after high school, over half of young adults with ASD had neither held paid employment nor enrolled in vocational training or college. This “no participation” rate

was higher than that of any other disability group tracked in the study—including those with intellectual disability. Six years after high school, only a third of young adults with autism had attended college and barely half had ever held a paid job. The years immediately after high school are when people create an important foundation for the rest of their lives” (Shattuck et al., 2012).

So how should we rate how well our country is doing as a whole in meeting the original goals of the ITP process? Currently the emphasis in the school setting is on Person Centered Planning, which means the IEP determines the academic path a student will take

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based on the curriculum determined by the assessment tool. But the majority of our students will not excel in academic subjects, so the assessment tool will point to the possibility of a more vocational job employment route. The issue here is that most schools no longer have vocational programs, so our students (who have been served by full inclusion) graduate with diplomas, but have no real job skills. In short, we are not giving them the tools to compete in the job market.

In a Utopian school setting, we would assess the student and then find a happy medium between the Person Centered Planning and a Vocational Training program. Unfortunately,

the school districts have not caught up with the assessment tool; so if your child is good at horticulture and baking, you are left to your own devices. It is entirely on you to make sure your child has access to his skill set and secures a job in that area.

We may want to rethink the ITP process and ask ourselves whether or not we are truly preparing our students for the real world and more importantly, for a job. Being included but sacrificing a job skill set isn’t going to help our students when they exit the public school setting. I say we rethink the inclusion model and find a way to incorporate vocational training into the mix. Bring back woodworking, horticulture, baking, shop class, music and art classes; not just for special needs students, for all students.

All our students should have the choice of the best that a Person Centered Planning combined with a vocational model can offer, whereby assuring them a seat at the table! ■

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Joanne Lara, MA, founder of Autism Movement Therapy, recipient of two Autism Speaks grants, was the autism expert on the FoxTV show *Touch*, and is core adjunct faculty at National University in Los Angeles. Lara produced the documentary, *Generation A: Portraits of Autism & the Arts*. For AMT Certification and licensing, visit [www.autismmovementtherapy.org](http://www.autismmovementtherapy.org)

## Reference

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