



## Focused on Strengths: Autism Research at Kessler Foundation

Transcript

May 7, 2026

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00:00:02 SHELBY NIELSEN

Welcome to our latest Real Life Science webinar, Translating Research to Real Life. Thank you for joining us today for today's topic focused on strengths, autism research at Kessler Foundation. We're excited to be joined by Helen Genova, PhD Associate Director of the Center for Autism Research, who will share how her team's work is grounded in positive psychology and focused on recognizing and building on individual strengths. You'll also learn about KF Strive, a research-backed program that helps autistic and neurodiverse young adults identify their strengths and communicate them in a way to support their personal and professional goals. We'll wrap up with a panel that brings this work to life, featuring Michelle and Gabe Scher, a mother and son participating in Kessler Foundation Research, along with Michael D'Aponace, Senior Research Assistant and Program Facilitator. Together, they'll share how these approaches work in real life, and why participant and family perspectives are so central to this research. Thank you again for being here.

00:01:05 HELEN GENOVA

We're glad to have you with us today. So as Shelby said, my name is Helen Genova. I'm the Associate Director for the Center for Autism Research. Autism is a deep personal and professional passion of mine. One of the things that I'd like to start out by saying is that our whole mission is really to help you succeed by focusing on their strengths. So if you are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder or if you are the parent of someone on the spectrum, you know that historically there's been a lot of therapy to try to help people on the spectrum. But there has not been as much emphasis on trying to help them identify what's really wonderful and special about them. And that's really at the core of the work that we do is to try to help them realize what are their unique strengths, talents, skills, and then how to use those abilities as a jumping point to achieve the goals in their life.

00:02:05 HELEN GENOVA

So our mission is really to help youth and young adults with disabilities like autism to thrive and achieve their goals through innovative interventions and research, some of which I'll be showing you today. And I just want to also take a moment to thank my team for being wonderful. Mike is here with us today. He'll be speaking on the panel a little bit later. But really all the work that I do, I couldn't do without all of these wonderful people. So I just wanted to say thank you to them.

00:02:33 HELEN GENOVA

So our research really is focused on helping transition age youth and young adults achieve their goals. And what I mean by that is a lot of research in autism is focused on very young kids. So historically, if you look at the amount of papers. Most of the research studies to date have been done on younger children and how to best help them succeed.

00:02:59 HELEN GENOVA

What we wanted to do was focus on that transition period between childhood and adulthood, that time of life when people are really trying to discover who they are, what kind of jobs they want, who they want to be when they grow up, for lack of a better term. And so what we wanted to do was focus on employment because we know that's a very big goal for many people. And we looked at the programs that existed out there for kids on the spectrum. And we said, well, what are some of the places where we could make the most impact? We didn't want to reinvent the wheel. If you guys are involved in the employment world at all, especially in the disability employment world, you know that there are some really cool, innovative programs out there to help people become more hireable, to give them employment skills. We didn't want to reinvent the wheel. We wanted to help in two areas that can be very tricky for young adults and adults on the spectrum. The first area was job interviews. And the second area is job maintenance through positive coping skills. So I'll talk about job interviews first. So one of the things that we realized is that even though you could have someone who has the most amazing employable skills, who has really wonderful strengths, is a team player, is a hard worker, they may not know how to strategically talk about that to another person, to an interviewer. So many of you on this webinar have either been on a job interview



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yourselves looking to get a job, or you are in the position of interviewing people. And you know, you may have a resume that comes across your desk and the resume is like, okay, it's not bad. But then the person comes in and they are just really... very personable and you guys get along great and it's a wonderful conversation and you feel very positive about the whole thing and then you could have somebody who's got an amazing resume that comes across your desk and when

