

Kathleen D. Viesel  
Susan M. Wilczynski  
Andrew S. Davis *Editors*

# Postsecondary Transition for College- or Career-Bound Autistic Students

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# College- or Career-Bound Autistic Adolescents: An Introduction



Kathleen D. Viezel, Susan M. Wilczynski, and Andrew S. Davis

**Abstract** School psychologists and those in related professions need to provide a variety of services to Autistic students as they prepare for postsecondary life, including assessment, intervention, and consultation. Similarly, school psychology professionals in postsecondary settings ought to be prepared to meet the needs of Autistic college students. Many Autistic high-schoolers have the abilities to enter college or competitive employment and often have the same goals as their neurotypical peers; however, individual and systemic barriers may impede their success. This introductory chapter reviews foundational concepts relevant to the context of this text, including diagnostic considerations, use of appropriate terminology, and the role school psychologists have in supporting college- or career-bound Autistic students. Finally, summaries of the chapters included in this book are provided.

**Keywords** Autism · Transition planning · Postsecondary

Increasing prevalence rates of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) suggest those working in high schools can expect to see more Autistic students in their classrooms and on their caseloads. The dual demand on schools to meet the current needs of students (e.g., academic, social, and behavioral skills) and to prepare these students for their postsecondary futures means school psychologists need to be prepared to provide expansive direct and consultative services that support the self-determined goals of transition-aged Autistic students. Given 38% of high school students take advanced placement courses (College Board, 2021), school psychologists will need

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to support college-bound Autistic students while they are in high school as well as prepare them for postsecondary life. Autistic high school students often have the cognitive ability, academic potential, and most importantly the desire to follow similar postsecondary trajectories as their non-Autistic peers. Despite these protective factors, it is often difficult for neurodivergent adolescents to navigate systems which are not optimally designed for them. Autistic students without comorbid intellectual disability (ID) who desire to live and work independently (often historically referred to in the literature as having “high-functioning” autism spectrum disorder, or HFASD) would therefore benefit from the assistance of experts in the educational system, such as school psychologists. Practitioners, however, may not feel adequately prepared to help these students meet their postsecondary goals. Similarly, practitioners serving postsecondary students should be prepared to meet the needs of Autistic college students and professors must adequately train graduate students to work with transition-age Autistic students. It is also often necessary for vocational supervisors and/or college administrators and faculty to be provided with psychoeducation about how best to help Autistic workers and students. Our aim in producing this book was to help school psychologists, and those in related professions, support Autistic students and their families so they can effectively prepare and execute meaningful and appropriate postsecondary transition plans and interventions. Information in this book will also be useful for families and Autistic self-advocates as they navigate the transition to college or a career.

## **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) has always been written using the medical model, in which clusters of deficits or excesses are applied to human beings, as opposed to the mismatch between individuals and the environments in which they live (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). We believe the deficit model of ASD in which psychologists are often trained fails to adequately account for the strengths associated with ASD and to reflect that many of the challenges Autistics experience result from a poor match between the environment and their unique needs, rather than constitutional deficits associated with ASD. However, given the central role that the DSM has played across disciplines, we would be remiss in eliminating the diagnostic criteria consistently being applied by health and school professionals. The fifth and most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) contains two major categories of diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder. The first is deficits in social communication/interaction; the individual must have (or previously had) difficulty with reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and with social relationships. The second criterion focuses on restricted or repetitive behavior or interests, such as stereotyped movements, resistance to change in routine, restricted/fixated interests, and/or being either over- or under-reactive to sensory input. These deficits must have occurred

during the individual's early development, cause significant impairment, occur across settings, and are not better accounted for by another developmental disability (although they can co-occur; APA, 2013). The reader is directed to the DSM-V for full diagnostic criteria.

Of note, many practitioners may be familiar with other autism spectrum disorders, such as Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). The current DSM does not differentiate between these disorders and autism (called "Autistic disorder" in the previous edition of the DSM); instead, the text notes that individuals who previously met criteria for these disorders should now be considered to warrant a diagnosis of ASD. Thus, the contents of this book do not differentiate between people diagnosed with "autism" or "Asperger's." However, Autistic individuals may still identify as having Asperger's (the label "Aspie" is sometimes used by people who self-identify as such), although the elimination of the PDD-NOS category seems to be well-received within the autism community (Linton et al., 2014).

Perhaps in an effort to recognize the "spectrum" nature of ASD without the existence of heterogeneous categories, the DSM includes specifiers for severity level for both social communication and restricted/repetitive behaviors. These levels range from 3 ("requiring very substantial support") to 1 ("requiring support"). The population of interest in this book will mostly be individuals without co-occurring ID, and likely fall within levels 1–2. However, it should be noted these distinctions are somewhat subjective and may not sufficiently describe differences across environments that often result from poorly structured supports in some environments. For example, 51% of college-bound Autistic high school students reported being recently bullied. In addition, college-bound Autistic high school students whose parents reported they experienced bullying had much higher rates of social anxiety (van Schalkwyk et al., 2017). The same student may have been described as not requiring supports prior to bullying but requiring more substantial supports in school once the bullying and resulting anxiety increase. Thus, school psychologists should withhold judgment about the identified level of support required for new students on their caseload until they understand the environmental conditions that may be attenuating independence. Further discussion on the use of terminology to describe the level of functioning is provided below. Readers of this volume may also be familiar with the educational classification of autism. Different states may define this category differently, and it should be noted that a DSM-V diagnosis of ASD is not required for special education services.

