

## **Helping Adolescents with Neurodevelopmental Disorders Transition to College**

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For adolescents with autism spectrum disorder, language-based learning disabilities, ADHD, and related challenges, the transition to college is often fraught. There are many new academic, social, and emotional demands placed on these individuals. While in high school, these teens generally have the support of their parents, school personnel, and clinicians. In college, however, this support suddenly decreases or even disappears. Without proper support, many of these young adults flounder.

### **Understanding Emerging Adulthood**

Instead of thinking of adolescents directly transitioning into adulthood, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett posits they enter a new developmental phase he terms “emerging adulthood.” This normative developmental period spans the ages between 18 and 29. It is helpful to consider the concept of emerging adulthood when thinking about the challenges teens face as they transition to college.

This new construct takes into account that the transition to adulthood is often slow and complex. During emerging adulthood, individuals learn how to become adults and manage adult responsibilities. There is immense pressure to establish their identities, build adult relationships, find fulfilling career paths, and figure out answers to life’s big questions. This is a lot to ask of any emerging adult, especially one with a neurodevelopmental disorder.

It is important to recognize that young adults with neurodevelopmental disorders are managing two potentially overwhelming transitions: one to college and one to adulthood; each transition inevitably impacts the other. Therefore, to successfully transition these young adults to college, it is essential to prepare them for the many academic, social, emotional, and life challenges that inevitably arise.

### **A Team Approach to Support**

A team approach to planning and transitioning promotes a smooth entry into college. The team should be comprised of the teen, family members, school personnel, psychologists, life skill coaches, and any other important adults who have contributed to the adolescent’s success in high school. Under the direction of a designated leader, the team should discuss the teen’s strengths and needs in all aspects of life. By working together, the team can craft a comprehensive and individualized transition plan.

### **A Transition Plan**

There are a number of critical areas that should be taken into account when developing a transition plan. It is important to both discuss each area where support is needed and establish specific, concrete ways to provide this support. It is essential that all team members be in agreement about the support that will be offered and the manner in which it will be provided. Some teens may require high levels of academic support and daily coaching to be successful as college students. Other teens might only need support in one or two areas.

For example, a common transition challenge is living with a roommate. If the adolescent struggles socially and will be living on campus, the team should determine what needs to be done to prepare the teen for dorm life. Frequently, there is a critical need for a psychologist to work with the adolescent to improve his or her social skills, address anxiety, and handle the stress of living in close quarters with a roommate. The team can encourage the teen to reach out to the school to determine how roommates are selected and advocate for a roommate who will be a good match for him or her. There are numerous other areas for the team to consider when planning to transition a teen with neurodevelopmental disorders to college.

### **Areas that Benefit From Team Support**

- Arranging suitable living and eating arrangements
- Maintaining healthy habits
- Establishing a daily routine
- Building meaningful social relationships
- Balancing academics and social life
- Handling academic and interpersonal stress
- Managing competing responsibilities and deadlines
- Developing effective study skills
- Learning to self-advocate
- Problem-solving when faced with obstacles
- Identifying sources of support and counseling

### **Finding the Appropriate College**

Careful choice of college is an essential part of a transition plan for a teen with neurodevelopmental disorders. If a college is a bad fit for the student, then even the best plan may not be enough for a successful transition to college.

Many families automatically think a four-year college is the logical next step for their adolescent. After carefully considering their teen's strengths and needs, however, families might realize that a gap year, a two-year community college, or a vocational school might be a better option. Frequently, the best choices are made with the input of a college counselor who has experience working with adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders.

### **College Characteristics to Consider**

- Location of the campus relative to the teen's home
- Physical size of the campus
- Size of the student population
- Size of the average class
- Access to professors and teacher assistants
- Majors offered
- Philosophy towards education
- Campus safety
- Campus social life
- Quality of student support and accommodations

- Quality of social and emotional support services
- Quality of career services
- Access to internships

### **Transition Timeline**

Promoting the independence of teens with neurodevelopmental disorders is not an exact science. The process is slow and unpredictable. It is important to recognize that adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders develop on their own timelines. These unique timelines significantly impact the transition to college. During this transition, it is not uncommon for some team members to disagree about certain aspects of the support being offered to the student. It is critical, however, that a teen's transition team agree about the support and maintain comfort with the ongoing help that is required for this process to be successful.

### **Dealing with Setbacks**

The transition to college will inevitably come with challenges and setbacks. The goal of the transition team is to anticipate problems and be prepared to work together on solutions. When a setback occurs, it is essential to bring a sense of calm to the situation while working on a resolution. In the face of a crisis, an emerging adult's confidence in himself or herself can be seriously challenged. Therefore, it is essential that the transition team pull together and demonstrate confidence in the emerging adult and the team as a whole. It is important to avoid pathologizing the setback and viewing it as a weakness. Instead, it is best to support the student by helping him or her process the situation and provide a context for why the setback may have occurred. This approach will help the student learn from the experience and develop resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Transitioning adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders to college is both challenging and satisfying to every member of a transition team, especially the teen. By anticipating areas of need with a transition plan, the team can support the adolescent and increase the likelihood of a smooth transition to college *and* adulthood.

Note: Some of the material for this article was drawn from Daniel Franklin's forthcoming parenting book, *Helping a Child with Language-Based Learning Difficulties: Strategies to Help Children with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, ADHD, and Auditory Processing Disorders Succeed in School and Life*, to be published by New Harbinger Press in May 2018.