

# *The Transition to Adulthood for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders*

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I am grateful to James Loomis, PhD at The Center for Children with Special Needs for his support in preparation of this material

# The Expanding Social Competency Issue

- With adults we sometimes find assets such as:
  - Increase in learned social behavior
  - More capable social conversation
  - Academic or vocational competence due to “goodness-of-fit” with life choices



# Expanding Social Competency.....



- And continuing deficits such as:
  - Literality and concrete thinking
  - ToM issues
  - Compromised executive functions
  - Rigidity
  - Continuing difficulty with meta-linguistics of conversation (e.g., “reading between the lines”)
  - Difficulty shifting attention across modalities

# Key Dimensions

- Degree of spectrum impairments
- Social motivation
- Learning skills
- Ability to take on challenges
- Presence of personality disorders



**.....so you have to individualize your approach.**

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- Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism
  - The Challenges of Transition to Adulthood
  - Strategies to Facilitate Transition
  - Evaluation and Treatment for Adults with ASD
  - Supporting Families

# Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

## Challenges:

1. Language and communication
2. Social functioning
3. Restricted and repetitive behaviors
  - Stereotypies
  - Difficulties with transitions
  - Focal interests
  - Behavioral rigidities

## Challenges:

4. Sensory challenges

5. Imagination

6. Cognitive challenges

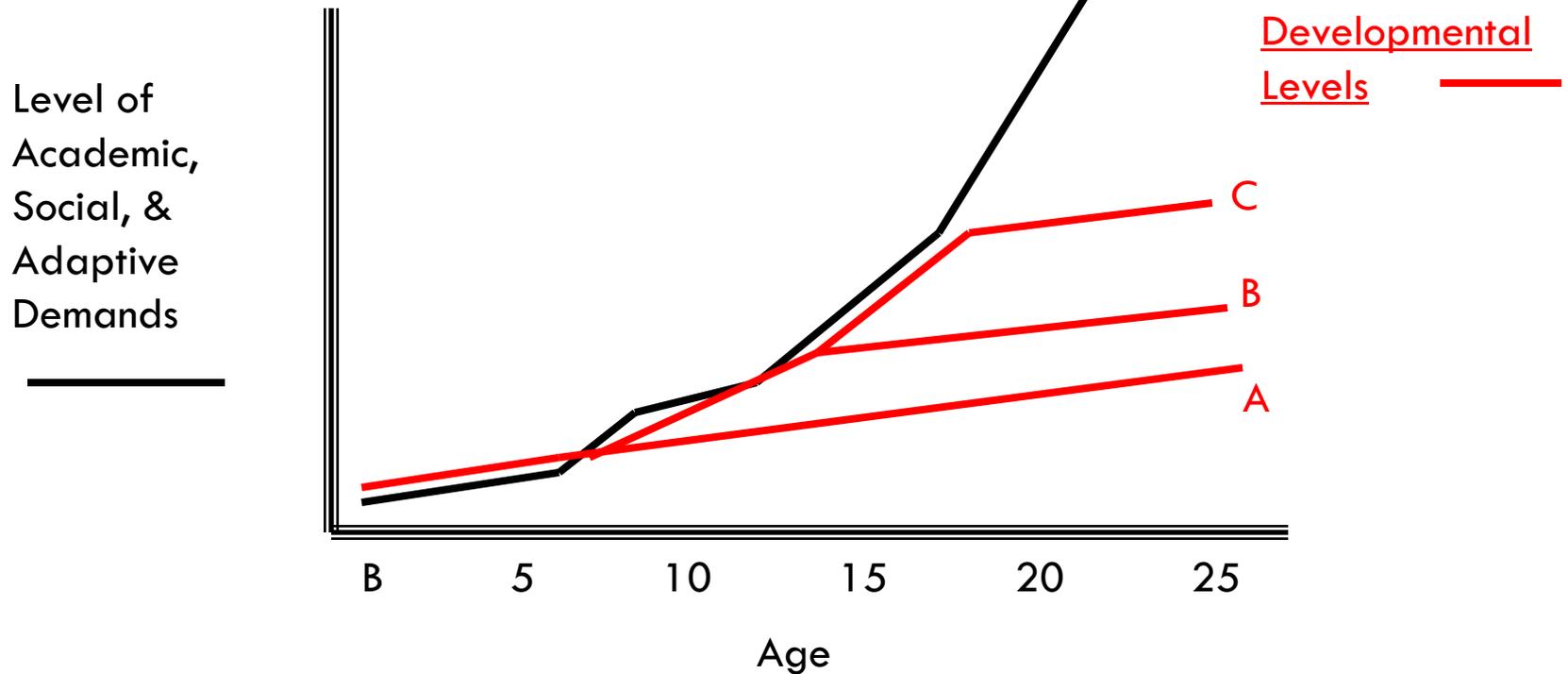
- Verbal and/or nonverbal functioning
- Executive functioning/ higher order functioning
- Information processing inefficiencies (speed of processing, fatigue, memory)
- Self-observation
- Initiation