## **A Discussion of Terminology**

There is some debate in the field about how to describe Autistic individuals and, in particular, how to distinguish groups with different needs. One issue arises with person-first (e.g., "person with autism") versus identity-first (e.g., "Autistic person") language. Most psychologists and school psychologists

were, at one point, trained to exclusively use person-first language when discussing individuals with any diagnosis, including autism or a learning disability (e.g., “person with a learning disability,” not learning-disabled person). However, a number of self-advocates have objected to person-first language (Botha, Hanlon, & Williams, 2020), and it appears the much of the autism community has made the shift to self-identify as “Autistic.” Therefore, the editors of this book have decided to use identify-first language in this chapter. However, we do not speak for Autistics as a whole, and other researchers, practitioners, and self-advocates may still view person-first language as more respectful. Therefore, some chapter authors have mindfully chosen to use person-first language. Inconsistencies in this book are not due to carelessness but illustrate the current lack of consensus in the field and the struggle many scholars and practitioners experience as they seek to better understand how to effectively support Autistic people. By modeling the disparity in opinions in this book, we hope it will support readers as they make decisions about ableism and person-first language.

The terms “high-functioning” (including HFASD) and “low-functioning” have long been used to describe Autistic individuals without and with significant cognitive and adaptive impairment. However, recent research such as that conducted by Alvares et al. (2020) suggests these terms do not provide a useful characterization and should no longer be part of our lexicon. Perhaps more important, many Autistics are now coming forward with concerns that these terms may be pejorative and limiting. For example, the same person may demonstrate many characteristics of ASD under one condition and very few under different conditions. In addition, we would not use the term “high functioning” to describe a neurotypical group of people who were identified based on race or religion and many in the Autistic community ask that we reduce the ableism (i.e., discrimination based on the biased assumption that people without disabilities are superior) they face by basing our decisions on whether we would apply the same standard to neurotypical people. The recommendation is to describe a person’s strengths and areas of need. When we first set out to write this book, we also used the term “high-functioning” to discuss the population of interest; however, we have shifted away from this terminology as we learn more about ableism and the role practitioners have in mitigating or perpetuating discrimination disabled people may face. We do acknowledge that the term “high-functioning” is common in the literature when discussing Autistic individuals without ID who have the potential to live independently with minimal or no assistance, and it has become an easily identifiable shorthand for researchers and professionals. Because Autistics are a diverse group of individuals, some may also still self-identify as “high-functioning.” Therefore, like person-first language, some chapters in this volume may still use terms such as “high-functioning” or HFASD.

## The Role of the School Psychologist

School psychologists work in many sectors, including pre-K-12 public schools, private schools, residential settings, hospitals, private practices, and colleges/universities. We include trainers of school psychologists (e.g., faculty) in this group. Although the topics presented in this book are most relevant to those working with Autistic students who are either planning their postsecondary transition (e.g., middle and high school settings) or those working in colleges, much of the information would be useful to anyone in other disciplines that support Autistic individuals who seek to enter fields dominated by neurotypical individuals, such as traditional colleges or careers. For example, the information in this text would likely be useful for professionals working in the field of vocational rehabilitation.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates postsecondary transition planning (IDEA, 2004). Specifically, Part B specifies individualized education programs (IEPs) must include postsecondary goals by the time the student is 16 years old. These goals must be measurable, and related to several adult outcomes, including education and employment. Further, services need to be put into place to help the student achieve these goals (IDEA, 2004). Additionally, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) calls on school psychologists to use evidenced-based techniques to help students with postsecondary transition (NASP, 2020). This can be a difficult task when Autistic students are aiming for traditional college or careers because empirical research describing effective interventions for Autistic college students is still relatively scant (Anderson et al., 2019) and the vast majority of the literature on ASD and the workplace involves participants with intellectual disabilities (Baldwin et al., 2014).

The goal of entering traditional colleges or high paying positions in the workforce may be appropriate for a large percentage of Autistic students, as approximately 44% of children with ASD have average or above average intelligence (Christensen et al., 2016). Intelligence alone does not predict success in college or the workplace, however. Sufficient academic, social, self-regulation, and self-sufficiency skills must be developed for Autistic adolescents and young adults with ASD to be successful in either of these endeavors (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Additionally, the degree of success may, in part, also depend on the willingness of supervisors and professors to enact appropriate accommodations. Although this literature base is limited, high-quality evidence regarding related populations, settings, or skills should be used to guide both transition plans and service delivery. Unfortunately, extrapolating from other literature bases is a time-consuming process that is not feasible for the average school psychologist. It is our hope that the chapters in this volume can help school psychologists, and those in related fields, efficiently understand and learn about the characteristics and needs of Autistic college- and career-bound people.

## Chapter Overviews

We selected several topics we felt would be most relevant and helpful to professionals, families, and self-advocates.

Prior to attempting to implement solutions, stakeholders must understand the problems Autistic adolescents face as they begin to navigate their postsecondary options. In *Barriers to Successful Transition*, Unger et al. explain difficulties these students may face as they prepare for increased independence from family and K-12 educational supports. They explain academic difficulties, with a focus on executive functioning skills that required across environments, specific social and emotional concerns, and behavioral barriers such as rigidity and skills associated with autonomy. It may be helpful to the reader to conceptualize behavioral skill deficits as opportunities for learning and growth, rather than problems to be solved for the benefit of others. Unger et al. also discuss how these barriers could translate into difficulties in vocational and postsecondary educational settings. Importantly, the authors point out that deficits are often found in the environment, and not in the Autistic individual, illustrating the need for professionals to address larger systemic issues in addition to individualized transition plans, interventions, and accommodations. This chapter also addresses the often-overlooked issue of the possibility of Autistic students' involvement in the criminal justice system and associated roles of, and preventative opportunities for, school-based professionals. Overall, this chapter goes beyond the DSM-V to help readers understand the contextual challenges many college- or career-bound Autistic students face.

