

‘I definitely feel more in control of my life’: The perspectives of young autistic people and their parents on emerging adulthood

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Autistic children grow up to become autistic adults. Researchers, practitioners, parents and autistic people themselves rightly want to know what the likely outcomes might be for young autistic people as they move into adulthood. Unfortunately, the few long-term studies that have looked at autistic people’s outcomes over the life-course often paint a discouraging picture. Yet the way that these outcomes are typically measured – in terms of having a job, living independently, and enjoying friendships and more intimate relationships – has been set against what is traditionally expected for neurotypical adults, which may not apply to autistic people. Here, we interviewed 26 young autistic people and their parents about the process of transition from high school to more adult roles and what they wanted for their future lives. Parents often voiced serious concerns about the ongoing support their children would require and the severe lack of services designed to support them as adults. Yet, overall, young people were more positive, reporting feeling more in control of their own lives, including developing a sense of identity and being able to make decisions for themselves. These developments may be driven by two sets of underlying skills: (1) young autistic people’s executive skills (their ability to plan ahead and shift flexibly from one thing to the next) and (2) their ability to develop and maintain strong, trusting relationships with others. Focusing on these underlying skills – while keeping in mind the different needs and preferences of individuals – should be the focus for targeted support for autistic people in childhood and adolescence.