# Outcomes in Adulthood for those with AS and HFA

□ Living independently:	10-40%
□ College:	0-25%
□ Employed:	15-35%
□ Have friends:	15-20%
□ Married:	0-25%
□ Overall adjustment:	
▣ Good	20-30%
▣ Fair	20-30%
▣ Poor	40-75%

(Adapted from Howlin, 2005)

# Course of Development



# They can do it, but.....



- Not as fluently
- Not as consistently
- Not without a lot of effort
- Not necessarily in all places or in all situations
- Not without help (even a little)

# The Challenges of Adulthood for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

## **1. *Self care***

Sensory difficulties

Self-observation

Understanding social expectations/rules

## **2. *Managing an independent residence***

Problem solving maintenance issues

Judgment/safety decisions

Functional social interactions with service people

# Challenges of Adulthood

## 3. *Functioning in the community*

Getting around

Functional social interactions with merchants, community members

Judgment/safety decisions, interacting with first responders

Vulnerability

## 4. *Functioning on the job*

Work demands- processing challenges

Social and communication demands

Appearance and other “soft skills”

Initiative and problem solving



# Challenges of Adulthood

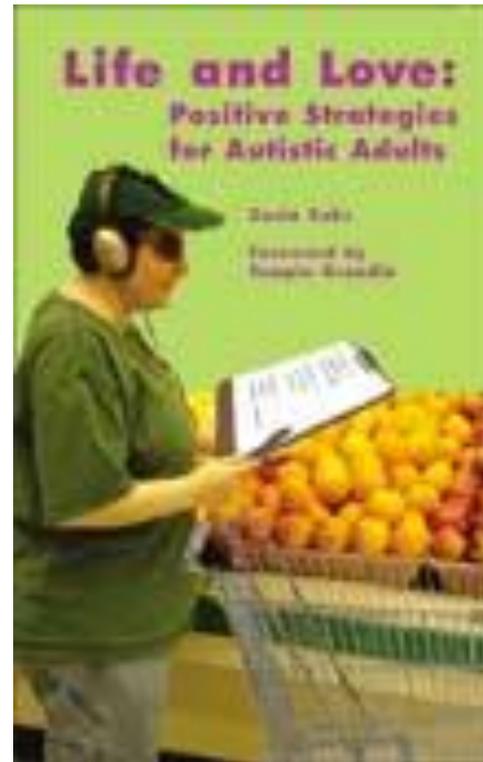
## 5. *Functioning socially*

Finding appropriate peers

Making invitations

Moving from acquaintance to friend

Dating relationships



# EVALUATION AND TREATMENT OF ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS



# Evaluation and Treatment Must Be:

- Dynamic
- Individualized
- Family-Centered



# Process Considerations

- Negotiating the shift in case management from the family to external agencies: Balancing parent participation, stress, and burnout
- Facilitating and understanding increased participation of the individual with ASD in personal decision-making
- Fostering independence in any therapeutic relationship with the person with ASD
- Understanding parental interdependence and independence for the person with ASD: Helping resolve difficulties with separation and individuation

# Domains of Assessment and Treatment for Employment



## □ Employment-readiness skills

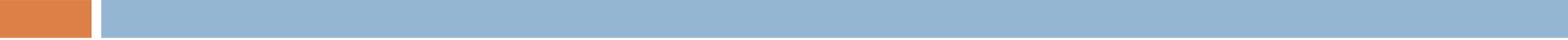
- Prerequisite skills to the specific job/task
- Competent performance of the requisite job skills
- Coping skills and strategies necessary for competent task performance (e.g., quality control, etc)

## □ Job/task matching considerations

- Hours of work
- Co-worker involvement
- Degree of physical involvement
- Social environments and expectations
- Noise and activity levels
- Production demands and expectations
- Degree of social and cognitive flexibility required