School psychologists are experts in neurocognitive assessment and should be able to conduct high-quality psychoeducational evaluations of Autistic students. Even when the assessment is completed by another professional, school psychologists need to competently interpret the findings and apply them to effective interventions and postsecondary transition plans. In *Neuropsychological Considerations of Adolescents and Young Adults with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder for School Psychologists*, Davis et al. address topics related to the neurodevelopment and neuropsychological assessment of Autistic adolescents who aim to attend college or enter the competitive workforce. The authors explain how thorough assessments can be used to benefit the trajectories of these individuals, the potential-associated difficulties that ought to be considered (i.e., comorbid psychiatric and medical conditions), and the domains that should be addressed in the evaluation. School psychologists and other assessment professionals can use the information in this chapter to ensure their evaluations are comprehensive and contain information and recommendations useful to all stakeholders.

Hernández Finch et al. address educational considerations in *Core Academic Skills Considerations, Evaluation Methods, and Intervention Approaches for Autistic Adolescents*. Academic success is critical to the successful transition of many Autistic students, but particularly for those intended to attend universities. This chapter will be useful to those looking for specific details of well-designed transition plans. Many Autistic students will transition to postsecondary settings

where they will be held to the same standards as their peers (i.e., traditional colleges), yet they often have unique needs. Hernández Finch and colleagues review common academic needs of Autistic people, including potential causes of these difficulties. Simultaneously, they address strengths many Autistic students may have while acknowledging that this population has diverse need. This chapter also includes detailed information on appropriate academic assessment, including potential test batteries, and associated interventions for the primary academic domains of reading, math, and writing. Information in this chapter is specific to the Autistic population, and includes a discussion of how one might need to modify standard approaches to educational assessment.

The mismatch between the school expectations for age-appropriate social and behavior skills and those demonstrated by many Autistic students reflects one of the primary challenges faced by Autistic students and their educators alike. School psychologists need to be aware of how these challenges may interfere with successful postsecondary transition, and how to help Autistic students increase social, coping, and behavioral skills. In *Social Emotional and Behavioral Assessment and School-Based Intervention for Adolescents with High Functioning ASD*, Dale et al. detail assessment and school-based intervention strategies. This chapter includes the discussion of both assessment tools used to diagnose the characteristics of ASD as well as associated comorbid and related domains, such as adaptive behavior, social skills, and internalizing concerns. As the authors note, assessment and intervention should be linked, and this chapter will also be a valuable resource for school professionals looking for evidence-based interventions for Autistic students. Because Autistic individuals have diverse needs, a variety of strategies and curriculums are described so professionals can best match the intervention to the needs of their population.

Transitioning to college requires all students to increase their level of independent goal-directed behavior. Autistic college students may experience some challenges with new expectations for self-sufficiency and self-advocacy. Wilczynski et al. address self-management through a lens of self-determination in *Self-Management for Transition-Aged College-Bound Autistic Students*. Readers will find specific steps with examples they can follow to help Autistic students with self-management, allowing the student to set their own goals and drive their own intervention techniques. Specific applications to college settings, such as working with campus offices, registering for classes, behaviors required for academic success, self-care, mental health, and college-specific social situations are highlighted. Those working with Autistic students in K-12 settings can also use these flexible strategies with students in their caseload as they help them build self-management skills over time.

The rise in the prevalence of ASD diagnoses has led to a corresponding increase in research and professional interest in working with Autistic children. Less research, however, has been conducted with young Autistic adults. In *Understanding Autistic College Students*, Viesel and Froner comprehensively describe the state of research and the need for practitioners to apply their professional judgment when serving this population by assembling essential information about Autistic adolescents and adults who plan to, or are attending, college. As discussed throughout this



text, Autistic college students sometimes have a different pathway to academic success compared to their peers. Although the field of psychology tends to use a deficit model, Viesel and Froner recognize it is equally important to examine the strengths Autistic college students have and the social barriers that sometimes are the source of challenges these students face. Viesel and Froner review these abilities to help practitioners understand how to use a strengths-based approach to support concurrent with accommodations for the challenges that are unique to this group of college students. Areas of cognitive, social-emotional, behavioral, and self-care needs are reviewed with a focus on practitioners' applying this knowledge. A summary of current research and recommendations for academic areas (e.g., reading, writing, and mathematics) is offered. An important consideration for those working with Autistic students currently attending, or preparing for college, is the discussion of the college community. This section highlights the importance of understanding that while it is important to work directly with the Autistic college student, it is also critical to work with individuals and systems with which the student will interact. This includes peers, instructors, and other college staff.

Even when students have the cognitive and academic abilities to succeed in traditional, four-year college, it is not always the best path towards their ultimate career goals. In *Considering College Alternatives*, Trammell et al. describe different options available to Autistic students within the context of effective transition planning. The authors detail specific steps in developing appropriate career goals, how to address barriers to these goals, and options for supported employment, all of which may help prevent unemployment, underemployment, or malemployment. For anyone looking to enter the career force, getting a job is only the first step; Trammell et al. describe how school psychologists can support Autistic students in maintaining employment. The specificity of their recommendations will be appealing to a variety of helping professionals. Also included in this chapter are recommendations regarding when and how to consider and plan for entering community college, trade/vocational school, or technical college. These alternative postsecondary educational settings are often excellent choices for some Autistic students and require unique considerations of benefits and drawbacks, including potential career outcomes, accommodations offered, and opportunities beyond course content, such as socialization and development of independent living skills.

