

# Surviving and Thriving: Essential Ingredients for Social Success in College



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# The Early Years

- Diagnosis
- Early intervention
- ABA, DIR-Floortime, Wraparound...
- I.E.P.s
- Social Skills Groups
- Autistic Support
- Individual Therapy
- Support from mom and dad
- Preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school...graduation!



# NOW WHAT?

- **Research on college students with ASDs is woefully lacking**
- **Supports for college students with ASDs range from nonexistent to inadequate to brand new, depending on the college**

# Our Study

- 13 participants—self selected (positive bias?)
- 1-hour long semi-structured interviews
  - ◆ Why interviews?
- Range of demographics
  - ◆ Ages 18 to 23
  - ◆ 6 females & 7 males
  - ◆ Small colleges & large universities
  - ◆ East coast schools (NY, PA, NJ)
- The question: What is the college social experience like for college students with ASDs?
  - ◆ Apply what we learn to creating better supports & interventions

# Why Social Experiences??



# Why Social Experiences?

- **1 out of 88 diagnosed with ASDs (CDC, 2008)**
  - ◆ Many with the academic abilities and interest necessary for college success
- **Less support in college than during first 18 years**
- **Student with ASDs tend to drop out for social reasons, NOT academic**
- **Research on employment and life satisfaction for adults with ASD is grim**
  - ◆ Usually due to social reasons (interpersonal difficulties, loneliness, etc.)
  - ◆ (Jobe & White, 2007; Jennes-Coussens, Magill-Evans & Koning, 2006; Howlin, 2004).

# Why Social Experiences?

- Socializing in college is important developmentally
- College can serve as a time to learn and experiment socially in a structured, safe environment



# What We Learned

- College students with ASDs are diverse with unique sets of strengths and needs
- Understanding the individual is the **MOST IMPORTANT** step towards appropriate support!





# The Good News!

- 100% of the participants feel accepted at college
  - ◆ 55% felt accepted in high school
  - ◆ College students are more accepting and mature
  - ◆ May be self-selection bias
- 77% made real, satisfying friendships
  - ◆ Making friends is easier in college
- 77% said college has boost their self-esteem
  - ◆ Most felt less confident or not confident at all before college

# How to Survive & Thrive

## 1.) Making Friends:

Why it might be difficult:

- ◆ ASD symptoms will likely impact socialization
  - Reading social cues
  - Talking too much
  - Not knowing when to talk
  - Prosopagnosia
- ◆ Social anxiety in new situations and in large social settings

# How to Survive & Thrive

## 1.) Making Friends:

Step outside your comfort zone

- ◆ BUT socially successful students worked around these challenges
  - Found friends in classes, dorms, and through clubs/activities
- ◆ Avoid socializing exclusively online
- ◆ Be aware of hyperfocusing on a friendship
  - Ask for feedback: “Am I crowding you?”

# How to Survive & Thrive

- 2.) Join clubs & activities that appeal to your interests
- ◆ Colleges offer a variety of organizations, clubs, activities
  - ◆ Meet like-minded peers!
  - ◆ Clubs offer structure, reliability, regular social contact



# How to Survive & Thrive

## 3.) Join (or start) an on campus or off campus ASD social/support group

- ◆ Increase support base
- ◆ Communicate with others who have similar perspectives/challenges/strengths etc.
- ◆ Aid one another in self-advocacy

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# How to Survive & Thrive



4.) Pick a living situation that suits your needs and social interests

**-At home (first year or two)**

**-On campus, alone or with roommates**

- o Consider a suite
- o Communicate with roommates!

# How to Survive & Thrive

5.) **DATING:** It's scary, but you might want to consider it...

- ◆ **Majority of participants would like to date at some point, but do not currently**
- ◆ **There is always a reason to put it off**
- ◆ **College is a good time to meet people your age who share your interests**
- ◆ **Proceed with caution and support!**



# How to Survive & Thrive

- 6.) Enlist professional help**
- Therapist specializing in ASDs
  - College counseling center
    - o Ask about expertise in ASDs





# How to Survive & Thrive

## **7.) Consider self-disclosure. Carefully**

- **Those who self-disclosed their ASDs to trusted peers felt doing so elicited support and understanding**
- **A few had bad experiences when disclosing to peers they didn't know well**
- **Many do not disclose to avoid judgment**
- **Recommendation: consider self-disclosing to trusted peers**
  - **How do you know who is trustworthy?**

# Conclusion: Helpful Tidbits

Advice from the participants for prospective college students with ASDs

- ◆ Be yourself and try to accept who you are
- ◆ Be proactive and step outside your comfort zone
- ◆ Go with the flow
- ◆ And have fun!

# Questions? Feedback?

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