

## *Preparing to Experience* COLLEGE LIVING

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**GOING AWAY TO COLLEGE IS A SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENT IN THE LIFE OF ANY YOUNG ADULT. BUT THIS MILESTONE IS OFTEN CONSIDERED OUT OF REACH FOR STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE.**

*High school students on the spectrum are accustomed to the natural supports they receive from their family, their school and their community. Relatives, friends and community members often offer accommodations and support without even realizing it. In addition, federal law such as IDEIA (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act) mandates a free and appropriate public education for every child with a disability, and every student with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) receives individual support services. But these supports disappear when students with ASD enter college and encounter new academic and daily living challenges.*





A COMPREHENSIVE NETWORK THAT INCLUDES ACADEMIC AND LIFE SKILLS COACHING WILL HELP STUDENTS EXPERIENCE COLLEGE LIVING, BROADEN THEIR SOCIAL SKILLS AND ACHIEVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS.



Paying bills, doing laundry, studying – even getting out of bed for class in the morning – can be especially challenging for students with ASD. However, they can thrive in community and four-year colleges if they have the right support. A comprehensive network that includes academic and life skills coaching will help students experience college living, broaden their social skills and achieve academic success. More importantly, students with a strong network develop the skills to accept responsibility so they can transition to independent adulthood. This is a critical goal for both the students and their parents.

Parents and students should have frank discussions with high school and college personnel to determine the level of support the student will require in college. Typically, members of a strong support system may include a resident advisor, a mentor, a tutor, a staff psychologist, an academic liaison and others who are on-site and available when needed.

In general, a strong network helps students:

#### LEARN TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

The daily lives of many young people with ASD are typically organized by their parents. But once they leave home, students with ASD can be overwhelmed by the choices that they must make every day. College students need to master the skills required to make good choices and plan their day themselves. A college campus offers some easy decisions, such as access to places students gather to eat, study or socialize. Options also exist off-campus. For example, some students may live in an apartment where they have a resident advisor. Students learn to handle tasks of everyday living such as grocery shopping, preparing meals, doing laundry, paying

bills and maintaining their apartments. While the students are ultimately responsible for managing these tasks, many parents and students find comfort knowing that support and guidance are always nearby. Some prospective college students and their parents consider attendance at a community college first as this can be an easier transition and provide an opportunity to assess skills and comfort level with living away from home. Always remember, each case, and every individual, is different. Parents know their child better than anyone and young adults know what they want and what they are comfortable with; have open and honest discussions to find the option that works best for you.

#### DEVELOP NECESSARY ACADEMIC SKILLS

Students with ASD will often benefit from extra help with academics. Daily one-on-one tutoring sessions and supervised study halls can ensure academic progress. Fellow students often provide natural support by serving as tutors for their peers, but it is recommended that students on the spectrum have access to tutors who are experienced professional educators with a command of the subject at hand.

In addition, attendance at regular, structured study halls helps ensure students are spending their time learning. Ongoing review sessions help make sure students remain on task, capture good notes, understand the assignments and are prepared for the next class. This academic support frequently enhances students' success.

#### DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS

Social interaction and social skills development are no less important than academic pursuit. Parents often worry whether their child will have friends at school. They want

## TIPS

- ✓ Throughout high school, families should have frequent conversations about future plans, What kinds of careers are of interest? What steps are necessary to reach goals for the future? What options are realistic for your family, for example which schools can the family can afford; what types of scholarships or other forms of support are available, etc.? What preparations are needed to meet requirements and successfully pursue the goals that are set?
- ✓ Parents and the student should begin researching post-secondary options by the time the student is a junior in high school.
- ✓ Contact schools and programs that interest you well in advance. Gather material so you can learn more about the school and their approach. Ask questions related to your individual needs to see if that college might be a good fit.
- ✓ Learn about education options by reading articles in the media and by networking at support groups meetings, conferences and on web sites and message boards.
- ✓ Visit the schools and programs you're considering. Many programs hold open houses where students and their parents can tour the campus and meet staff and other students.
- ✓ Learn about the disability services offered on campus. Resources are often available for students with special needs, but the student generally must take the initiative to access these supports.
- ✓ Learn about your options for financial aid. Sallie Mae, the nation's largest provider of federal student loans, offers grants and loans depending on the program selected.



to know their child is participating in supervised group outings and typical college student activities such as going to the movies or going bowling. Under the direction of a mentor, these kinds of structured experiences help students gain confidence in social settings. A dedicated social skills development program offers activities that are educational, empowering and enjoyable.

Developing strong social skills – and the ability to use them – also means the student has regular interaction with resi-

dent advisors, tutors, mentors and friends. This interaction can help keep students on track with their studies as well as reassure parents that their child has the support he or she needs to develop independence in a nurturing, attentive and safe environment.

With the right support in the right environment, students with ASD can be successful in college, meet new people, expand their experiences and be better prepared for the opportunities adulthood has to offer.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Claypool is founder, president and chief executive officer of Educational Services of America, a provider of K-12 and post secondary alternative and special education programs for students who are at risk of dropping out of school and for students with learning disabilities. Mark believes that all children can advance academically, behaviorally and socially if they are given the right tools in the right environment. As a social worker and education administrator, Mark was frustrated by decreasing resources for children with learning differences, so he founded Educational Services of America in 1999. Today, ESA serves more than 8,000 students who have autism, Asperger's Syndrome or other learning/behavioral disabilities at more than 120 schools and programs nationwide and is listed among the Inc. magazine's "500 Fastest Growing Private Companies in America."

One of ESA's service divisions is College Living Experience (CLE), which provides academic, social and daily living skills assistance to students with special needs as they attend community colleges, vocational schools or universities and transition to independent adulthood.

## RESOURCES:

To learn more about College Living Experience, visit [www.cleinc.net](http://www.cleinc.net) or [www.esa-education.com](http://www.esa-education.com) or call College Living Experience at 800-486-5058.

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