

Introduction

The challenges associated with the transition from school services to adulthood for individuals with disabilities are well documented. The process can often be a very overwhelming and challenging one as families worry about the individual's future: What kind of job will he have? Where will she end up living? Will he ever be independent? What will make her the happiest? Every individual with autism is different and as a result, there is no "one size fits all" plan for the path to adulthood. A transition plan involving job training and skill development that is fitting for one person with autism may be ineffective for another. The most important factor in creating a plan is to focus on the individual. His or her strengths, needs, challenges and preferences will play a critical role in ensuring a successful transition process.

A key ingredient in creating a transition plan for an individual with autism is a transition assessment that leads to comprehensive skill development in the final years of school. When a student turns 14, the focus of his or her Individualized Education Program will likely shift away from math and English to vocational training and community living skill development. This shift in focus necessitates a shift in assessment priorities. That is, instead of measuring what a student cannot do, it is time to measure the student's interests, preferences, strengths and work habits and based on these factors, describe the supports and modifications that will be necessary for the student to be successful in the future.

What is an Assessment?

The Community-based Skills Assessment was designed to help parents and professionals assess the current skill levels and abilities of individuals with autism beginning at age 12 and continuing into adulthood in order to develop a comprehensive plan. The purpose is to assist teams in identifying areas of instructional priority for the individual. While employment support needs of individuals are addressed through community-based internships and work experiences through school, this is the first tool to assess needs in the area of community-based living from transportation to financial management to peer relationships and more.

The tool is designed for transition aged youth and is divided into three levels based upon the age of the individual being assessed. This is important because the skills identified will be age-referenced based on the individual's peer group. The levels and definitions are as follows:

- **Level 1 Life Aware:** *This group includes youth ages 12 to 16 who are between middle school and sophomore year of high school.*
- **Level 2 Life Explorer:** *This group includes youth ages 17 to 22 who are in their junior or senior year of high school.*
- **Level 3 Life Seeker:** *This group includes individuals who are post high school and seeking postsecondary education and/or employment.*

After conducting a careful analysis to illuminate the critical areas of functional life skills, eight skill sets were identified and collapsed into the categories below:



CAREER PATH AND EMPLOYMENT The items in this section assess the individual's progress towards developing job seeking skills and/or employment. This section covers such job topics as: demonstrates work habits by performing chores at home, explores opportunities by job shadowing, volunteer or using a mentor, indicates personal strengths, completes a resume and secures a competitive job.

SELF-DETERMINATION/ADVOCACY The items in this section review the skills that youth with autism need to develop and the challenges that they will face living and working in the community. Specifically, this section will cover a variety of skills that would indicate that the individual is able to demonstrate some control of his or her life. This section covers skills such as: goal setting, IEP participation, choice making, self-regulation, problem solving, requesting support and disability awareness.



HEALTH AND SAFETY Assessment items in this area cover a vast range of independent living skills. These items include basic to advanced hygiene, fire safety, home safety, medication management, self-management and general sexuality information.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS, SOCIALIZATION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION This area is the most detailed section of the assessment. For individuals with ASD, the interaction between two or more people, requiring the processing of both verbal and nonverbal cues, can be an arduous task. It is important to assess skills across multiple environments because many people with ASD understand language so concretely that they may miss the subtle meanings of social information, as well as experience issues with generalization. This section covers skills across home, work and leisure/recreation environments while assessing if the individual can initiate a skill, as well as respond to a social communication situation.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND PERSONAL FINANCE This area focuses on a variety of independent living skills assessed across areas that include making decisions that affect an individual's life, taking care of personal affairs and pursuing areas of personal interest. Community participation items assess the extent to which a youth with ASD uses and interacts with local restaurants, stores, parks, libraries, places of worship, community events, government activities and volunteering.

TRANSPORTATION Transportation can be confusing and frightening to many individuals with ASD, so this assessment item is of critical importance. Generally, these skills will have to be taught along with socially appropriate behavior requirements within each of these settings.



LEISURE/RECREATION Developing and engaging in leisure/recreation activities is important for all community members. As with other community members, when individuals with ASD join in a community event, they engage in a stress relief activity and have the opportunity to make new friends. Skills that are present in this section include: identifies preferred activities, uses technology for enjoyment and schedules opportunities for exercise and/or participation in community activities.

HOME LIVING SKILLS Whether an individual with ASD is living at home, in a group home or independently or with a roommate, home living skills are essential. This section will review both basic and advanced skill sets that include eating and preparing meals, cleaning tasks, doing laundry and home repair.