00:05:01 HELEN GENOVA

they come in for the interview the interview feels a little flat maybe um there's not much that's being shared that connection just isn't there and so you're probably more likely to hire the person with the mediocre resume but really wonderful interpersonal interview skills okay So the job interview is one of the most critical points in which someone is trying to maintain employment. It's like one of the biggest hurdles. And it can be very challenging for people on the spectrum. Why? So people on the spectrum can have things like social communication difficulties. They might find that challenging. Conversations. Taking turns in conversations. How much do I say? What do I share? What do I not share? What do I hold back on? Right? So the interview, when you think about it, it's a social exchange of information and you are taking turns. You are trying to sell yourself, but you're trying to sound modest. You don't want to brag, but you also don't want to hold back on things that you want to tell to an employer. So there's like a strategy that's involved in the job interview. And this strategy may be very tricky for individuals on the spectrum. So if you think about the first question that's almost always asked in job interviews, which is, you know, so tell me about yourself. So if you are on a job interview and somebody says, tell me about yourself, you probably will right away start to say things like, oh, well, my name is Helen Genova. I'm the associate director for the Center for Autism. I'm a scientist.

00:06:34 HELEN GENOVA

You give professional information, right? Information that's relevant to the job that you're applying for. However, you might have like a teenager on the spectrum that starts giving other kinds of information. So they're not quite sure. So for example, they might say their favorite movie or where they just went on vacation or the thing that they like to study in school. All of these things that are really amazing facts about someone, but are maybe not relevant to the job interview. And so again, they're kind of missing out on this amazing opportunity to sell themselves. as an amazing employee because they're not quite sure which information to provide and then what information that you shouldn't share at that moment in that situation. So that's the job interview. So we created a program that's called KF Stride into the interview. KF Stride stands for Kessler Foundation Strength, Identification, and Expression. And it's a web-based program for youth that focuses really on two stages. The first one is strength identification. So that means we help individuals identify what their strengths are. That's the first step. Because a lot of people, both neurotypical and on the spectrum, simply don't know. I don't know what are my employable strengths. I'm not sure. The second thing we do is we help them understand and practice how to explain those strengths to an employer in a socially appropriate way. So that can take a little bit of practice, and we do that.

00:08:07 HELEN GENOVA

A couple things you'll see is that we use a lot of animated videos. So why do we do this? A lot of kids on the spectrum or adults on the spectrum will go to a job coach. They will learn about job skills in class. They'll go to a program through the Department of Voc Rehab, and they will just have someone kind of lecturing them on how to do better on job interviews. And what we chose to do was rather than give it to them in that sort of dry format, was we chose to create animated, engaging videos to make it more fun. The video I'll show you will have someone called Scott the Strengthspotter. He is the main person who gives the content to the users. The other thing is we focus all on positive psychology. So if you... know about traditional psychology, if anybody has ever been to a therapist, you know that in the field of psychology, you focus on trying to reduce things like anxiety, depression, and whereas positive psychology is you're trying to increase things like strength awareness, things that bring you joy, things that you're good at. So it's not like you're stopping negative behaviors,



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you're more using positive behaviors and strengths in your life. We use animated videos. We use positive psychology. And with KF Stride, you're always working with a support coach. You're going to be meeting one of our support coaches. We call them KF Stride guides. That person is really there to help navigate the program and also to practice the job interview skills with them. So there's a lot of job interview practice where they will practice answering questions with a filmed actor. All of that will show you in a second. And the role of the K of Stride guide is to give them feedback based on those things.

00:10:04 VIDEO ANNOUNCER

Are you ready for a career but can't seem to make it past the job interview? You are not alone. Many people are ready to start their career but can't seem to land the job because they struggle with the interview process. For some people, social anxiety can make the interview difficult. For others... they simply don't know what type of information they should talk about to an employer if this sounds like you then this course is for you this course is kf stride which stands for kessler foundation strength identification and expression kf stride is going to teach you what types of information a typical employer or interviewer wants to know and how they expect to hear it Unlike books or online articles, this information will be given to you in short, engaging, animated videos. Scott, your job coach, will be teaching you some easy to master skills. Sometimes you will be asked questions and see a red pause button. That's when you should pause the button and answer. These questions will often help you reflect on the lesson or let you practice a skill.