School psychologists are ideal candidates to affect systems-level change. Carter and Shulz focus on comprehensive, high-quality, and team-based transition services at the middle- and high-school levels. Throughout *Addressing Transition Preparation in Middle and High Schools*, the authors highlight aspects of transition planning required by both law and best practice. Carter and Shulz build on the information about evaluation of cognitive and social/emotional domains offered in previous chapters by detailing transition-specific assessment practices. Specific recommendations are also provided for academic strategies with a focus on inclusive education supportive of postsecondary goals. Early (i.e., before leaving high school) career planning could help Autistic students actualize the goals in their transition plans. Carter and Shulz describe how schools can be supportive of increased skill-building and actual employment experience. Strategies are also offered for



achieving goals around independent living and social skills and relationships. Interdisciplinary practice is essential for effective educational programs. A section of *Addressing Transition Preparation in Middle and High Schools* is devoted to outlining the roles and responsibilities of school personnel, including school psychologists, special and general educators, guidance counselors, transition specialists, and more. Readers will also find information to help strengthen community connections, including with family and adult/postsecondary programs.

If college is the goal for an Autistic student, knowledge of the typical accommodations and services offered by colleges is essential for successful transition planning. Yet, school psychologists and other educators are likely under-informed about how to help Autistic students and their families select an appropriate college. Some postsecondary schools may have specialty support programs with their own application requirements. Regardless of whether the student is interested in an ASD-specific support program, there are factors to consider when selecting a college and requesting appropriate accommodations. In *Obtaining Appropriate Services in College*, Williams describes considerations related to college selection, including both desirability (e.g., majors offered and social activities) and logistics (e.g., cost and location). Although these factors are important to anyone, there are sometimes unique considerations for Autistic students, particularly those receiving special education services. Relatedly, Williams details how school professionals can be better prepared to help students transition from accommodations offered in high school to those offered in college settings. Finally, information on specialty programs is presented, including common interventions and how to access these services.

If further education is not aligned with a student's goals, then transition planning should focus on meaningful employment. Appropriately supporting students during their final years in high school can mitigate some of the barriers to entering the workforce. Additionally, those working with Autistic college students should include post-college planning as part of their supports. In *Preparation for Successful Employment*, Cullen describes individual, family, and systemic factors that may be associated with employment, thereby helping determine domains to consider in transition planning. Like other chapters in this volume, Cullen provides specific recommendations for identifying appropriate goals for the student, as well as how to meet those goals. Career preparation goes beyond specific skills related to job searches and interviewing. Readers of this chapter will find information on a variety of domains, including course planning, social skills, independent living skills, self-determination, and building work experience. School psychologists are experts on consultation and collaboration, and Cullen describes how to bridge these skills to working with employment-based community stakeholders from a person-centered planning framework. Another important consideration for Autistic adolescents looking to enter the workforce is whether and how to access workplace-based supports, which, as noted by Cullen, actually begin with the hiring process. Employers should be aware of inclusive hiring practices, as neurodiverse individuals bring many benefits to the workforce. Support professionals are well-positioned to provide consultation and training about nondiscriminatory interviewing and hiring. Once hired, some employees may need workplace accommodations, to varied

degrees. Cullen provides a description of some of these options, with a focus on self-advocacy.

School psychologists working at colleges or universities in service delivery and/or faculty roles are ideal candidates to help new Autistic undergraduate students successfully transition to college, as well as train future school psychologists on a variety of topics detailed in this volume. Although the previous chapters will also be beneficial for these professionals, *Considerations for School Psychology University Faculty: Developing and Implementing Services for Students with ASD* specifically focuses on information for school psychologists in postsecondary institutions. Cleveland and Williams detail factors relevant to those interested in starting (or adjusting) an ASD-specific support program, as well as how to support a college culture which is accepting of neurodiversity. Even, or perhaps especially, in postsecondary settings without an ASD support program, supporting faculty, staff, and peer self-efficacy in inclusive practice is essential. Effective consultation practices relevant to Autistic college students are especially highlighted by the authors.

High-quality and accurate sex education is important for health, safety, relationship building, and general quality of life. This is as true for Autistic students as it is for their neurotypical peers (and, due to their elevated risk of victimization and involvement in the justice system, perhaps even more so); however, their sex and relationship education is often impoverished. In *The Need for Relationship and Sexuality Education for Transition Aged Autistic Youth*, Wilczynski et al. address these issues within the context of school-based services. Because some professionals and families may be hesitant to discuss sensitive topics with students, the chapter opens with a frank discussion of why sex education is imperative for Autistics. A focus of the chapter is inclusivity and intersectionality, recognizing that Autistics are more likely to identify on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Even if they recognize the importance of comprehensive sex and relationship education, stakeholders cannot assume that curricula designed for neurotypical students will match the needs of Autistic students. Wilczynski et al. review the literature on available sexuality education programs, highlighting the potential benefits and limitations of each choice. Individualized programming and intervention may be the optimal solution for many students, and this chapter also includes important topics that should be covered, with specialized consideration for Autistics.

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# Barriers to Successful Transition



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**Abstract** Adolescents experience a variety of emotions as they transition from high school to postsecondary experiences across educational, employment, and community settings. For many individuals, these feelings may range from optimism and enthusiasm to uncertainty and apprehension, or anxiety as they interact with new acquaintances and new environments. Even with appropriate planning and individualized supports, these transitions can be intimidating and overwhelming for Autistic adolescents. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of internal and external factors that may influence or hinder the Autistic individual's experiences in pursuing college and career goals. Challenges experienced by Autistic individuals related to academics, social, mental health, self-management, and interaction with law enforcement officials are documented. The chapter communicates these topics as potential barriers to favorable transition to increase awareness of potential challenges so professionals and those supporting Autistic youth can proactively plan and help prepare individuals for success as they exit secondary education.

