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!
• 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.)
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
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
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?”
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
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
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!
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!
6.) Enlist professional help
   - Therapist specializing in ASDs
   - College counseling center
     - Ask about expertise in ASDs
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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