

Autistic Women and Girls

Resources for Professionals

Education: Part 2

These resources have been collated from information collected through an online questionnaire, focus groups, interviews with individual practitioners and autistic women, and other recent research studies. Our aim is to summarise all this information, to present it in a succinct and useful form for busy professionals. Each resource contains a summary of key points, with links to appropriate items within the Right Click programme itself and other resources, from websites, online information and books. If you'd like more information on any of the areas covered, or have a specific enquiry, please contact us at rightclick@scottishautism.org

Post-School

1. Being able to get the exam results required to get to college or university for autistic young adults is not always accompanied by similar abilities in independent living skills. The unfamiliarity of a new place, needing to navigate new rules, schedules and geography and having to deal with large numbers of new people can all be highly challenging.
2. Anxiety and loneliness are major obstacles for young autistic people. They also have the potential for making young autistic women vulnerable.
3. Some resource-light but effective strategies for support can make all the difference to autistic students being able to succeed in gaining their qualifications.

Post-School Education and Autism

Executive functioning: One important aspect of autism is in the area of daily living skills known as executive functioning. This set of capabilities which varies across the whole population, to process and organise information, prioritise and then act, becomes especially important when young people are studying.

Environmental and social challenges: Colleges and universities may be big, sprawling collections of campus buildings, full of people, where the demands of academic timetables and social expectations can be difficult to navigate especially for young autistic people who may

have difficulties in finding their way around, going into unfamiliar environments, dealing with groups of people and organising their time. Anxiety and loneliness can exacerbate the difficulties faced by individuals.

The survey carried out for Right Click for Women and Girls highlighted some areas of concern for young people and their parents.

What Helps?

Some institutions do make accommodations and offer support and sometimes very simple things can make a great difference. For example, issuing clear maps of the campus to each student; helping the autistic student create a personalised schedule, with timetables, routes to lectures, study plan all clearly laid out in a form that works for them; organising mentoring systems through student support or students' union e.g. some universities (Cambridge for example) have 'family' systems for students, which are organised through 2nd, 3rd or 4th year students taking on the role of being a new student's 'family', with organised meetings and socials to help provide orientation and support.

Right Click Survey Suggestions:

- peer buddy and mentoring were highly cited requests along with:
- appropriate career advice in schools and colleges
- support for anxiety
- organisational skills/executive functioning support
- time management/ study skills
- online access to tutorials
- peer support
- social/ communication skills teaching
- greater adult knowledge of female autistic behaviour
- "all of the above..."

Outcomes for young autistic people entering further and higher education are currently unknown. We do know that a proportion of students drop out for many reasons to do with executive functioning difficulties and mental health problems. How big of a proportion this is we don't know.

Autism is a developmental condition and so individuals have the capacity to grow and learn. It's worth noting and perhaps passing on to young women who may be struggling to find a direction that many autistic women have been 'late developers' who 'find themselves' later in life.

Some quotes from autistic women:

“If I were to add all the courses and career changes I have taken in adulthood they would probably make up well over what is needed to gain a masters. And yet, here I am, undergraduate aged 40+, mainly because of sudden changes of heart, but also because of inability to infer how systems work, i.e. up until two years ago I didn't know I was able to get a grant to study an undergraduate course. So although I did yearn to study at university I thought I could not afford it.”

“I left school feeling as if I had let everyone down, including myself, bewildered and depressed. I had passed a few exams and while I did gain a place at college, it wasn't really what I wanted and I gained a poor degree. After struggling to find work that I enjoyed and was sustainable (i.e. didn't leave me exhausted and anxious, where I wasn't bullied or taken a loan of) I got married, had two beautiful children and at this point began to realise I was really quite smart, that there were intelligent, capable, interesting and funny women I met who liked me and sought my company and it began to dawn on me that maybe I could do more. I retrained in my early 40s, gained an MSc at 46, completed my PhD at 52. I am now doing work I am passionate about and that I am good at.”

To learn more about autism in women and girls, register for our Right Click Women and Girls programme where there are in-depth discussions on post-school education from the perspective of autistic people and professionals.

Resources

Martin, R. (2010). Top Tips for Asperger Students: How to Get the Most Out of University and College. Jessical Kingsley

Scottish Transitions Forum: www.scottishtransitions.org.uk