00:11:20 VIDEO ANNOUNCER

Speaking of practice, you'll be doing practice interviews, taking quizzes, and doing other activities to help reinforce what you've learned. At the end of each lesson, you'll review what you've learned. Sometimes, you'll be given an assignment to do on your own time. These assignments are usually brief, and they're not meant to be hard or stressful. With time and practice, your confidence will grow. and you'll be on the right track towards achieving your goals and finding the right job for you. So, let's get started with KF Stride.

00:11:59 HELEN GENOVA

That is the first video that people see, and that gives an overview. So you saw there the character, the little animated character, his name is Scott the Strengthspotter. He helps people understand what their strengths are. We also, we go through things like job etiquette or... job interview etiquette to be more specific. So for example, when you go on a job interview, what time do you show up? Do you show up, like let's say your interview's at 10, do you show up at 10? No, you should probably show up at 9.50. You don't want to show up at nine o'clock and sit there in the room for an hour. You know, you want to show up about 10 minutes early. If you're doing a virtual interview, so everyone knows these days everything is virtual. A lot of times the first time you meet with someone, it's on Zoom or some other platform. And so we talk to them about being mindful of what's going on behind them. You know, it's funny. I'm in this position of creating this intervention for people, but also I've hired people to work for me personally in the last few years. And, you know, sometimes kids, teenagers will need to be reminded, any teenager, not spectrum specific or anything like that, where they'll have things going on in the background, like garbage or another person or, you know, what they're choosing to wear. So we give tips like that. If it's an in-person interview, that's the day to kind of plan something nice to wear. Plan in advance so you're not looking for the shirt the day of. You know it's ironed and ready to go. How to write a good thank you note. So these are all things that we teach in addition to speaking about your strengths and practicing those skills. Okay, so we were... Funded a few years ago, we were very happy to be funded by the National Institute of Mental Health to evaluate KF Stride in a randomized control trial. And so we had two groups. We had kids, when I say kids, transition age youth, who took KF Stride. And then we had kids in the control group who did not receive KF Stride. So these two lines here are the non-KF Stride group and then the kids who got KF Stride. And we looked at their job interview skills. before and after the program. And you'll see here is where the kids who did not get K of Stride showed no change in their job interview skills over time. The kids who got K of Stride really showed a very nice increase in their job interview skills. And this has been published. So if you are interested, we can send you that paper. But that was very exciting to see. And then even more exciting was what we saw in



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terms of employment. So for those of you who are on this call who are not familiar with autism or employment in autism, it's a pretty big problem in this country. Individuals who are on the spectrum, there's an 80 percent unemployment rate, meaning one in five autistic adults are employed.

00:15:00 HELEN GENOVA

That's a really scary number, especially considering, you know, everybody. on this call, I'm sure knows someone on the spectrum or is someone on the spectrum or loves someone on the spectrum. So it's a societal thing that we all should be paying attention to, how to help individuals on the spectrum gain employment. So what we're really excited about was that after KF Stride, 54 % of job seekers became employed compared to only 12 % in the control group. So that was a really, really cool finding. I mentioned briefly at the beginning that we have another program focused on job maintenance through emotion regulation and positive coping. So what does that mean? Okay. Not everyone, but some people on the spectrum may have some difficulty in keeping themselves calm when stressed out. Then you get on a job where maybe you don't know everybody there. Maybe there's no one there that feels like you're a safe person that you can trust to lean on. And that stress can go even higher, right? So you can have difficulty dealing with stress in your regular life. Then you go to your job and the stress is just exponentially increased. This is very difficult for kids on the spectrum. And so what we wanted to do was create a program where we focused on positive coping skills and emotion regulation. So how to keep people calm when feeling things like stressed out. Angry, you know, maybe you got into work and you thought you were doing something and then your boss says to you, you know what, you're not doing that anymore. Now you're doing this and that can cause some anger. Overwhelmed, you know, you came into work and the jobs are kind of piling on or you're working, let's say, in a restaurant and the number of people coming into the restaurant is just increasing. You're getting really overwhelmed. So in those sorts of situations, we wanted to give positive coping skills so that we could help them with emotion regulation.

