



Challenges for teenagers with ASD at secondary school

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a group of neurodevelopmental disorders affecting up to 1 in 160 Australians (Wray and Williams, 2007). Although the presenting symptoms change with maturation, they continue to be a major source of difficulty for many. Most students with an ASD find school challenging at some time or other. This can be the case no matter what the type of school; specialist or mainstream, primary or secondary. The continuing challenges of ASD (difficulties with communication and social skills, emotional and behavioural difficulties) combined with the added demands of secondary school indicate that they will require ongoing support in this educational setting. At secondary school it is usually students with high functioning autism (HFA) and those with Asperger's Disorder (AD) who do not have an intellectual disability (ID), or those diagnosed with Autism and only a mild ID who are continuing in mainstream education. Difficulties may arise for these adolescents because of:

- the social interaction required with teachers and students throughout the day and their response to these social and emotional demands
- the student's learning and thinking style and symptoms of ASD
- difficulties in managing stressful situations
- poor organizational skills
- poor peer social interaction

- insistence on sameness and special interests or obsessions
- difficulties in both understanding and using language
- other co morbid conditions (health, ID and mental health problems)

Secondary school learning environments

Although adolescents with ASD share common core features, no two individuals are the same. The pattern and extent of difficulties change with development so it is important to combine what we know about the core features of ASD and additionally consider knowledge of the current specific interests, abilities, interpersonal skills and mental health status of each student. However, some generalisations can be made. When students leave primary school and enter secondary school, they are faced with many changes. Being mindful that students with ASD have difficulty adjusting to change, it is not surprising that many are unsettled and anxious in this new environment. Changes they meet include:

- Physical environment
- Curriculum
- Teaching approaches
- Staffing
- Peer group
- Expectations

Hay and Winn (2005) conducted a qualitative study specifically to increase knowledge about students with Asperger Syndrome (AS), their parents, teachers and special education teachers at mainstream secondary school. Five themes emerged across the four stakeholder groups: (i) the influence of AS on behaviour and social interactions; (ii) collaborations and relationships; (iii) burnout and a lack of services; (iv) special educators worked hard to assist others, and (v) the quality of the school facilities. Results also suggested that all stakeholders supported the philosophy of inclusion but all found it a challenge. An implication for policy makers was the challenge of how to limit the number of “complex students” so that the school is not overloaded. Teachers were challenged with issues of feeling that they lacked confidence and skills, motivation, time, resources and strategies to effectively teach students with AS. Hay and Winn (2005) concluded that there is a need for individual relationships between teachers and their aides, students and parents. The importance of individual assessment and learning context was also noted.

A study of students with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFASD) (Hay and Winn, 2012) examined the educational issues and the challenges faced by educators in the secondary school setting. Both teachers and students with HFASD completed surveys after attending focus group sessions. The two main concepts in the mainstream teachers' responses were: (i) the less predictable and at times inflexible social behaviour of the students; and (ii) the level of additional in-class attention required to effectively teach the students in a group context. The two main concepts from the students with HFASD responses were: (i) the students' desire for social relationships and friendships; and (ii) their concerns

about their learning environments. (Hay and Winn, 2012).

In their qualitative study, Saggars et al, (2011) conducted interviews with students with ASD attending mainstream secondary school to listen to the student voice. They listed six categories that emerged as having either a positive or negative effect on the students' participation and learning at school. The categories were:

- teacher characteristics (positive and negative)
- curriculum related issues (workload, demand for handwriting, solutions to difficulties)
- support mechanisms (attitudes to specialist support, types and ways of receiving support)
- friendships (perceptions of friends/friendships, attitudes to socialising and solitude)
- environmental considerations
- teasing and bullying

Teaching approaches.

It is important to be mindful that as yet there is no clear intervention or treatment that ensures a positive outcome for adolescents as they enter adulthood. Below is a quote from the recent US healthcare research and quality report (Lounds Taylor et al., 2012) that investigated interventions for adolescents and young adults with ASD.

“Given the number of individuals affected by ASD, there is a dramatic lack of evidence on best approaches to therapies for adolescents and young adults with these conditions. In particular, families have little in the way of evidence-based approaches to support interventions capable of optimizing the transition of teens with autism into adulthood. Most of the studies identified were of poor quality; while the five fair-quality studies were primarily of medical interventions. Behavioral, educational, and adaptive/life skills studies were typically small and short term and suggested some improvements in social skills and functional behavior.” (Lounds Taylor et al., 2012. p. 15)

With regard to educational interventions Lounds Taylor et al, concluded:

“Few studies addressing educational interventions in the adolescent and young adult population have been conducted, and studies focusing on life skills or adaptive behaviors have included few individuals, typically in short-term studies focused on highly specific short-term intermediate outcomes. More research in both areas and over broader timeframes with more clearly defined populations is critical for helping individuals with ASD transition to greater independence.” (2012, p. 15).

Because students with ASD can outwardly look the same as all the other students at secondary school, they are in danger of their needs becoming “invisible” to school staff who do not know them. As a consequence, teachers may expect these students to behave like everyone else, for example, to follow the school rules, act in a socially appropriate manner, have a friendship group, be respectful and in tune with what is going on around them in and outside the classroom and be reasonably well organized. We expect these things of typical secondary school students, even taking into account that they are adolescents who act like adolescents. Students with ASD may clash with teachers or get into trouble for behaving in a way that seems rude, disruptive or non-compliant. The student with ASD has been given this diagnosis because he or she, since birth, has had difficulty with communication skills, social relationships, and particular focussed preoccupations and repetitive aspects to their play and behaviour, all of which can impede learning and managing in an educational setting. On top of these difficulties, many adolescents with ASD are struggling with emotional and mental health issues that interfere with their enjoyment of daily life and affect their performance at school.

