



Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Overview
Four-Part Professional Development
Moderated by Stacey DeWitt
Co-Founder and President, Connect with Kids Education Network

Module Four

Special Considerations for Inclusion and Transitioning through the Upper Grades

Welcome back to the final segment of this program. In our previous segments we've touched upon the new definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder, requirements and eligibility outlined in legislation including IDEA and 504 Plans, and we've identified some characteristics, challenges, classroom management and curriculum accommodation techniques to consider. In this final session, we will explore other special considerations for inclusion and transitioning through the upper grades – and we'll hear from students with autism and their families about their hopes for the future.

As students with ASD mature, so do certain educational challenges. A special consideration when working with the teen population is to appreciate the importance of learning **advocacy skills**. While we may view the teen years as rebellious and ambiguous, those with ASD might need extra support in learning to speak up – and not just act out.

In teaching self-advocacy skills, start in small ways by helping to each teach a student to **make choices**. Learning to **ask for help** is another step in developing self-advocacy skills. In order to do this, the individual must be able to identify that there is an obstacle or difficulty, and then seek out assistance to have the issue resolved. Gradually, more advanced skills such as those involving **negotiations and disclosure** should be added to the curriculum as appropriate.

It is important that adolescents with ASD know about their disability, and can communicate to others the nature of those disabilities and the accommodations that they may need as a result. Once young adults with autism leave the educational system, they will need to be able to self-advocate on their own to the best of their ability.

Transitioning is part of the advocacy process. The planning begins with stating goals for the adolescent and formulating a timetable. Transition teams should consider **opportunities for community participation**, the **availability of adult services, integrated employment** (including supported employment), **post-secondary, vocational, continuing and adult education**, and **independent living**. The transition plan should identify responsible people or agencies to provide assistance and necessary funding.

We know that communicating and collaborating with parents is part of the job description – and may be a challenge for educators across grade levels. When addressing the challenges of ASD, the symptoms of ASD can vary, as will the knowledge bases and coping skills of parents and siblings. Parents can contribute information and a history of successful (and unsuccessful) strategies used, and benefit from information on strategies and successes at school that can help to extend learning into the home setting. A positive and collaborative relationship with the family is helpful to everyone.

While academic benchmarks routinely mark progress for students and educators, parents of children with autism tell us that there seems to be a belief that cognitive learning will follow social and emotional connections.

"I think for a child who's got a developmental disability like Graham's is all the more imperative that they be given the kind of nurturing, time, energy toward making that emotional connection... which then allows for the learning. It doesn't matter if he gets the test -- that was always a secondary goal. It was always how can we keep him calm, connected, related in a group of people or just within two...whatever, that was always the main focus."

JoJo Nelson, Graham's Mother

"He wasn't really in the long run at risk for not being great at math. He's not great at math but what he's at risk for is being lonely and isolated and unable to process his emotions and unable to navigate the world. But I think really what has been most helpful to him overall is I think in general, he has had a life filled with people who are willing to keep engaging with him and keep interacting with him and keep helping him get better at living the full range of emotions without having everything resolved automatically."

David Nelson, Graham's Father and Executive Director, The Community School

All parents, but especially those with children challenged with ASD, have a desire for their kids to fit in and find acceptance – and friends. It is what Graham Nelson innocently referred to one day as simply wanting to be one of “the gang.”

"I remember one day driving down the road and a kid who is a neighbor here and a friend was walking down with you know, a gang of other boys, friends, a pack and I think one of us said, "oh there goes so and so with his gang" and it just broke my heart. In the back seat, Graham's like "I wish I had a gang. You know I wish I could have a gang. That was hard."

JoJo Nelson, Graham's Mother

Educators can remember that inclusion of the entire school community – administrators, classmates, cafeteria personnel, bus drivers – they can all help to build a support network for students with ASD. Learning about ASD and getting to know those challenged helps to remove all too common stigmas and misconceptions.

