



ASPERGER
CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

College Coaching for Students with Asperger Syndrome

Lynda Geller, Ph.D.
Spectrum Services

Most college disability officers tell us that there has been a recent and significant increase in students on the autism spectrum attending college. This increase stems from a number of factors including the early recognition of these conditions and appropriate intervention during the developmental years, the recognition of these conditions by school and college staff, and the self advocacy movement within this population that motivates potential students on the spectrum to realize that college is a realistic plan for them and to act on that knowledge. Most college students on the spectrum are the product of mainstream education and IDEA-mandated supports for whatever educationally disabling characteristics they manifest. However, colleges, used to serving more neurotypical students, are often at a loss as to how to effectively support such students on campus, and the less specific ADA laws do not delineate specific supports. In fact, ADA really only gives students the right to equal access to higher education and it is up to them to negotiate realistic accommodations.

There have been a number of specialized programs developed that can give intensive support to college students with Asperger Syndrome. Some support students to pursue traditional academic degrees and others are certificate programs that help train the student in the life skills that may not have been addressed in a mainstream educational program, but are critical for lifetime independence. Some college disability offices have staff that are educated about Asperger Syndrome and give an excellent effort to supporting such students in multiple ways, while others have no specific interventions designed for this population and simply make available whatever supports are generically available to classified students.

As in all service arenas that offer a range of intensity of assistance, from mental health to child advocacy to early intervention, a system is at its most effective when it can match the specific level of need to the appropriate service level. Overly intrusive help stifles independence and inadequately intense assistance lacks effectiveness. This is also true for college support for students on the autism spectrum. Those who try to function without any assistance and find themselves having an unsuccessful experience may have only needed some regular but contained support, yet without that they are not succeeding. They may not have required a self-contained specialized program, but often cannot find other options addressing their level of support need. In addition, we would all like to see these students being able to take advantage of any college experience that is otherwise their choice without having to limit their selections to a small number of colleges with specialized services for students on the spectrum. Thus, we see an ever-increasing demand for more individualized supports for college students who may have excellent academic potential, but need unique supports to be able to continue their schooling successfully. Oftentimes, college students who were mainstreamed may have not received supports from their school in social, vocational, and life skill areas because of their academic success, but in college find themselves lacking in these areas. For students who needed academic support and received it through their IEPs, the transition to college with its relatively lesser protections through ADA, may be a jolting surprise and lead to academic and life management failures. It is important that all areas of function that may impact college adjustment are considered and appropriate plans to address them are made. Students, their families, and their educational team need to consider the following aspects of the young person's functioning during the planning period before college:

- Academic: what modifications have been in place and how does the student perform in various types of the classroom settings?
- Psychological well-being: what therapies and medications are currently being utilized?
- Physical well-being: how independent is the student in managing his own exercise, medications, diet, and sleep cycle?
- Social: how are the student's basic social skills and relationship development skills? Does the student have a social network upon which he or she can depend?
- Independent living: is it realistic to expect the student to be able to function independently in basic life skills or is it necessary for that student to receive support services in order to live successfully at college?
- Family life: how much support has the family been giving the student and is it realistic to assume that that student can be successful living away from home? (Geller & Greenberg, in press)

One very important method of support, that is just beginning to be more widely implemented, is that of college coaching. The significant advantages of this kind of approach are that the coaching can be more or less intense depending on specific need and that coaching can occur for students attending any college of their choice, not only those with special programs. The critical elements of coaching are an excellent fit with the very disabilities that students with Asperger Syndrome manifest.

What is coaching?

The field of coaching originated in the business world where individuals within an organization coached others in the group toward successful achievement. Since those beginnings several decades ago, coaching has grown to include helping a wide variety of individuals with all sorts of disparate needs meet individual or organizational goals. Further contributions from the fields of psychology, business, and education have enriched the conceptualization of what coaching can be to a diverse clientele.