**Keywords** Transition barriers · Self-sufficiency

## Introduction

Many youth struggle during the transition to adulthood; this period of development appears particularly difficult for Autistic individuals (Shattuck et al., 2012) because this transition represents a fundamental shift in expectations for accessing supports from having professionals and caregivers direct the process to that of being a self-advocate. During this time, Autistic young adults lose access to federally mandated educational services, thereby cutting access to many formal supports available to them while in school. These young adults now are expected to make decisions about their lives when they may not understand their own idiosyncrasies or how to advocate for services to meet their unique needs. In addition, Autistic young adults may

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feel socially alienated (Eussen et al., 2013) while struggling with a host of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral difficulties that lead to further withdrawal from various situations (e.g., Bellini, 2006). As a result, many Autistic adults remain dependent on their families and may be unable to assume independent adult roles (Howlin et al., 2004; Wehman et al., 2009), increasing the likelihood of disengagement from postsecondary education or paid employment opportunities completely (Alverson et al., 2019; Ohl et al., 2017; Shattuck et al., 2012).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of variables that may interfere with the successful transition of Autistic adolescents to postsecondary education or the workplace. Topics explored include both internal and external challenges that affect the successful transition opportunities for this population. Specifically, we begin with an examination of the noteworthy academic, social, mental health, behavioral, and self-management characteristics of Autistic adolescents. Then, we provide an analysis of how these characteristics, combined with limited access to post-school services and supports, may interact with future employment and educational environments.

## **Academic Skills**

Although Autistic adolescents and young adults typically do not display significant delays in cognitive development, they still may require significant academic supports (Sansosti et al., 2010). It may initially appear to educators that Autistic students know and/or understand more than they actually do because of their relatively fluent communication and advanced vocabulary, masking more advanced academic difficulty. Academic difficulties become increasingly apparent when instruction and instructional materials become more abstract, requiring higher-order thinking such as skills to interpret, integrate, and generalize information (Goldstein et al., 2008; Whitby & Mancil, 2009). Moreover, preoccupation with restricted interests, attention problems, limited problem-solving skills, and organizational challenges often make it difficult for Autistic individuals to benefit from advanced education without appropriate supports and/or accommodations.

## ***Attention***

Autistic adolescents and young adults frequently appear to be inattentive and easily distracted both during structured and unstructured academic activities. These students may appear to be daydreaming (i.e., staring into space) and unaware of their immediate environment. Attention is likely to be fleeting when they do attend to tasks (Hoffmann et al., 2016). For instance, an Autistic young adult may start to follow directions for a task but quickly lose focus. As a result, the student likely is perceived as purposefully inattentive and requiring frequent redirection (e.g.,

restating directions). High levels of inattention may be due to distractions in the environment, such as noises (e.g., chairs screeching across the floor, intercom announcements), objects (e.g., bulletin boards, highly decorated classrooms), and/or overstimulation of the senses (e.g., flickering of fluorescent lights, school bells). Autistic students tend to be easily distracted as they often view their environment as overstimulating and stressful due to aforementioned sensory reasons, as well as the social expectations of the classroom (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of inattention in Autistic adolescents and young adults is their difficulty in shifting attention, or the ability to move the focus of attention from one stimulus (i.e., cat) to another (i.e., dog). Attention shifting is one of several cognitive components that fall within the realm of executive functioning that enable individuals to achieve goals efficiently (Boucher, 2017; Ozonoff et al., 2010; Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996); and subsequent primacy theories consider attention and arousal to be central to many of the social and cognitive differences in Autistic individuals (e.g., Courchesne et al., 2011; Dawson & Faja, 2008). For many Autistic students, switching attention from one stimulus to another or from one sensory modality to another is a relatively slow process that results in a pause or delay of reaction.

Educators may observe an Autistic student struggling to follow along and communicate their lines in a timely manner during an oral reading or role-play activity. In this frequently occurring activity in a high school English literature class, students are assigned characters in a novel and must follow written text and then verbally communicate the lines attributed to their character. This task can be especially daunting to an Autistic individual who may sense they cannot keep up but lack instructional supports or self-management strategies to facilitate favorable participation. The lack of compensatory strategies to address insufficient attention shifting also contributes to challenges with problem-solving, organization, and planning, as well as with other skills related to executive functioning.

## ***Problem-Solving***

Autistic adolescents and young adults often exhibit problem-solving skills that are insufficient and inflexible. That is, they demonstrate difficulty in generalizing and applying knowledge and skills across multiple environments and situations. Instead, these students use the same rigid problem-solving method for all academic tasks even when this strategy has proven to be ineffective for them in the past. For example, a student who has learned the spelling rule of “I before E except after C” may adhere to this strategy rigidly, incorrectly spelling words such as *freight* and *weigh*. Poor problem-solving also may occur in reading tasks, exhibited by deficits in differentiating fact from fiction, extracting meaning from text, and discriminating relevant from irrelevant information (Loukusa & Moilanen, 2009). Consequently, these deficits lead to slower, or poor, comprehension of text. In fact, Nation et al. (2006) found that nearly 75% of their sample of Autistic students demonstrated

below average comprehension skills. One possible explanation for limited problem-solving skills is that Autistic individuals may have difficulty applying contextual information into higher order cognitive representations, as well as integrating prior background knowledge into the construction of complex operations (Bogte et al., 2009; Sansosti et al., 2013).