00:17:02 HELEN GENOVA

Again, a little bit about K of Strive into work is what we call it. It's animated videos, again, so it's the same format. All coping strategies that we taught are based on positive psychology. And the really cool thing is they're customized to the user. So everybody finds out what their strengths are, and then we give them coping strategies based on those particular strengths. So let's say my strength is creativity, but Mike... is honesty, right? For me, my coping strategy might be taking a creative break to kind of regulate my emotions and get my mood reset. Whereas Mike, whose strength is honesty, his might be telling someone that he trusts his honest feelings about what he's going through. So we would have different coping strategies. So it was very important to us to not take a one size fits all approach, but to really customize to make sure that the coping strategy is given to the kids. resonated with them and were really important to them. And the other thing I'm proud to say is that this program was made in partnership with the autism community. So we spoke with parents, employers who successfully employ autistic kids, and youth themselves on the spectrum, and teachers, educators, clinicians. What we found in our preliminary analysis is that from before to after that program, The youth that were enrolled reported using their strengths more in their daily lives following the program, and that was a significant difference.

00:18:40 HELEN GENOVA

I'm very excited about this. One of the things that's very important as a scientist is not just doing things in the lab and then having them stay there, right? So as a scientist, you want to make sure that your research is having a real -world impact. So one of the things we wanted to do was make sure that we get KF Stride out into the community. These are the community organizations that are either using KF Stride or have used KF Stride. Some of these names you might recognize and the list is growing, which is really exciting. So recently we were approached by the National Down Syndrome Society and they are actually going to be using KF Stride in their organization. but schools across New Jersey, New York, and also we have a



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program in Louisiana State where Louisiana State University is using KF Stride in their paycheck program.

00:19:35 HELEN GENOVA

And we are always happy to partner with others. So if you are interested, please feel free to reach out to us if you feel like KF Stride is good for your family or for your school or your voc rehab agency.

00:19:51 HELEN GENOVA

I'm going to come back. Well, I'll cover this right now, Shelby. We're going to do our panel in a minute, but for those of you who are interested in being a part of our research, we have a number of studies that you might be interested in, and you can either use the QR code on your screen right now, or you could email Shelby or myself following this. We are... We have a research study right now for adults who are on the spectrum, anyone over the age of 18 who would like to try out our new KF Stride program. We have a randomized control trial going on right now. It is completely free for you to be a part of it, and you will be compensated for your time. We have another one for Down syndrome. So for individuals who are diagnosed with Down syndrome who would like to try out our program, we have that. One of the scientists here is looking at physical activity in youth on the spectrum. So for those ages 14 to 24 who are diagnosed with autism, you would come to Kessler Foundation and you would be able to participate in that. These two studies are virtual, so everything can be done online no matter where you are in the country. We have a program specifically for parents of kids on the spectrum, kids who are age 5 to 12. And then we have another one where we're testing out our into work program a little bit more. And that's for individuals between the ages of 14 and 26. So again, please reach out to us. We love to have new participants to try out our programs. I'm going to stop sharing. Great. Yes. And also, if you're just interested, you can always go to the Kessler Foundation website, which is [KesslerFoundation.org](https://www.KesslerFoundation.org). There's a big, beautiful button right at the top that says join a study. And you can click on autism research. They're beautiful little icons to help you find what you're looking for. So thank you, Helen, for an introduction to what is research, autism research at Kessler Foundation, and what is KF Stride and why we focus on strengths. We're excited now to transition over to our panel discussion. I'm going to ask everybody who is on our panel to come off mute. We're going to start, as I introduced at the beginning, we have Michael Dacony, who's our Senior Research Assistant and Program Facilitator. Michelle and Gabriel Sher, who are, Michelle is a wonderful mother to Gabriel, who's a research participant in KFStride. So, Michelle, I'm going to start off with you. Gabe's mom, what were your hopes or questions when he started KFStride?

