

Top 10 Areas of Support for Students with Asperger's and LD As They Transition to College

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As the number of people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders including Asperger's syndrome, ADD, and other learning differences explodes to nearly one in 100, it is important to address the type of support these individuals will need as they transition to college.

Most college age adults with learning differences have challenges in areas of social, organizational, and executive functioning skills. Many go off to a traditional college but aren't successful because their school does not provide the day-to-day supports they require. Even though these bright young adults have great potential, many will return home from college, isolate themselves, and lose motivation.

The following are 10 key areas of support that can help this growing population transition successfully to college:

1. Executive Functioning

College students with Asperger's and learning differences may be overwhelmed by the typical college experience. They need to learn executive functioning skills which include planning, goal setting, and scheduling, along with strategies for residential living. Students also need to prioritize tasks and communicate more effectively. Each student should work to develop organizational and follow through strategies for his/her academic schedule. By working in small groups and using visual prompts, these young adults can learn how to carry these skills into their college classes, the workplace, and daily life.

2. Individual Tutorials and Study Groups

Individual and group tutoring sessions that meet throughout the week keep students on track. These sessions should be designed to help students in specific areas where they have difficulties as well as improving basic academic skills. Students need assistance selecting college courses and professors that will best meet their needs. They may also need assistance in signing up for accommodations provided by the disabilities support center on campus.

3. Social Competency

The social cognitive learning difference is the most abstract of all learning differences. Students need to interpret what others are thinking and feeling by assuming another's perspective. Students need to learn whole body listening, social inference, and use memory to facilitate friendships. Students need to learn to interpret facial expressions and take perspective on what others are feeling. They can participate in small group sessions to discuss perspectives and practice real-life social situations. They need to work on essential skills including reciprocal conversation, body language, eye contact, and spatial awareness.

4. Social Mentoring

Social Mentors are individuals who are a few years older than students and act as role models for social and problem-solving skills. Research shows that role modeling by positive social mentors in real-life situations

carries the highest degree of learning success. For example, practicing reciprocal conversation skills in a grocery store is much more powerful with a Social Mentor than in a classroom with a teacher. They can meet regularly with students and work to improve social understanding while participating with the students in their special interests. Mentors spend time helping students work on their social challenges while encouraging participation in real-world activities.

5. Sensory Integration

Students benefit from having a holistic understanding of their sensory issues. This helps them improve attention, decrease anxiety, and increase environmental comfort. Classes or individual sessions that focus on sensory integration and the importance it has in everyday tasks provide valuable insight and help to develop coping strategies.

These types of sessions include work on gross and fine motor control and help students understand the effect of the individual senses (tactile, vestibular, auditory, visual, and olfactory). Calming strategies are taught as part of the curriculum and a sensory diet, or daily activities that help calm and relax, can be established for each student.

6. Internships and Community Service

Internship placement is a crucial part of the college transition experience, especially for students with learning disabilities. Students who can apply their academic and social knowledge directly in real-life workplace experiences will be successful. Teachers can help students by assessing their interests and abilities to find appropriate internships. Group meetings wherein students can openly discuss personal experiences, performance, advocacy, challenges, and what they have learned about themselves during the internship process are very beneficial for all who attend.

Community service can be a less stressful opportunity for students to learn more about themselves and what they like. Through community service, students gain a sense of accomplishment and achieve personal growth by contributing their time to help others.

7. Wellness

A healthy lifestyle can help a person both reduce stress and elevate their level of healthy functioning. Exercise and a good diet increases energy, promotes positive social behaviors, and strengthens the immune system. It can also improve self-esteem as well as perceptions of others. Starting with individual assessments, students can then focus on the areas of nutrition, hygiene, sensory diets, weight control, and physical fitness.

8. Reframing

Reframing is a concept that helps students connect the dots between behavior and emotion. Reframing is a themed pro-social activity that aids students' self-understanding and provides daily structure to one's life.

A gathering once a day, usually in the morning, provides a consistent schedule where students can evaluate their feelings and plan out their

day. This may seem mundane, but students with Asperger's and learning differences may crave consistency, so a daily practice strongly aids the alteration of behavioral patterns.

9. Relationship Development

Students need to explore attitudes and values regarding healthy relationship development with special consideration given to issues related to learning differences. Present topics such as friendship building, communication skills, relationship dynamics, and sexuality education. Don't assume that your student on the spectrum does not need basic instruction in common strategies such as initiating friendships and conversations, to learning how and when to be intimate.

10. Individual Therapy

Many students on the spectrum need support with social, anxiety, and sensory issues. Every student arrives at college with a unique set of challenges. Most attend college without being able to ask a teacher for help, work in a group, or develop typical college friendships. Individual therapy utilizing cognitive behavior therapy is very effective in assisting students to deal with their emotions and to solve problems.

As the number of students being diagnosed with Asperger's and learning differences increases dramatically, colleges need to develop curricula and supports that provide them with individualized services. It is of paramount importance that institutions hoping to address this increase can incorporate at least some of these concepts into their special programs for this population.

Michael McManmon has 35 years of experience with students with learning differences and Asperger's syndrome, and he himself was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. He is the founder of CIP (www.collegeinternshipprogram.com), a program that eases the transition to university and independence for young adults with learning differences.

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