Transition to adulthood: Service utilization and determination of functional outcomes

Topic: Transition

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Institution: Washington University in St. Louis

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Purpose: To determine the strengths and weaknesses of current transition programs for transition-age youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in order to improve these services in the future.

Objectives: This study sought to identify patterns in service utilization by transition-age youth with ASD, including any changes in program use post-transition and continuity in service use throughout transition. The study also set out to determine which combination of programs produced the best results for individuals.

Study: This study used data from the 2000 National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS2), a nationally representative sample of special education students in grades 7-12. The study included 922 students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The research team used parent and student interviews, teacher and Individual Education Plan (IEP) team surveys, school and community characteristic surveys, and student assessments to measure an array of transition-related variables and individual student performance. Portions of the data collected by NLTS2 were statistically analyzed by the research team to determine service usage (by population) and program effectiveness.

Results: There were great disparities in the rates of service use in low socioeconomic status (SES) populations. 43.2% of these families did not receive services, and those that did typically received services due to a medical need. Across the entire sample population, less than 50% of students with ASD had received mental health services. Among those that had received mental health services, 50% received it in a school setting. The study also found that when people with ASD were dually diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), those from higher SES groups expressed high use rates of anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication, stimulants, and anti-psychotic drugs. These medications, however, had mixed results. It was also found that students in low SES groups had a higher chance of being socially isolated and bullied, but that peer-based interventions can help prevent this from occurring. Furthermore, 64.1% of students with ASD spend their time with non-social media, thereby increasing isolation. Finally, the researchers found that 33% of post-secondary adults with ASD are not engaged in any work or school activities.

Significance: This study suggest that there is a trouble discontinuation of services after high school, particularly for individuals from lower SES groups, emphasizing the need for outreach to disadvantaged populations before and immediately after graduation from high school. We are coming up short in terms of providing education, vocational guidance, and socialization support for adults with ASD. The results also indicate that families need more quality mental health services that are both affordable and accessible. Finally, it suggests that schools need to develop and implement programs that increase peer understanding and acceptance of peers with ASD.
Associated Publications:

Publications Under Review:

Media: Autistic young adults missing out on much needed services: Nearly 40 percent fall through the cracks after high school, study finds. [Online video clip].