00:22:35 MICHELLE SCHAERF

First of all, thank you all for inviting us to join the KF Stride program. Gabriel had been struggling since graduating college to interview for jobs. So I was looking for something that would help him to be a little more confident in those interviews, help him not agonize over the interviews and stress about them. he would often get caught up with the right things to say when asked a pointed question. So this program actually really felt right, like a really good fit for him.

00:23:16 SHELBY NIELSEN

That's great. Were there any changes you noticed during or after his participation, even small?

00:23:23 MICHELLE SCHAERF

Yeah. I mean, we were looking for something where it would build his confidence and his ease of talking and delivery. And I think that after completing the program, Those were the things that really resonated. He definitely honed in on what his strengths were and what he possibly might be looking for in employment. And, you know, he just overall enjoyed doing the program, which I think is so key. And, you know, he really just seemed like his delivery on answers. when asked questions of anybody, you know, in an interview or even, you know, just the beginning stages of talking to somebody a little bit more at ease when he was speaking to them.



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00:24:07 SHELBY NIELSEN

Oh, that's great. Thank you for sharing. Is there anything you'd want other parents to know if their child was considering a program like this?

00:24:17 MICHELLE SCHAERF

Well, I think it's a win-win. I always believe that every bit of help you can get is helpful. Again, like I said, he was eager to work with Mike. It wasn't something that he, you know, gave me a hard time about. Like, he really hopped on. He did it independently. The animation part, I think, is very appealing, very user-friendly. The time commitment is really realistic. It's not a lot of time out of a week. You know, it's a very short time. And I think the program's very engaging. And the coaches are really fabulous. I think he learned a lot from the program, and hopefully he can take those skills and adapt them as he continues to look for employment.

00:25:05 SHELBY NIELSEN

Wonderful. Gabe, Gabriel, now we're switching over to you. I'm curious, does this line up with how you felt about the KF Stride program? Tell us a little bit more.

00:25:16 GABRIEL SCHAERF

I would say what my mother said is pretty much in line with how I feel. My mic is working, correct?

00:25:25 SHELBY NIELSEN

Yes, we can hear you.

00:25:26 GABRIEL SCHAERF

Just making sure it wasn't lining up for me.

00:25:30 GABRIEL SCHAERF

I definitely was very excited to get to know what was coming next. I think the animations definitely did help a lot in that aspect because it definitely is able to stick with you a lot better than someone just repeating the information back to you.

00:25:50 GABRIEL SCHAERF

And I also think... I think like a major part of why I was having such a hard time before this versus after is I lack a lot of self-confidence. So really getting to build that up via the practice interviews and the different types of activities was definitely helpful.

00:26:12 SHELBY NIELSEN

That's great. I was going to ask you what you were thinking the program might help you with, but it sounds like that is what you were looking for. um could you describe a moment or an activity that stood out to you during you know i know the animation but was there anything else yeah um i remember there was well there were multiple practice interviews that we did but there was one that we did that was we would record it and then we'd watch it back um and as i said before i'm very uh i lack a lot of self-confidence in myself um but

00:26:29 GABRIEL SCHAERF

um i remember there was well there were multiple practice interviews that we did but there was one that we did that was we would record it and then we'd watch it back um and as i said before i'm very uh i lack a lot of self-confidence in myself um but I think being able to see what I do during an interview and like getting to see like what I can improve, what I did well, that really helps sort of get a visual of what the other person is seeing from me.



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00:27:10 SHELBY NIELSEN

Was there something you learned, like a strength of yours that you learned about that surprised you?