Barbara Slane



## □ Social competency considerations

- Responsiveness to authority figures and other employee-supervisor relationship skills
- On-task skills and need to maintain attention to task
- Timeliness and time management
- Grooming and hygiene
- Interpersonal communication skills
- Co-worker relation skills

# Domains of Assessment and Treatment for Community Accessibility Skills

- Transportation skills
- Recreation and leisure skills
- Ability to access health care providers (physician, pharmacy, hospital)
- Public safety skills with first responders (fire, police, ambulance)
- Ability to find and access community resources for everyday needs (supermarket) and specialized needs (accident, trauma)

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- Self-management/behavior management considerations
    - Ability to tolerate unanticipated change
    - Self-monitoring skills
    - Self-management skills
    - Safety skills and risk management issues (e.g., elopement, self-injury when frustrated)

# Domains of Assessment and Treatment for More Independent Living

- Personal care and hygiene skills
- Critical thinking and judgment skills
- Issues related to personal decision-making and competency
  - Management of personal finances
  - Procurement and preparation of food
  - Maintenance of an orderly, clean, safe living environment

# Common Challenging Scenarios for Adults and Related Solutions

- **Withdrawn**: Adult spends most or all of the time with soothing activities (e.g. video-games, internet, watching TV, eating).....*enhance motivation to participate in other competing activities; make non-adaptive preferences less uncomfortable*
- **Selectively Strategic**: Individual finds ways to access preferred activities but can not sustain efforts to find a job or live on his own.....*block the manipulation, address rigidity, use contingencies*

# Common Challenging Scenarios

- **Disruptive behavior**: Adult struggles with self-regulation and anger management, leading to job losses and problems with legal authorities.....*treat the self-regulation problems functionally, reduce stress, go slowly*

# Common Challenging Scenarios

- **Lack of support network**: Without functional family, financial support, or community resources.....*use case management approach, build support network*
- **“Too much” family support**: Families struggling to launch the adult because of concerns regarding the disability or other unrelated family issues.....*family based consultation, respect the family’s need to remain more actively involved*

# Common Challenging Scenarios

- **Poor preparation for adulthood:** Young adults (sometimes with a range of good skills), with limited independence and functional competencies....*take a step back and build the basic competencies*
- **Dual diagnosis:** Complications beyond the developmental disability related to depression, substance abuse, psychosis or other mental health issues.....*treat the co-morbid condition while coordinating efforts among all providers*

# Strategies to Make the Environment Work

- Establish environments (home/ school/ community) that do not overwhelm the individual's functioning
  - Protect him from environments that he can not handle
  - Adapt environments that may work
  - Find/create environments that fit his profile
- Establish environments that facilitate development
  - Appropriate level of demands
  - Natural reinforcers

# Factors Requiring Adaptation and Accommodation

- Sensory considerations
- Transitions and unpredictable schedules
- Social/communication demands
  - ▣ Interactions/need to communicate
  - ▣ Conventions
- Work demands
- Access to preferred activities
- Support for self-regulation

# Strategies to Teach Skills in a Way That They Can Be Learned

1. Use multiple input channels (auditory and visual)
2. Break skills down into small components
3. Provide repetition; use rote learning approach with multiple learning opportunities
4. Minimize time pressures
5. Promote mastery; slowly raise difficulty level; use errorless learning approach

# Strategies to Teach Skills in a Way That They Can Be Learned

6. Provide memory supports
7. Minimize demands for/actively teach autonomous inferential reasoning/critical thinking
8. Provide needed cues, prompts, and models and then fade them
9. Include generalization plan
10. Target specific skills: You get what you teach!

# Essential Tools for Success

- Visual Supports
- Structure = Predictability (routine, time, space, expectations, rules, etc.)
- Peer Mentors
- “Job Description” and “Benefits Package” for adult living
- Accessible Social Opportunities
- Fun, humor, and preferred activities

# Supporting Families

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# Goals for Supporting a Family's Transition of Their Child into Adulthood

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- Facilitating family empowerment
- Facilitating service access and coordination
- Facilitating the family's understanding of autism into adulthood
- Facilitating development of parent advocacy skills

# Goals for Supporting a Family's Transition of Their Child into Adulthood

- Facilitating structural balance within the family system
- Facilitating functional forms of family organization
- Facilitating the development and maintenance of social networks

# Questions and comments