"The most common misconception that we see is that they are shocked that there's a child in the general education classroom who is passing with flying colors in all their academics, but they still have autism. There is a perception that if a child has a disability they need to be in a special education classroom. So we do see ahh you know 'I don't think he has autism, he just talked to me and hugged me' where people don't realize that children with autism very often are affectionate. There is some of that old stigma comes back that they are cold and they don't like to be social and some of them are very social and quite social in a different kind of way but you know very often would like to be hugged and interact, with especially the adults."

Dana T. Zavatkey, Ph.D.

Program Manager, School Consultation Program

Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

At a time when building a culture of caring and bullying prevention is so much a part of school development plans, addressing acceptance, understanding and reaching out to those with disabilities or those who learn differently can benefit the entire school community.

"Very often do kind of mini-trainings for the other students about what autism is and why some things may be a little bit different, ways they may be able to support them. Sometimes, we do a small group of the typically developing peers that we may be able to enlist as peer helpers or peer buddies that can help us teach the children with autism other things or kind of give them a little bit of support, as well as training the community as a whole in a school. Very often our training includes cafeteria people, bus drivers, other teachers who may not have a child with autism in their classroom but are part of the community as a whole."

Dana T. Zavatkey, Ph.D.

Program Manager, School Consultation Program

Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

Remember that when even a casual conversation requires so much effort, and when hanging out or talking to a classmate becomes stressful and frustrating, it can be hard for people with ASD to make friends. Teachers can encourage inclusion, peer mentoring, and classroom programs that allow students to reach out to others. That can help students with autism – and benefit the classroom community, as well.

“Having them practice social skills that they are learning with a typical peer is a much more natural and functional skill for them to have. Because when they go to the cafeteria it’s not the adults they are going to be sitting with. We also address some of the social skill needs in the classroom or separate groups with children with autism or other social disabilities. We teach them how to ask if they can sit at the table with this new group or how to contribute to the conversation in a more functional way.”

Dana T. Zavatkay, Ph.D.
Program Manager, School Consultation Program
Marcus Autism Center, Atlanta

Parents, educators and students can be encouraged to know that with hard work, patience, cooperation and lots of support, from lots of places, positive outcomes lie ahead.

“My son Graham is 24 years old now and he lives...I guess I would say he lives independently in an apartment with a roommate in Connecticut and he’s a sophomore in college. He’s going to a community college part time. He’s had a couple of jobs and in general has matured into a really emotionally, reflective wonderful human being.”

David Nelson, Graham’s Father and Executive Director, The Community School

“It may not be that picture that you have of what an independent child would be. But what I’m discovering is that there’s a life and a way of living that... is satisfying... particularly knowing everything we have gone through. And I feel like I can just honestly say it’s one I never envisioned. There is this place that we have arrived at that’s amazing and wonderful.”

JoJo Nelson, Graham’s Mother

“I hope like in the future, I am actually like really successful and as someone who has autism like emotionally like get over my emotional problems, which I am doing at a pretty slow pace. But I believe and my mom believes that it’s more important for me to be a point where I can actually be capable of taking care of myself and I am in a way very capable of taking care of myself and being able to eventually maybe one day get married and have kids of my own, which is a dream of mine.”

Deck Foster, Student

“I want to be a musician, but I know I still need to go to college to get a musical degree or something and to take music classes in college if I ever want to be extremely successful like I do but umm yeah...really...I think I do see the importance in academics.”

Nick Vigilante, Student

“Think of it not as a disability...Just know that you are not alone in the world. There will be people to help you. I want to be a history professor so I want to get my Ph.D.”

Evan Ibarra, Student

“We want to bring that down to the school level and say, okay if Evan is going to function better by thinking a lot about history, then let’s build a lot of his learning life around something that has meaning for him.”

David Nelson,
Executive Director, The Community School

When dealing with Autism Spectrum Disorder, there are no easy solutions or quick fixes. But you have taken an important step in empowering yourself with information, perspectives and, hopefully, both empathy and optimism in embracing your role as an educator and advocate.