00:27:20 GABRIEL SCHAERF

I wouldn't say there was anything that surprised me in terms of the strengths themselves. Just to make things a little bit out there, my strengths, as I have them written down, were creativity, honesty, and humility. I believe that's what it was. And most of those, I knew going in, okay, those are likely. But what surprised me was how they could be applied to certain situations. Creativity is not just um being creative in like an artistic or um yeah really just an artistic sense but in like how you respond to someone or how you handle a certain situation

00:28:09 SHELBY NIELSEN

definitely I mean there's so many different elements of what being creative can be and like you may be a wonderful painter or drawer or maybe even an animator. But how you answer a question and how you connect the dots can be an example of being creative. And you've exhibited that just here. And now you've connected all these wonderful dots. Is there anything, I know you talked a little bit about self-confidence, but was there anything challenging about the program that you feel that you, that was challenging at first that you overcame?

00:28:44 GABRIEL SCHAERF

I think. And I don't think this is specific with this program. It's just a general thing that I find challenging.

00:28:53 GABRIEL SCHAERF

Trying to feel like I need to say the right thing. Like I need to be perfect at an interview in order to get a job. And sort of letting go of that mentality as I was continuing this experience.

00:29:13 SHELBY NIELSEN

Okay. Thank you, Gabe. We appreciate your perspective here today. And I know folks who are joining are grateful as well. I'm going to switch over to money. As a facilitator, could you share a little bit more about what your role is within KF Stride and what you're focused on supporting is?

00:29:31 MICHAEL DACANY

Yeah. So my main role is to guide the participant through the program, answer any questions that they have and provide individualized support for their interviewing and career goals. So the program, throughout it, we have meaningful discussions, we do a bunch of different activities, and we go through a lot of practice interviews. And that's the opportunity for me to provide feedback on areas of improvement. And everyone has different top character strengths, talents and skills. They're on varying stages of their career, their experience, their interviewing journey. So I asked them, in the beginning, what are some of their challenges that they have? um and you know I try to figure out what um what in what ways or what areas that I can you know support them um you know especially from a character strength based approach you know with Gabe you know as you mentioned you know some self-confidence um was something that he wanted to improve so we focused on that uh you know it's been a pleasure you know working and meeting so many participants and you know getting the opportunity to work you know one-on-one with them you know Gabe was a great person to work with and you know I enjoyed our sessions and um you know he He was one of the first people that went through this Newark program with me. So he even taught me a lot about the program and how to best facilitate it.



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00:30:49 SHELBY NIELSEN

That's wonderful. Could you talk a little bit more about success and what that looks like beyond completing the sessions for participants?

00:30:58 MICHAEL DACANY

Yeah. So I think success is seeing improvement with job interviewing and seeing, especially with this, how participants tailor their interview answers towards themselves on a personal level. So we give the participants a framework and structure to how to answer common interview questions. And it's great to see that by the end of the program, these answers are cultivated to highlight their individual strengths. So I think a big show of success is seeing how much more confident and interview ready our participants are at the end towards the beginning. And we also discuss goals with the participant at the beginning. Anywhere from, you know, having improving self-confidence or feeling more prepared to even applying to jobs or going on interviews while they're enrolled in our program. So whether they accomplish those personal goals that they set for themselves, I think that's a great indicator for success outside of the program.

00:31:53 SHELBY NIELSEN

That's great. That's great. You've talked about some of the common challenges that participants experience. We've talked about self-confidence, feeling, you know, you need to get it right, be perfect. But are there any other common challenges that participants come in with? And how does KFStride help them work on using their strengths to work on those?

00:32:13 MICHAEL DACANY

Yeah. Well, I just want to reiterate one that Helen mentioned. So I think one challenge is we have so many great participants who have such amazing accolades and accomplishments, especially on paper. And they have all of these great talents and skills and strengths that would be useful to any employer. I think some of the difficulties are, you know, when it comes to the job interview, sharing that information and also, you know, highlighting the best qualities of themselves. So I guess in our program, you know, we have the participants focus on their individual strengths and what makes them, you know, amazing and unique. And so that we hope that, you know, emphasizing that helps them kind of share their positive and job relevant qualities on a job interview.

00:32:58 SHELBY NIELSEN

That's great. That's great. You've

That's great. Thank you. Thank you, Mike. That leads me to kind of my next set of questions for Helen, which is, why was it important for KF Stride to explicitly be strengths-based, especially for autistic youth?