## ***Organization and Planning***

Autistic adolescents and young adults may demonstrate difficulties with organizing, planning, and prioritizing, a critical executive functioning skill needed to persist in postsecondary education and employment. For example, they tend to misplace academic supplies (e.g., writing instruments, notebooks), fail to plan ahead regarding what materials are necessary in order to complete assignments, and incorrectly allocate time and energy to their work (e.g., Martin et al., 2010). Likewise, they may have messy desks, workstations, backpacks, or lockers so finding anything in these areas becomes a daunting and challenging task. As a result, these students often have difficulty completing academic assignments on time or fail to turn them in at all (Sansosti et al., 2010).

Poor organization often goes beyond the placement of academic materials and supplies. Many Autistic individuals also demonstrate poor organization of thoughts, as well as actions. For example, a high school student, Matt, often (almost daily) forgot the combination of his locker. When teachers provided Matt with a card with his locker combination on it, he often forgot the card at home. When they wrote the combination of the locker on his backpack, Matt frequently forgot that it was there. When Matt was able to get into his locker, he often forgot what he needed. Subsequently, these behaviors often led Matt to be late for class and not to have the correct materials. Although this example may seem overstated, this pattern of forgetfulness and lack of planning is somewhat common and presents challenges to favorable experiences in postsecondary education (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; White et al., 2016) and employment for Autistic young adults (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Lee & Carter, 2012).

Despite what often appears as a general display of average to above-average cognitive abilities, and at times, superior intellectual skills of Autistic adolescents, many obstacles may hinder their academic success, making the prospect of postsecondary transition tenuous. The heightened level of abstraction may increase the frequency and intensity of successive behavioral reactions. Academically, problem-solving becomes more difficult in middle and high school contexts because more abstract concepts are involved (e.g., word problems, advanced comprehension, geometry). Abstraction often requires increased focus and additional problem-solving strategies that Autistic students may not understand or even know exist. As a consequence, academic subjects requiring flexibility in reasoning (e.g., English language arts, philosophy, social studies) may cause significant confusion for the student (Sansosti et al., 2010), limiting their potential for grasping “real-world”



content necessary for postsecondary success. Thus, many Autistic adolescents underachieve academically (Estes et al., 2010) and are at high risk for dropping out of college or avoiding postsecondary education completely (Alverson et al., 2019; Shattuck et al., 2012). In some instances, Autistic students may even be dissuaded from pursuing postsecondary education (Zimmerman, 2017). Similarly, job attainment remains significantly lower for Autistic young adults than those with other disabilities (Chen et al., 2015), which may be due to gaps in earlier teaching.

## **Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Issues**

### ***Social Relationships and Independence***

Deficits in social communication and social interactions are the defining characteristic of Autistic individuals (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013; Volkmar et al., 2014). Autistic adolescents and young adults tend to have few friends, and they prefer to be on the periphery of social networks within school and community settings (Locke et al., 2010). In comparison to neurotypical peers (Stanish et al., 2017) and peers with other disabilities (Orsmond et al., 2013), Autistic adolescents report a higher level of social isolation and are less likely to participate in social or recreational activities such as making phone calls, having friends over, or attending activities/clubs. Perhaps the most critical challenge to social relationships lies in the basics of social understanding and problem-solving. In general, Autistic young adults exhibit difficulties in understanding nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice (Kuzmanovic et al., 2011; Uljarevic & Hamilton, 2013), making it difficult for them to decipher thoughts, feelings, intentions, and perspectives of others.

Difficulty understanding nonverbal cues means increased challenges when attempting to interpret when another is upset, happy, or uninterested. It is unlikely that an Autistic individual will engage in all expected nonverbal behaviors when communicating. For example, they may demonstrate poor eye contact (or have a stiff, staring gaze), display awkward or clumsy body posture and limited or inappropriate facial expressions, and/or fail to use gestures while interacting and communicating with others. As a result of limited social understanding, Autistic young adults frequently appear unaware of how to physically engage and respond in social interactions (Volkmar et al., 2014). They may violate social conventions and engage in a large amount of socially inappropriate behavior(s). For example, an Autistic individual may infringe upon another's personal space (e.g., touching a shirt that has a picture the individual likes), ask extremely personal questions (e.g., "Why are your parents divorced?"), or share thoughts and/or opinions that are better left unsaid (e.g., blurting out "you have really ugly shoes"). A lack of understanding of the social world, combined with socially inappropriate behavior(s), often results in numerous social errors.



Friendship is often described in terms of common interests and may wane when the focus of activities deviates from the shared interest. For example, an Autistic individual may continue to talk about the latest Spiderman movie while seemingly ignoring the listener's signs of boredom (e.g., looking away, or attempting to leave). This failure may appear as disregard for others' feelings and may come across as insensitive, despite this not being the individual's intention. Instead, Autistic young adults experience difficulties recognizing, relating to, and understanding the feelings of others, making it challenging for them to understand why others do not share their same level of passion (APA, 2013; Webb et al., 2017).

Challenges in understanding the social world combined with a tendency to make social errors are likely to impact the development of social independence. Adolescence can be challenging for all youth as they navigate physical, emotional, and social changes but even more so for Autistic young adults due to difficulties engaging socially with peers. The demands of social situations combined with social anxiety will likely impact the progression toward social independence. In fact, Autistic adults often achieve lower levels of socially independent functioning than would be expected from their cognitive and language skills (Howlin & Moss, 2012). This translates to developing romantic relationships. Some Autistic individuals may have limited social knowledge and independence to pursue and engage in romantic relationships appropriately (Dewinter et al., 2015). They may initiate behaviors viewed or received by others as inappropriate or intrusive given the situation and context (e.g., touching without consent, making sexual comments) when engaging with potential romantic partners (Strunz et al., 2017). See the Wilczynski et al. (chapter "The Need for Relationship and Sexuality Education for Transition Aged Autistic Youth") chapter on relationship and sexuality education in this book.

