

Transition for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder; Parent and Professional Perspectives.

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Adolescents with Autism and their families experience a significant increase in the number and nature of challenges faced when leaving the structure of the formal education system. Increased support and planning is required in order to prepare for and better manage this period, as a successful transition is associated with family well-being. An ecosystemic approach was used in order to better understand the experiences of the individual, the family, the school and the community during this period. Four interacting factors are central to this process: person factors (in this case ASD, and resulting behavioural manifestations), process factors (interactions between school and family), the context (school, family and community), and time (changes existing because of adolescence and changes required in intervention). The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of parent and professional perspectives on various elements of the transition process, in order to develop awareness, improved planning and consequently; outcomes. A sample of 14 participants (7 parents and 7 professionals) was engaged in semi-structured interviews.

The results are presented as emerging themes and categories that answer the research questions: (a) factors on various levels which influence the process of transition, (b) the experience of planning and support during transition, (c) the perspectives of parents and professionals on employment and residential arrangements for young adults with Autism, and (d) thoughts and feelings experienced by the study participants during this period. Several themes emerged from the data obtained. Firstly, participants perceived a lack of available resources, facilities and services required by adolescents with Autism and their families for successful transition to occur. Secondly, it emerged that although a theoretical understanding of what is needed to prepare for transition exists, the practical application of the knowledge is limited. Thirdly, there is a need to take the individual and his/ her context into account in order to assess transition possibilities. The final theme includes the need for an ecosystemic or multidisciplinary approach when planning for transition. Collaboration and the need for various members to play various roles in planning and implementing intervention was repeatedly mentioned, with reference to family, school, community and government influences all impacting the potential of an individual with Autism. The themes which emerged as feelings experienced by participants include fear and uncertainty, secondly a feeling of isolation, lack of support and understanding, and thirdly, a glimmer of hope and the possibilities which exist should support be achieved.

Early intervention for individuals with Autism is acknowledged; however the need for ongoing intervention designed specifically for adolescents with Autism, cannot be underestimated. With the prevalence of Autism continually increasing, and their normal life expectancy, increased awareness of the possible implications on society is required. With appropriate attention, structure and support, individuals with Autism can attain a reasonable quality of life, including residential, employment and social opportunities. Positive outcomes for the individual would result in a positive impact on family, school, community and country.