The general field of coaching assumes an equal relationship exists between two adults the purpose of which is to meet the client's self-determined goals. Coaching assumes that the client is competent and resourceful and that the client is capable of developing the agenda. Coaching can address a narrow focus or broaden to address larger life issues. The coach is responsible for developing appropriate supports based on client need and to spontaneously adjust the approach whenever needed. For college students with Asperger Syndrome, the approach must be adjusted to assume that the client is a developing young adult and may not yet have reached the maturity level coaching typically assumes. The coaching relationship supports that developing maturity by engaging the client in creating and investing in goals that are achievable and specific to individual need. The coach who engages in supporting college students with autism spectrum conditions must have a fundamental understanding of the condition and a full knowledge of the specific characteristics of the client to be effective.

Coaching for these students on the spectrum can very successfully address a wide range of common issues. A critical element of coaching is creating goals and systems of accountability. For the college student, the coach helps develop feelings of internal drive and mechanisms for setting and meeting interim goals. Often our students need a feeling of urgency to complete any long term work, yet are also incapacitated by these feelings. Coaching can help create a healthier balance between motivation and planning. For many students on the spectrum, feelings of inadequacy and self defeat have arisen from failure experiences or quickly arise for the first time when college feels overwhelming in its multiple demands. Coaching can help by encouraging and reinforcing competent behaviors that lead to feelings of competency. Students sometimes cannot self motivate, especially when they are not prepared to handle college stressors. A coach can provide positive reinforcement while teaching how to develop individual methods of reinforcement. Lastly, a coach does not solve problems, but helps the student become a problem solver by increasing self awareness and accepting personal responsibility for outcomes.

How can coaching a useful approach for students with Asperger Syndrome?

A coach who has a strong understanding of the general neurobiological issues inherent in the condition and the individual's particular profile of strengths and challenges is in the best position to be truly helpful. Understanding specific neuropsychological differences and their effect on function is a very important beginning to developing a useful coaching relationship. Testing data should be shared so that this knowledge is part of the relationship. The coach and the student together examine this information and incorporate it into the overall plan, developing effective coping strategies. As the student comes to make proper attribution to causes of problems and learns how to find the right coping mechanisms, this awareness will help in solving other life issues. The student practices concretely how to address individual challenges rather than to endlessly experience blame. Many students have had their confidence destroyed

by years of blame from themselves and others. Sometimes not trying has become a defense mechanism for those who have tried too often without success. Slowly, coaching can give the student positive experiences in handling problems effectively.

As we know, the experience of creating solutions and learning actually changes neural pathways in the brain, just as not having these experiences changes nothing. When students work together with a coach who is encouraging brain-based solutions, they may be experiencing for the first time someone who has a thorough understanding of their condition. Unlike family members, who may understand, coaches can support students without the emotional baggage that years of joint struggle may have created at home.

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome are frequently notoriously poor problem solvers and need to be supported to learn how to do so if they are to have an independent adulthood. Creating effective problem solvers is a prime goal for all coaching. The coach considers the entire life picture and helps the student grapple with whatever parts need support. While there may be many aspects that need support, the coach helps the student learn how to prioritize and choose goals, creating an achievable plan with incremental steps appropriate to the student's current level of functioning. Most importantly, coaches teach students new ways of behaving through the joint effort of problem solving, systematic goal creation and personal monitoring and responsibility. These skills are critical to independent functioning, yet are often not taught through any past experiences. A coach may help a student develop organizational strategies, role play appropriate classroom behavior, or brainstorm about how to choose a social activity, but the underlying learning that occurs through the relationship paves the way to independence.

How can families access coaching?

It is important that college coaches have knowledge of autism spectrum conditions, the demands of college, and the field of coaching. Families should not assume that someone has this knowledge and need to remember that coaching is not a regulated profession and anyone may advertise as a coach. Recommendations from those who have utilized a specific coach may be helpful or a family may want to sponsor an appropriate individual to take additional training. Some college disability offices may be able to recommend someone who has worked in this capacity or who is willing to be trained. This search needs to begin before the college year starts and perhaps before the college selection process begins to insure a smooth transition. Many coaches work only by telephone and internet, but face to face meetings, especially at first, are an important aspect for students with Asperger Syndrome. It is important to remember that coaching is not therapy but is a personal relationship and a learning experience. The need for this service is increasing and we hope the field will expand to meet the demand.