A recent study has found that young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are exceptionally at risk for struggling in their transition from high school into adulthood. In particular, young adults with ASD participate in education and work experiences after high school at significantly lower rates than typically developing peers and those with other disabilities (Shattuck, Narendorf, Cooper, Sterzing, Wagner, & Taylor, 2012).

These poor transition outcomes are especially alarming, given that ASD is currently one of the fastest growing disabilities in the country (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2013). It is currently estimated that 1 in 68 children is diagnosed with ASD. Many of these children will grow up, resulting in a “great wave” of adolescents and young adults with ASD in the years to come.

Similarly to other students, these adolescents and young adults with ASD will have aspirations and goals for their transition to adulthood (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). Some may want to pursue a college degree, while others may search for meaningful employment or independent living situations. Transitioning to these activities has become increasingly possible. This is particularly true for the majority of individuals with ASD who are often considered to be “high-functioning,” meaning that they have average to above average intellectual capabilities (Baker, 2013; Bauminger-Zviely, 2013).

Because these individuals are bright and may perform well academically, they may not always appear to have a disability, leading others to assume that they will do fine in college and beyond. However, “high-functioning” young adults with ASD may actually be the most likely to struggle in their transition from high school to adulthood.

Although the transition from high school can be challenging for any student, research consistently suggests that young adults with ASD, including those with high-functioning abilities, demonstrate remarkably poor rates of success. In a recent study published in 2012 in Pediatrics, researchers examined nationwide data of 500 young adults with ASD (Shattuck et al., 2012). They found that over half of the young adults with ASD did not engage in any form of postsecondary education or employment in the first two years after high school. In the six years after high school, only about one-third of the young adults with ASD had attended college and only about half had held paid employment. Even more concerning, the young adults with ASD demonstrated the lowest rates of postsecondary success compared to peers with other disabilities, including those with speech and language impairment, learning disability, or cognitive impairment.

These findings are especially troubling because pursuing higher education or obtaining employment opportunities can make a big difference for individuals with disabilities, including those with ASD. Participating in postsecondary activities can increase their independence, contribution to society, and overall quality of life (Hendricks, 2010; Stodden & Mzurek, 2010). Recent research suggests that young adults with ASD who gain employment and take on independent responsibilities at work tend to show more improvement in their social interactions, communication skills, repetitive behaviors, and daily living skills (Taylor, Smith & Mailick, 2014).
Transition planning for adolescents and young adults with ASD remains crucial to improving their success as adults. Individuals with ASD experience pervasive social and other difficulties that may hinder their experiences in the adult social world. Additionally, for those who are “high-functioning,” acquiring necessary services and supports after high school can be challenging. Therefore, careful and early transition planning is essential.

References