



Navigating College: Empowering Autistic Students for a Smooth Transition

Spring 2025 Facets Audio Newsletter Transcript

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ANNOUNCER: 00:04

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AVA: 00:26

I remember the anxiety of my first year of college. Being away from home, living with a roommate, and juggling classes led to many homesick calls to my mom. Time passes, and now I'm the parent on the phone, supporting my son as he navigates his freshman year.

The transition to college is stressful for everyone, even more so for those on the autism spectrum. In this issue of Facets, we offer advice to ease the adjustment quotes Helen Genova, PhD Associate Director.

MASARU: 00:59

Ready for the future

For many students on the autism spectrum, college offers a path to greater independence. Strong planning and preparation can help them reach their goals.

Starting college is typically an exciting chapter in a young person's academic journey. For many autistic students this may also mean leaving behind a structure they've relied on and entering the more unpredictable world of college. They'll face new experiences and accept more responsibilities - often without the daily support they're used to.

Indeed, a student's transition from high school to college can be frightening, even with their parent's love, guidance, and encouragement. Scheduling classes, keeping up with assignments, meeting new people, and managing sensory overload in lecture halls and dorms can seem overwhelming. Many students will feel anxious, while parents may struggle letting their child take the lead.

Contact disability services

Once your child is accepted, contact the college's autism or disability services office. These programs support and advocate for



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autistic students and help determine which accommodations are needed, such as extra time on tests or private rooms to take exams. They will also help you discuss your child's accommodations with professors. Many programs also offer additional assistance, including weekly check-ins with a counselor, peer mentors, and support groups.

Some students may not want to reach out to these programs. They may feel that they no longer need these services or that they can manage everything on their own. Other students may worry about being labeled in this new environment. Regardless, connecting with this office early on is critical for your child's success.

Build confidence with preparation

Unexpected changes are difficult for many individuals on the spectrum. However, there are things you can do to prepare your child for what college will be like. Go on a tour of the school and walk through the dorms, dining halls, classrooms, and other parts of the campus. If possible, meet with an advisor or professor.

For students who will be commuting by car, do a few test drives to the campus and find where to park. If your child will be using public transit, take a few trips to and from campus to help establish a routine.

Manage expectations

Everyone has dreams of what college life is like. However, for many autistic students, the college experience will likely differ from that of their parents, siblings, or neurotypical classmates. As a parent, try to take each day as it comes and trust that your child can succeed in their own way.

BRANDON: 03:34

3 Tips to Ease into College

Contact autism or disability services

Build confidence with preparation

RYAN: 03:45

Manage expectations

Packing up, settling in



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If your child will be living on campus, the college will likely give you a suggested packing list. Here are some additional items that may be helpful for your autistic teen.

Noise-canceling headphones provide quiet to focus and relax, or adjust to a roommate's schedule.

Weighted blanket helps reduce anxiety.

Calendar or organizer keeps track of classes, assignments, and other tasks or activities.

Alarm clock sets reminders and builds daily routines.

Room décor reflects your child's interests and personality.

SARA: 04:16

Letting go, staying connected

Handing over control is never easy. But by trusting your child to manage college on their own, you give them the gift of independence.

As your child heads off to college, you'll probably be less involved in their daily routine and, yes, that can be an abrupt and scary change for many families. But giving them space to become more independent teaches them to trust themselves - an essential part of growing up.

However, encouraging independence does not mean removing your support. Rather it means stepping back, but still being there for your child.

Here are five suggestions:

Provide as much support as needed during your child's first semester, including, for example, reminders to study, complete homework, or do laundry. As time goes on, see how they're doing and adjust the level of support.

Reconnecting with friends and family in a comfortable environment may be reassuring to your child. Schedule regular calls to check in and let them come home on weekends, especially in the beginning.



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Encourage your child to meet with their professors and practice speaking up for themselves. Avoid the urge to contact a teacher if your child isn't doing well; let your child learn to handle it.

Suggest your child join a club or activity that matches their interests. This can help them make new friends and feel more connected.

Stay calm. Things might not go as smoothly as hoped. Your child might miss an assignment, forget to set the alarm for a morning class, or call you in tears. While you may wonder if college was the right decision, try to relax and give it time.

ALLOY: 05:55

A spectrum of financial support

College is expensive, but scholarships can help cover tuition, room and board, books, fees, and other costs. Fortunately, many scholarships have been created just for students on the autism spectrum.

Here is a current sampling:

Buckfire & Buckfire, PC Disability Scholarship, Kerry Magro, and Making a Difference for Autism Scholarship Program, Organization for Autism Research, American Association on Health & Disability Frederick J. Krause Scholarship, National Center for Learning Disabilities.

Links to these organizations can be found in the program notes.

GIUSEPPE: 06:32

Putting college on hold?

While some students look forward to starting college right after high school, others take time to figure out their personal goals and career plans.

What's commonly called a "gap year" can be a great opportunity for young adults to further explore their interests, gain experience, travel, or do volunteer work before continuing their education or starting a job after high school.

Take classes without full-time enrollment



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One gap year option is to take a college class or two without the pressure of full-time enrollment. This allows your child to explore potential areas of study - especially if they are unsure about their major. Additionally, they may even be able to transfer the credits they earn if they decide to seek a degree.

Use the gap year to gain work experience

Others may choose to use this gap year to gain experience in a field they wish to pursue as a career. Working part-time is a great way to learn more about a profession, accept new responsibilities, maintain an independent schedule, and even save money for tuition.

SARA: 07:34

Finding the right fit

Many colleges across the country have programs that provide support and services to help their autistic students succeed. When looking into colleges, think about your child's particular needs and goals to see if the school will be a good fit. Here are a few with autism-specific programs:

Adelphi University New York: Bridges to Adelphi

California Polytechnic State University: Empowering Autistic Scholars Program

Eastern Michigan University: College Supports Program

Ramapo College New Jersey: ENHANCE Program

Rochester Institute of Technology: Spectrum Support Program

University of North Florida: THRIVE Program.

Links to these schools can be found in the program notes.

ALLOY: 08:22

To learn more about how our research develops interventions focusing on the critical adolescence-to-adult transition. Go to [Kessler Foundation dot org slash autism](https://www.kesslerfoundation.org/autism).

Interested in learning more or enrolling in our studies, email us at [autism_research at KesslerFoundation.org](mailto:autism_research@kesslerfoundation.org).



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ANNOUNCER: 08:41

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