00:33:14 HELEN GENOVA

Yeah. So I just knew that there were so many programs out there that focused on weaknesses. So, for example, you know, don't do this. Don't act like this. Try to not do this anymore. You know, that was like the typical framework that a lot of type trainings were using. And I, you know, saw it in my own personal life with people that I cared about. And then I saw it in other families as well. was there was this emphasis on trying to get an individual to almost pretend to be someone other than who they were. And I think what can happen with that is you can start to feel like, well, what's the matter with me? And why can't I just be me? And so the place that we wanted to start was like, okay, we know that you have challenges and difficulties, but we also know that you have these really special strengths. And we want to capitalize on those and empower you to talk about and use those in your daily life. So that was why we took that approach. That's great. Thank you, Helen. From a research and impact standpoint, though, what outcomes matter most to progress this research? So, you know, the first thing we always look at is job interview skills. Specifically, you know, we want to make sure that is our primary outcome. Are they improving in those job interview skills? But beyond that, one of like the coolest things that we saw was that people reported knowing about their strengths more. So in one of our published papers, it was not an unexpected finding. It was just really gratifying to see. that people not only did their job interview skills improve, but they reported knowing



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how to use their strengths more just in life generally. And that was really cool because I think, you know, we've had some kids say, you know, I didn't know that I was creative prior to this program. It was just not something that I knew about myself. And now that I know about it, you know, I'm really excited to continue to use those strengths. So the fact that we may have impacted someone's ability to see themselves a little bit differently or to feel more confident, you know, as Gabe said, it's not just about talking to an employer. It's any conversation. The more practice you have, the better you feel and the more confident you feel. So if we could help with even those everyday interactions, that's really exciting to us too. That's great. And you talked a bit about Gabe's kind of story here, but I want to see in the bigger, grander picture, how do stories like Gabe's help inform where we go next? Yeah. So specifically, you know, thinking about Gabe, it was such a great opportunity to show the program to someone and to get his opinion and to, you know, know if we were on the right track. And then even like speaking to people and saying like, well, what are the specific challenges that you're facing? And then having those stories impact the way we deliver or develop our interventions. That's a really important step that we try to use is not just like, well, what do we think will help? But to ask people directly, what would help you? And then to create the intervention based on that. So a really great example is, you know, when Gabe said, I don't, you know, I didn't know. how much information to say, you know, or, you know, trying to be perfect. If we could create an intervention to help people to just master that thing, like, don't worry about rejection. You know, if every time you get a no, it was just another opportunity to practice. You don't have to be perfect. Or, you know, you don't know how much to say, okay, let's come up with a cool way to practice how much to say. So, for example, we teach them the elevator pitch. And we actually have like a little animation of a person riding up an elevator so that they can practice along with that timing, you know, and that can really help someone with their pacing. So information that we get from people like Gabe, and thank you, Gabe, so much for all your beautiful feedback, that really does help us create better programs for the people we're trying to serve.

00:37:48 SHELBY NIELSEN

Wonderful. Well, this is... kind of concludes our long -form panel discussion, I did want to just throw in a fun little lightning round here. So, like, one or two word answers, you know, if possible. I'm going to start with Gabe. What's one thing you do differently now because of KF Strive?

00:38:09 GABRIEL SCHAERF

Not going to be one or two, but I'll try to keep it brief. Helen sort of mentioned this, but it's keeping... the information relevant to the job that you are applying to.

00:38:21 SHELBY NIELSEN

That's great. That's perfect. And Michelle, what's one thing you hope educators and employers understand after hearing our conversation today?

00:38:31 MICHELLE SCHAERF

I think that just young adults on the spectrum have so many skills and when they have the confidence, they are motivated to work and share those skills with employers. So it would be lovely for them to have the opportunities to work and put those things to use.

00:38:53 SHELBY NIELSEN

Wonderful, wonderful. And Helen, what's the long -term impact that you're working toward with KF-STRIDE?

