

## Chapter 3

# The Social Experiences of College Students on the Autism Spectrum

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### ABSTRACT

*As children on the autism spectrum age out of the K-12 system, many will go on to attend college. Often, they are intellectually capable and academically prepared for the college curriculum, but struggle when faced with the new social challenges posed by their new school setting and young adulthood in general. This book chapter offers information about the social experiences of college students with ASD, gleaned from a qualitative, phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews with college students on the spectrum. The results offer insights that are interesting and informative for prospective and current college students and their parents, educators at the high school and college level, and college staff working with students with ASD. Results of the study revealed some common themes, such as: the participants reported feeling socially accepted at college and have made friendships, college has had a positive impact on self-esteem; use of individual counseling and ASD support groups improve socialization.*

### INTRODUCTION

As children on the autism spectrum age out of the K-12 system, many will go on to attend college. Often, they are intellectually capable and academically prepared for the college curriculum, but struggle when faced with the new social challenges posed by their new school setting and young adulthood in general. In contrast with the K-12 system, relatively few sources of support and resources exist for college students with ASD, particularly in regards to socialization. Yet, the symptoms of autism, such as social impairments, awkward speech, and expressive and receptive language difficulties, may make it difficult for students with ASD to succeed socially in the college environment (Frith 1991; Attwood, 2007; Browning & Miron, 2007). Social success in college is an important part of individual development, and may be a particularly important experience for individuals with autism, who tend to struggle socially, personally, and professionally, in adulthood (Santrock, 2006; Arnett, 2004).

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The following chapter offers information about the social experiences of college students with ASD, gleaned from a qualitative, phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews with college students on the spectrum (Altman et al., 2010). The participants, males and females ages 18-23, participated in a variety of college settings on the East Coast of the United States, including public universities, private colleges, and community colleges. The results offer insights that are interesting and informative for prospective and current college students and their parents, educators at the high school and college level, and college staff (educators, administrators, counseling center staff, student life directors etc.) working with students with ASD. Topics covered include: meeting and making friends dating, participating in clubs and activities, living arrangements, joining support groups, and finding appropriate therapeutic services. Finally, the chapter also includes discussion and some recommendations for students with ASD and their support teams to help them navigate the social world at college and addresses specific challenges such as self-disclosure of the diagnosis and self-advocacy.

## **BACKGROUND**

Autism is a pervasive brain disorder with developmental and behavioral effects that include a language delay, limited social interaction, and impairments in socialization and communication (Bishop, et al., 2004; Frith, 1991; Tantam, 1991). Autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition, yet most of the treatment, services, and research offered center on children (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004; Tantam, 1991). However, even with treatment, young adults with ASD continue to display symptoms and behavior that impact social functioning and may make it difficult for them to succeed socially. Understanding presentation of symptoms and their impact in adolescence and adulthood is important, as ASD symptoms, “may cause the greatest disablement in adolescence and young adulthood, when successful social relationships are the key to almost every achievement” (Tantam, 1991, p. 148).

Generally, autism is a lifelong disorder and the symptoms extend into and throughout adulthood (Howlin & Goode, 1998; Ozonoff, Garcia, Clark, & Lainhart, 2005). However, certain symptoms in some people on the spectrum, such as sensory processing problems and underdeveloped language abilities, may have diminished by adolescence and/or adulthood due to early intervention and treatment throughout childhood (Szatmari, Bryson, Boyle, Streiner, & Duku, 2003). On the other hand, as life becomes more complicated in adolescence and then adulthood, social symptoms may become more pronounced and may hinder social and academic success for adolescents and adults with ASD. Friendships are much more complex and rely more on nonverbal cues and other complexities that may bewilder an individual on the spectrum, leading to isolation, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Ozonoff, Garcia, Clark, & Lainhart, 2005; Attwood, 2007). As person with autism becomes more stressed, their symptoms often become more pronounced, which may make it even harder for them to connect socially and can create a debilitating cycle (Attwood, 2007). For example, if a young man who ordinarily struggles with appropriately regulating his speech pitch and prosody attends a party where he does not know anyone and becomes socially anxious, his pitch and prosody may become more difficult for him to regulate. Therefore, he may present as even more unusual and “odd” to other partygoers, who thus avoid or even tease him, leading to more social anxiety and possibly a general aversion to social events. When working with these individuals, it is important to keep in mind that the presentation of symptoms and the needs of adolescents and adults on the autism spectrum may be very different from those of children on the autism spectrum.

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