### *Anxiety, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation*

Recent research and clinical information suggests that Autistic individuals may be more susceptible to anxiety and other affective mood problems. In fact, Autistic young adults demonstrate higher levels of anxiety and depression than neurotypical peers. Prevalence rates for comorbid anxiety range between 11% and 85% (White et al., 2009) and 1.4% and 38% for depression (Magnuson & Constantino, 2011). The higher risk of these psychiatric disorders increases throughout adolescence for Autistic individuals who are older, possess higher IQ (>85), and self-report more Autistic traits (Merikangas et al., 2010; van Steensel & Heeman, 2017).

One hypothesis for increased rates of affective disorders is that Autistic individuals may be more socially aware, but also experience increased anxiety as their deficits become more apparent and they experience more social failures (Bellini, 2006; Kerns & Kendall, 2013). Alternatively, as Autistic adolescents become more socially aware, they may increasingly recognize incidents of bullying, mistreatment, and disrespect from peers and other people. Autistic adolescents experience the highest rate of bullying in comparison to peers with intellectual disabilities and

neurotypical peers (Tipton-Fisler et al., 2018). Although they may minimize the severity of bullying incidents, they also withdraw socially from peer relationships, contributing further to social isolation and other internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Fisher & Taylor, 2016). Findings also demonstrate the relationship between being bullied and suicidality for neurotypical adolescents as well as Autistic adolescents (Holden et al., 2020).

Initial anxiety may emerge at early ages for Autistic individuals due to: (1) preoccupation with possible violations of routines and rituals, (2) being placed in situations without clear schedules or expectations, or (3) anticipation of failed social encounters. These anxieties may evolve into more depressive symptoms during adolescence and early adulthood (Eussen et al., 2013). This typically occurs when an Autistic individual begins to develop a greater insight into their differences from others and experience a growing desire for friendships (Eussen et al., 2013). Many Autistic adolescents desire and frequently seek friendships; however, they may lack the skills to acquire and maintain such relationships. Continued rejections and/or history of negative social interactions may cause Autistic young adults to remove themselves from social opportunities. In turn, this may cause them to downwardly spiral, whereby they rarely encounter opportunities to learn how to interact appropriately with others, and, subsequently, fail to develop meaningful friendships (White et al., 2011). As a result, poor social competence may increase or exacerbate mental health problems as the individual ages (White et al., 2011).

It is likely that chronic frustration from repeated failure to engage others socially contributes to the development of deepening depression, especially during adolescence and young adulthood (Hedley et al., 2017). That is, as Autistic children enter adolescence, they become more ostracized from their peer group and experience greater isolation from society, and, consequently, depressive symptoms become pronounced (Hedley et al., 2017). Characteristics of depression may include worsening in behavior, inattention, social withdrawal, overreliance on obsessions and compulsions, hyperactivity, aggressive or oppositional behavior, agitation, and/or changes in eating and sleeping (Eussen et al., 2013). Once caught in this downward spiral, it is likely that depressive symptomatology will worsen, resulting in significant risks if left untreated by interventions targeting resiliency (Mackay et al., 2017).

Consistent with higher rates of anxiety and depression, rates of suicidal ideation in Autistic adults appear significantly higher than the general population. Cassidy et al. (2014) found the rate of suicidal ideation in adults with recent diagnoses of ASD was 9.6 times higher than the general population; and that 35% of their sample had planned or attempted suicide, especially in those who self-reported higher autism traits. Similarly, Hirvikoski et al. (2016) reported that suicide was the leading cause of premature death in Autistic individuals and this group was 9.4 times at greater risk of suicide compared to the general population. More recently, talk of death or suicide (as indicated via parent report) was reported to be common in 22% of Autistic young adults during inpatient psychiatric admission (Horowitz et al., 2017). Such data highlight the relationship between affective mood problems and autism symptomatology; and, consequently, it is equally important to understand why Autistic individuals with high self-perceptions of autism traits may be at an

increased risk of suicide. For example, Pelton and Cassidy (2017) revealed that individuals most at-risk for suicide included those with high levels of autism traits who also experienced significant depression with *thwarted belonging* (i.e., feelings of loneliness, difficulties establishing reciprocal relationships) and *perceived burdensomeness* (i.e., poor self-esteem, agitation, unemployment).

### ***Behavioral Rigidity***

Autistic young adults often display an inflexible adherence to routines or rituals, desiring sameness, and requiring environmental predictability (APA, 2013). Change, surprise, chaos, and uncertainty are not easily tolerated or adapted to by many on the spectrum, and the lack of predictability or sameness can cause feelings of stress and/or anxiety (Gotham et al., 2013). Like most people, Autistic individuals prefer predictability in their environment; however, the extent to which a lack of predictability or sameness negatively influences Autistic people is likely much greater than the majority of the population (Goris et al., 2020). Although the specific cause of these behaviors are unclear, they are generally attributed to some type of neurological impairment and interpreted as attempts to cope with sensory factors, and others may relate to cognitive difficulties secondary to those neurological factors (Leekam et al., 2011).

Perhaps the most interesting feature of rigid behavior displayed by Autistic individuals is their obsessive and, at times, all absorbing interests (Harrop et al., 2019). These individuals may collect volumes of detailed, factual information and trivia related to a relatively narrow topic (e.g., Harry Potter, NASCAR racing). Regardless of the topic or the frequency with which it may change, Autistic individuals tend to focus most of their social advances and conversations on their specific topic of interest and talk about it to the point at which others become uninterested and disengaged.