00:38:59 HELEN GENOVA

I think, you know, we would love to change that horrible unemployment rate that we always hear about, that 80 % unemployment. I mean, I would love to completely flip it and see an 80 % employment rate one day. Um, so if we can, if we can move the needle just a little bit in helping kids to overcome these obstacles, that that's really our primary goal.



## Focused on Strengths: Autism Research at Kessler Foundation

May 7, 2026

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Transcript

00:39:24 SHELBY NIELSEN

Great. Fabulous. Well, I'll hand it back over to you, Helen. I think you may have more slides.

00:39:32 HELEN GENOVA

Yeah, just, just, um, wanted to share with everybody our, um, just some, uh, the, the website, uh, the website, uh, [www.kfstride.org](http://www.kfstride.org). and a QR code to go to that site. So again, if you're on the webinar and you are either an educator who is like, oh, this might work with my kids or a clinician or somebody who is in the field of voc rehab, or if you are a family and you're like, hey, this might be really cool for us to try out, we can also provide KF Stride to you. So if you reach out to us, we would be happy to give you more information. And thank you. You, everyone who was on the call and my panel, you guys are awesome. So nice to have you on and to share this message with you. So thank you.

00:40:20 SHELBY NIELSEN

Helen just shared the resource link specifically to KF Stride in that program. As mentioned before, if you're interested in learning more about participating at research, you can always visit [KesslerFoundation.org](http://KesslerFoundation.org). Got a nice big join a study button up at the top. But then we also have a lot of other ways to engage and learn. So if you're interested in learning more about autism research, Helen and her staff multiple times a year draft wonderful newsletter pieces that go out both digitally and as we translate them into audio. So if you want to listen to them on your drive to work or while you're running errands or you're moving along, you have the chance to. And some great videos. Helen and her team have... drafted some really wonderful content so that folks can engage and learn about the research at the foundation in any way that you want to. So I just want to shout out the whole Center for Autism Research team for consistently creating wonderful information so that our communities have access at their fingertip wherever they want to receive it. So on the screen is just a few little examples. And then I'm going to, oh, I went the wrong way. Say thank you. look at our Q &A section, see if we've got any questions. Some folks asked about, will the recording be shared on YouTube and the website? Yes, it will. We will send out an email to everybody who attended today and those who weren't able to attend but did register. We'll also put, it will be a link that goes to our website with the recording, the slides, the transcription. We will also post it on social media so folks have the chance who, you know, maybe didn't see the email inviting them to still learn about KF Stride and autism research. And then we have a question from Sandra Helen, which is, could you kindly confirm the top age range for participation?

00:42:16 HELEN GENOVA

In terms of getting KF Stride, anybody can get it. Regarding our research studies, it really just depends. We have some that... go up to 65, the age of 65. We have some studies that are more geared towards transition age youth with an upper age limit of like 26, so the age range of 14 to 26. But we do have a variety of studies. So if you reach out, I'm sure there's a place for you if you qualify to participate. Great. And then it looks like our last question here. It's from Lucy, which is, is this a virtual skill training or in person? So this is virtual. All of the work, you know, it was one of the gifts of COVID, which was that we were able to, you know, think of innovative ways to translate our procedures to be delivered online. And so that really just opened things up for us. And we are now working with, as I said, you know, we are working with a group in Louisiana and we are able to help someone off in California. Everything is virtual, so it's super convenient. If you prefer in person, we could also talk about that, but everything is available virtually.

00:43:31 SHELBY NIELSEN

Wonderful. On the screen, you'll see here our email address. If you think of anything after the fact, please shoot us an email, [development@KesslerFoundation.org](mailto:development@KesslerFoundation.org). I will receive that, and I will make sure to answer your question or get it over to Helen or anybody on her team. Again, if you're interested in joining Autism Research, please look at the Join a Study. And then, of course, our Camp Stride program is available online as well. Thank you, everybody, for attending this afternoon. I hope everybody has a wonderful day.