

***Developing College Skills in Students with Autism & Asperger's Syndrome***  
**Article for JKP Newsletter, by Sarita Freedman, PhD**

When we witnessed the first “wave” of individuals diagnosed with some form of “high-functioning” autism spectrum disorder (ASD) around 1995, many of the individuals I diagnosed at that time were between 2-8 years of age. As time passed, these children came in and out of my practice and I became aware of several issues. First, many students with ASD “fall through cracks,” especially when they’re bright and do not have behavior problems. The ASD student who is more difficult to manage in the classroom is more likely to be identified and receive services. Second, In order to qualify for special education services the student must demonstrate an “inability to access the curriculum.” Sometimes it can be difficult to prove that students need services. For example, while a fully verbal student may participate relatively well within the classroom setting, he frequently flounders on the playground due to social communication deficits. Developing better communication skills and having an adult present to facilitate social interactions on the playground could help this student improve his social communications skills, reduce his/her overall level of stress within the school environment, and be more accepted by his/her peers. However, supporting the need for speech and language therapy and/or an instructional aide for this student can be challenging because he functions “so well” in the classroom. Third, the types of services offered to these students can be quite broad, and can include any, none, or all of the following: speech therapy, occupational therapy, social skills, 1:1 instructional aide, special instructional assistance in subject areas, and/or placement in a special day class. Finally, the general education curriculum addresses a student’s academic skills, but not practical life skills. This leads to students who are unprepared for life after high school. While some students may be able to access other government-funded services after they reach the age of 18, others may not be eligible due to strict eligibility guidelines and/or funding shortages. In any case, waiting until the age of 18 to develop independent living skills (ILS) is probably too late for students who want to go away for college. Unfortunately, without specific programming ILS and many other skills will not come naturally to our students.

In *Developing College Skills in Students with Autism & Asperger's Syndrome*, I outline skills in a developmental perspective so that parents and professionals can stimulate skill development throughout the child’s life. I also recommend ways to break through some of the road blocks that commonly occur. For example, it’s challenging for students with ASD to participate in “non-preferred” tasks. As such, parents of students who go away for college worry that their student will spend most of his time playing video games, rather than focusing on college studies. Sadly, the risk of this happening is quite high. However, students can learn strategies to manage and balance their time, provided the student receives adequate programming throughout his life. I had the pleasure of interviewing several students and their parents while writing the book, and their insights and experiences helped inform some of the recommendations I made. A handful of these families recognized the importance of ensuring that their child learn practical life skills from very early on. Reinforcing these skills became an important piece not only of the child’s educational programming, but also a natural part of their family’s “culture.” All of those students are faring well in their post-secondary studies. One student in particular has completed his college education at UCLA, passed a professional licensing exam, and is working in his chosen field! If we begin the process of preparing students for life when they’re very young, they’ll be more likely to independently manage themselves by the time they’re ready for college and will more likely have a positive experience there.