Students with ASD at mainstream secondary school, usually experience difficulties because of their impaired social skills. They are required to interact with teachers and students throughout the day

and their response to these social and emotional demands may fluctuate between coping in some situations to being overwhelmed. The young person's learning and thinking style and symptoms of HFA or AD may also make it more difficult to cope at school where skills are needed to manage stressful situations, be well organised, cope with change, and limit or “turn off” special interests or preoccupations. The risk of being bullied or teased or socially manipulated continues and may even escalate at this time. It is a priority to ensure the safety of the adolescent at school. Protection from bullying and teasing is of primary importance. All of these situations and demands contribute to making going to secondary school and coping with school harder for adolescents with HFA and AD.

Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber and Kinkaid (2003) in their paper on effective educational placements for students with an ASD, listed core elements of educational practice with empirical support. The core elements included:

- the provision of individualized supports and services for students and families
- systematic instruction
- comprehensive and structured learning environments
- specialized curriculum content
- a functional approach to difficult behaviours
- family involvement
- attitudinal and social support
- coordinated team commitment
- recurrent evaluation of inclusion procedures

What happens in a school is usually determined by what happens at the top. The attitude of the school principal is critical in setting the overall tone or the attitude of the whole school. It is critical that there is a positive, accepting attitude on the part of the whole school community for the success or otherwise of inclusion of students with special needs, including ASD. Further, the complex needs of

students with ASD necessitate a multi-person, multifaceted, multidisciplinary approach supported by the availability of appropriately trained support personnel.

What can teachers and parents do to ensure the best possible outcomes for adolescents with ASD attending mainstream secondary schools?

1. Have written protocols in place to ensure that everyone understands and is aware of the student's needs. (One page summary sheets are helpful that include information about what this young person does well, struggles with, what sorts of things might make them anxious or upset. See example below).
2. Where possible, adapt the everyday practice within the school to help the young person.
3. There may be an opportunity for the young person with ASD to work in a resource unit or other area for some of their lessons or homework so that they can have some quiet time and are not always out in the mainstream.
4. Have regular lines of communication and contact with parents who know their child better than anyone. Daily contact may be necessary at times. (It has been shown that in schools where strong, positive relationships between parents and school staff are established that students with ASD do better socially and academically).
5. PD for school staff to increase their knowledge of ASD and provide teaching strategies.
6. Provide additional support so that appropriate provisions can be made for students with ASD.
7. Consult with speech pathologist

about pragmatics skills training and include these goals in the IEP

8. Give students an opportunity to talk with adults in a non-threatening environment. In the absence of an opportunity for adolescents with ASD to talk to peers, it can be helpful for them to talk to parents and teachers who have "been there" and know about adolescence, have life experience and the maturity that comes with age.
9. Monitor mental health and report at regular parent teacher meetings. In particular, monitor anxiety, discuss issues and refer on to mental health professionals as appropriate.

Student snapshot:

An effective way to inform school staff about each student with ASD is through a student snapshot. It should be available to all staff who have responsibility for and contact with that student. The snapshot provides a useful one page summary of important information that can make it easier for all staff members to communicate with and respond to the student with ASD. The snapshot should be reviewed and updated at each Student Support Group meeting. Information may include a clear and recent photograph and details about the staff who know the student well. Also include:

- Diagnosis
- Medical needs
- Communication and social skills
- Use of visual communication system
- Need for structure and routine
- Stress and anxiety: triggers and responses
- Motivation and favourite activities

Questions for parents, teachers & support staff: Ask yourself...

Are there school wide protocols in place to ensure that there is effective

- communication within the school?**
- assessment that informs teaching and individual learning plans?**
- communication with parents?**
- collaboration and mentoring with other professionals?**
- professional development available to school staff?**

References and relevant further reading

Hay, I., and Winn, S. (2005). Students with Asperger's Syndrome in an inclusive secondary school environment: Teachers', Parents' and Students' Perspectives *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 2005, 29, 2, 140-154

Hay, I and Winn, S. (2012). High functioning autism spectrum disorder: A challenge to secondary school educators and the students with the condition, Proceedings of the 2012 Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, 2-6 December 2012, University of Sydney, Australia, pp. 1-12. ISSN 1324-9320 (2012) [Refereed Conference Paper]

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Saggers, Beth, Hwang, Yoon-Suk, & Mercer, Louise (2011) Your voice counts : Listening to the voice of high school students with autism spectrum disorder. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*. (In Press) QUT Digital Repository: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>

Wray J, Williams K. The prevalence of autism in Australia. Report commissioned by the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2007.

Autism Speaks is working with the National Center for Learning Disabilities, PACER's National Bullying Centre and Ability Path in partnership with the new documentary film *BULLY* to raise awareness about how bullying affects children with special needs. For more information see: Autism Speaks: Combating Bullying <http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/bullying>

Thoughts on educating adolescents with autism. Dave Nelson, Director, The Community School, Decatur, GA <http://www.icdl.com/dirFloortime/overview/documents/ClosingCircles-Adolescence.pdf>

There are a number of factsheets about ASD at the DEECD Autism Friendly Learning website Resources page. These cover topics relating to young children as well as adolescents with ASD <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/program/s/needs/Pages/autismfactsheets.aspx>

British Columbia "Teaching students with ASD" <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/docs/autism.pdf>

