ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD WITH AUTISM

Making the transition from education to employment

Ensuring Psychological Well-being Through Transition

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‘Work is more than just a livelihood or paycheck; it is the key to a satisfying and productive life. For many on the autism spectrum, it is the glue that keeps our lives together in an otherwise frustrating and sometimes confusing world. Certainly my life would not be living if I did not have intellectually satisfying work’.

- TEMPLE GRANDIN (AND KATE DUFFY)

Good Transition is Critical for Psychological Well-Being

- Only 16% of individuals with ASC become fully independent (Howlin et al, 2000; Engstrom et al, 2003; Frombonne, 2003).
- Estimates have suggested 85% of those with ASC are unemployed or under-employed (Goode et al, 1997).
- Poor transitions into adulthood are associated with the development of mental health problems.
- Identified rates of mental health problems of 16-35% - far higher than in general population (Bebbington et al, 1997; Brugha et al, 2001).

The Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood – Challenges for individuals with ASC

Transition happens at a time when:

- Social relationships become more complex – self-esteem eroded by rejection by peers – particularly as peers develop sexual relationships, start going to parties, clubbing, etc.
- Roles change and there are increasing independence, demands and expectations.
- Developmental/hormonal changes related to puberty occur.

- Growing awareness of one's own difference – more able individuals are more likely to be distressed by their difference.

- Increasing exposure to stigma or bullying. Desire to 'fit in', may make individuals more vulnerable.

- Increasing gap between ability and achievement e.g. high achieving at school, but not being able to manage the demands of university or employment or even gain employment.

Other important factors

- Less structure = More cognitive demands on managing one's own time (e.g. at school bell indicates when one class finishes and another starts – at college/uni/work have to manage competing demands, prioritise deadlines, etc.).
- Changes in family system – family tension or breakdown.
- May not be able to recognise psychological distress until in crisis.
- Lack of support, knowledge and understanding in adult services after having potentially better experience of child services.

Without good transition support ...

- Increased ‘risk’ of the development of mental health problems.
- Also evidence of greater contact with forensic services (Scragg and Shah, 1994; Hare et al, 2000).
- Increased burden on mental health and social services.
- Poorer longer term outcomes regarding psychological well-being, accessing employment and other meaningful life experiences.

Mental health problems associated with ASC

- Depression
- Anxiety (Green et al, 2000)
- Phobias
- Eating disorders
- Obsessional Disorders (Green et al, 2000)
- Alcohol/substance misuse and other addictions
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Catatonic like states
- Single psychotic episodes
- Self-injurious behaviour

The way forward.....

- Person-centred transitions happening within a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary framework involving educational, employment, housing and mental health services.
- Raising awareness, knowledge and skills in adult mental health services (Crabtree et al, in press) and with educational and employment services and potential employers.
- Support in building independent living skills, social skills, access to meaningful employment.

The way forward.....

- Support in attending further and higher education, not just in academic aspects, but in managing social and independent living skills.
- Support in considering how special interests and skills can be developed into employable skills.
- Experience has shown that timely low level interventions are beneficial, rather than waiting for crisis points (e.g. Liverpool Asperger's Team, Newham Asperger's Service).
- ***With appropriate support during transition the need for longer term, more costly interventions and the development of mental health problems from which the individual may struggle to recover, will be reduced.***