

# **Supporting Higher-Functioning Students with Autism in the Middle & High School Environment**

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Patricia Howlin, PhD, a well-known researcher in autism spectrum disorders, states in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Preparing for Adulthood* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2004):

**“A recent follow-up study by Gillberg and his colleagues, for example (Billstedt 2003), has indicated that quality of life ratings for more able adults with autism are actually lower than for those with moderate to severe intellectual abilities.”**

**...“the ability to function adequately in adult life may depend as much on the degree of support offered (by families, educational, employment and social services) as much as basic intelligence” (Lord and Venter, 1992, Mawhood and Howlin, 1999)**

In my 13 years of experience of dealing with families and adults with autism, I find the research findings cited above to be true. The middle and high school years are critical in setting up higher-functioning students with autism (HFA) for success in later life. HFA includes individuals diagnosed with autistic disorder, Asperger’s disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Without the necessary meaningful supports and interventions in the high school environment, the student is distracted, anxious and unable to function socially and learn to their greatest potential.

Drawing from my son’s high school years and assisting numerous families over the last 13 years, I have created a list of some of the supports and interventions that will increase an HFA student’s chances of functioning successfully in the middle and high school setting, and, also importantly, gives them the confidence to transition into the adult world of post-secondary education, work and independent living.

- 1) With the advice of the student’s counselor and school site caseload manager, allow pre-registration in general education classes with teachers that are knowledgeable or willing to learn about the student’s diagnosis and implement the supports specified in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Encourage the general education teachers and support staff to attend training, or offer training on-site. Be sure to include bullying and harassment awareness and intervention and how it can manifest itself in a targeted HFA student’s behavior.
- 2) School site administration gives special education staff the needed support and allows them to advocate for the needs of special education students. This creates a culture of acceptance in the school setting from the top down by staff and is modeled to the general education student population promoting positive peer interactions.
- 3) A few days before the new term or session starts, give general education teachers a brief written description of HFA and an IEP at-a-glance that specifies the supports and accommodations needed by the student. Invite general education teachers to a 30-45 minute all-teacher conference to be

held within the next two weeks with the student, caseload manager and parent to ask and answer questions and discuss any issues.

- 4) When possible, minimize the transition challenges from class-to-class and other activities throughout the day. Schools that are on block scheduling with 4 to 5 periods per day help to prevent the HFA student from becoming overwhelmed and stressed. It is important to look at the entire school day and build in a structure on which the HFA student can generally depend.
- 5) When possible, smaller class sizes are less stressful and the teachers can give the students more individual attention and keep control of the classroom behavior. HFA students find it extremely stressful to cope with other students' disruptive classroom behavior while learning. Seating proximity to disruptive students, environmental distractions and group activities (often a challenge) can also be monitored in smaller classes.
- 6) Pre-identify a safe haven or quiet place where the HFA student can go if they feel overwhelmed or unable to cope and can regain emotional and sensory regulation. This is usually spelled out in the IEP and general education teachers and school staff need to be notified in advance about the agreement. The safe haven can also be used for activities that HFA students may find problematic like pep rallies, assemblies or unstructured recess time like lunch. Additionally, it is desirable to have trained and trusted contact staff like a special education teacher, school psychologist or school principal that is available to prevent or defuse a crisis.
- 7) Socialization training and pragmatic language skills services including effective interpersonal communication provided by a knowledgeable and experienced speech therapist or trained mental health professional. Perspective-taking, self-advocacy, conversation skills, friendship skills, processing and analyzing challenging school social interactions and preparation for new and potentially challenging activities or social situations are some of the areas that are usually addressed by speech therapists in one-on-one and/or in groups with familiar peers. Giving HFA students the skills needed to navigate the confusing social environment, referred to as the "hidden curriculum" by researcher Brenda Smith Myles, enables them to feel competent, enhances their self-esteem, reduces their anxiety and prepares them for future similar challenges in the community into adulthood.
- 8) Extra time for homework, class work, tests and projects gives the HFA student the extended time needed to process information, produce quality work and demonstrate their mastery. A study period with a resource teacher available to tutor and keep the HFA student focused is an effective support. It allows the student time to complete homework so they don't have to go home with a heavy homework commitment each day which can be very stressful and overwhelming. It gives them the opportunity to pursue other activities after school and allows them the needed "down time" to relax. The study period can also be used creatively to pull out the student for speech and language services so they do not miss any general education class time, teach independent living skills, address executive function deficits, target transition plan goals and focus on other goals identified in the IEP.
- 9) Flexibility by the school site staff to respond to the changing needs of the HFA student is extremely important. The IEP written at the beginning of the school year needs to be reviewed to reflect new issues or concerns by the student, parents and staff. Scheduling periodic reviews by a core team (caseload manager, speech therapist, parent and student) at least as often as general education students receive progress reports keeps the document relevant and meaningful for the student.

Access to effective supports and services needs to be available throughout the lifespan of individuals with HFA, regardless of the age they are first diagnosed. Joan S. Safran, Associate Professor, Educational Psychology and Secondary Education, Ohio University, states in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 2002:

**"It is important to note that as these people age, it is the *depression* (see Wing, 1981) that is often associated with isolation that interferes in their functioning and contributes to a higher incidence of suicide (Hardan & Sahl, 1999; Wolff, 1995). An effective deterrent to this isolation is a classroom environment that promotes acceptance of even the most vexing child. In saving this child, we may in fact, be saving ourselves."**

Finally, in the National Research Council's publication (commissioned by the U.S. Dept of Education), *Educating Children with Autism*, 2001:

Diagnosis, Assessment and Prevalence, page 3:

**"The committee recommends that children with any autistic spectrum disorder (autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, atypical autism, PDD-NOS, childhood disintegrative disorder), regardless of level of severity or function, be eligible for special education services within the category of autism."**

-and-

Goals for Educational Services, page 5:

**"At the root of the questions about the most appropriate educational interventions for autistic spectrum disorders are differences in assumptions about what is possible and what is important to give students with these disorders through education. The appropriate goals for educational services for children with autistic spectrum disorders are the same as those for other children: personal independence and social responsibility. These goals imply progress in social and cognitive abilities, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and adaptive skills; reduction of behavioral difficulties; and generalization of abilities across multiple environments."**

Effectively supporting students with autism in middle and high school creates a meaningful environment in which they can continue to learn skills to function more successfully as they transition into challenges of young adulthood. The benefits of high quality intervention, supports and services will establish a strong foundation and promote the belief that they are capable individuals, resulting in a motivation to continue to strive toward greater personal independence and self-fulfillment throughout their lifespan, whatever path they choose.