### ***Self-Sufficiency***

As students advance through schooling, the characteristics of school programming and environments become more dynamic as expectations and demands around independent or autonomous behavior continually increase. The nature and context of middle and secondary schools require students to adapt and self-direct their behavior across increasingly less structured and more unpredictable interactions and educational experiences. One of the developmental achievements often associated with adolescence is an individual's ability to function independently across complex situations and dynamic environments, without supervision or monitoring (Hume et al., 2014; Sessa & Steinberg, 1991).

The dynamic nature of high schools with varying curricula choices, multiple classes, and teachers, as well as the independent nature of navigating the formal and

informal structure and culture of schools, can be challenging for all students but even more so for Autistic students. Deficits associated with the core areas of autism (e.g., social/communication; restrictive, repetitive behavior, and/or stereotypical behavior) can impact progress toward independent functioning and self-sufficiency. The freedom and autonomy students experience in changing classes, managing multiple assignments, and increased social and behavioral expectations may contribute to increased anxiety and other challenges as Autistic students struggle with skills related to social cognition (e.g., perspective taking) and executive functioning (e.g., organization, time management, and flexibility).

Across their k-12 educational experiences and given appropriate instruction and supports, Autistic individuals continue to develop skills related to independent functioning and autonomous behavior. Yet, findings indicate this progress tends to slow during the late adolescent, young adult, and postsecondary transition years (Taylor & Seltzer, 2010). This occurs during a time when Autistic individuals are leaving federally mandated special education services and transitioning to eligibility-driven adult services, postsecondary education, and employment settings. Across these environments, Autistic individuals must demonstrate self-awareness and self-advocacy skills in an effort to receive accommodations, accentuating the need for independent functioning.

During a potentially stressful and uncertain time of life, it is probable that Autistic young adults will encounter difficulties maintaining supports and strategies they have relied on to compensate for challenges associated with social cognition and executive functioning (Smith et al., 2012). Students, caregivers, and other individualized education program (IEP) team members should monitor the extent to which instructional or behavioral supports and accommodations advance or impede the student's progress toward independent functioning and autonomous behavior (Hume et al., 2014).

Decisions made surrounding supports and accommodations should consider the feasibility of the support across multiple environments and contexts in addition to considering the student's personal functional and behavioral goals. For instance, when an educator, human service professional, or caregiver is needed to provide a cue, instruction, or support to the Autistic individual for them to use or implement the support, then an important consideration is whether the support is helping to move the individual toward independence. Beginning early in the Autistic individual's life and continuing throughout the lifespan decisions about the nature and intensity of supports should be informed by individual characteristics, preferences, and performance data well concurrently choosing those supports which are non-stigmatizing and increase one's self-sufficiency. Instructing children to use cues and supports available in their environment that are non-intrusive or stigmatizing should begin early to promote independence.

Given the variety of environmental, social, psychological, and physiological changes that occur during adolescence through early adulthood, self-sufficiency can be challenging or elusive for many young adults but even more so for Autistic individuals. Evaluating typical markers associated with self-sufficiency, such as obtaining a driver's license, employment, educational attainment, and residential status

reveals disparate outcomes for Autistic young adults in comparison to peers. Autistic individuals also report higher rates of disengagement in postsecondary education and employment (Shattuck et al., 2012), and are less likely to reside outside of their childhood residence (Anderson et al., 2014) compared to peers with other disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, intellectual disability, and emotional disturbance). Yet parents and Autistic young adults recognize living away from home as a step toward independence and a desirable transition outcome for Autistic individuals (Sosnowy et al., 2018).

Obtaining a driver's license is often viewed as a passport for increased freedom and independence for many teenagers. Autistic young adults are less likely to secure a driver's license, self-report lower ratings regarding their ability to drive, and experience a greater number of traffic accidents and citations relative to non-ASD drivers (Daly et al., 2014). Autistic individuals who have limited mobility depend on others or must find alternative means for getting around the community and accessing educational, employment, or social and recreational opportunities as well as needed medical or wellness services. For transition-age youth with disabilities, getting to and from work is frequently cited as a continued barrier to employment and remains through one's adult years (Lubin & Feeley, 2016; Rosenbloom, 2007).

The learning, social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties experienced by transition-age adolescents do not disappear as students leave federally funded special education services. Without effective strategies and supports, the challenges students encounter during secondary school will present in postsecondary education, employment, and community settings. Strategies and supports that move the student toward functional independence and autonomous behavior should be a critical component of educational programming.

### ***Mismatch Between Goals and Supports in the Environment***

Autistic individuals have much to contribute to the workforce and their communities. However, Autistic individuals are underrepresented in the competitive labor force. Reported rates of employment for Autistic individuals are low across studies, with 25–50% of Autistic adults participating in any type of paid employment (Hendricks, 2010). Yet, there is an evolving knowledge base that highlights workplace contributions of Autistic employees. The limited research conducted with employers suggests favorable experiences with hiring Autistic individuals (Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Scott et al., 2017). Autistic employees performed the same or better than neurotypical coworkers when rated on attention to detail, work ethic, and quality of work but were rated as less flexible or likely to follow instructions compared to coworkers (Scott et al., 2017). Several of the characteristics associated with the autism that can be viewed as challenges in an educational environment (e.g., rigidity of thought, insistence on consistency) may translate into desirable traits (e.g., attention to detail, insistence on consistency, strong adherence to procedures in repetitive process) for certain occupations. Through participation in early career