

A Spectrum of Possibility: Tips for Parents of College Seeking Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Since successful transition to postsecondary education begins much early than previously assumed, parents play a primary role in preparing their sons and daughters with autism for their journeys to and through college. Transition is an ongoing process, from elementary school to college, and therefore support needs to be comprehensive and longstanding. Below are tips from parents of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Communicate your belief that students can accomplish their goals

Parental expectations play a significant role in students' successful transition to postsecondary education.

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Set that expectation of college ... It's assumed. It's a given. The question then becomes, how do you make it happen?

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Recognize needs and provide opportunity

Develop growth and learning opportunities to address students' needs and do so from a young age. Parents can create various social opportunities to encourage interpersonal relationships, social skill development, teamwork, and other soft skills beneficial for college and career participation.

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I was that mom that would come to your house and say, "Can I borrow your child?" Or, "Can I take your kid home from school today?" But I did not understand just how deeply he craved and needed that socialization... I had kids that would spend the whole summer with us, because I knew the importance of the socialization.

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Promote responsibility and independence

Though fully capable of academic success, college students with autism have been shown to struggle with managing their daily lives. The struggle is greater when skills for independent living have been minimally practiced prior to college. Parents can support their daughters and sons by teaching them how to clean, cook, and to consider others who share living spaces. Responsibilities, chores, and trust at home can yield positive returns in college.

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We tried, for example, leaving him home for the weekend as an older teenager. And saying, "You're responsible for the dog, you're responsible for the cat, and keeping them both alive...you have to make sure all the lights are off. You have to make sure the doors are locked when you leave. If friends come over, these are the expectations.

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Visit college campuses early

Use the gap between college admission and the start of the semester for campus acclimation. Parents can work with students to identify opportunities for early campus inclusion or they can join students on frequent campus visits during summer months. Familiarity with campus facilities and services allows students to better focus on academic and social success.

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He got to know the environment, physical environment...You know, new places, new people, things like that. So he went in [to the first days of college] with some contacts. He went in with some context.

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Trust the campus community and resources

With services for accommodations, counseling, and advising, the campus community is well equipped to provide an array of support previously fulfilled by family. Written and unwritten rules encourage parents to pass along greater responsibility to their students in college.

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There are some very excellent resources [at college] to help students such as my son learn to communicate...they're teaching him how to have better conversation, so he can tackle job interviews, make friends...I think if they do disclose, it can open the door to many resources.

I find this University to accept diversity, to accept people with differences. It's a very warm and compassionate University...The students here...are so kind and good and they've befriended my son.

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For more information, please see our video series *A Spectrum of Possibility*: centerontransition.org/asd. This four part video series highlights experiences and advice from college students with ASD as well as parents, high school counselors, and college professors. The series was produced by Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Transition Innovations with funding from the Virginia Department of Education.

Additional resources

Thierfeld, J., Wolf, L. E., & Bork, G. R. (2012). *The parent's guide to college for students on the autism spectrum*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: AAPC Publishing.

More parent tips: mamaot.com/tips-to-help-parents-of-teen-s-with-autism-prepare-for-high-school-college