

# A major hurdle; transition for girls with Autism

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LEAVING school is a major hurdle for any child. The transition from that school environment with all of its familiar people, routines, structures, rules and memories – good and bad – is a time of worry and concern for any young person, even if it is tinged with the excitement of a ‘new adventure.’

For the girl with Autism the perspective on leaving school may be very different. Feelings of abandonment may be evoked; the loss of that Teacher who always showed kindness by letting you enter the classroom once everyone else was settled in their place; that Teaching Assistant who would spend time with you explaining the incomprehensible emotional aspects of English Literature; the Learning Mentor who, every Thursday, would host a Lunch Club for “girls like you”, where you could talk excitedly about your latest special interest.

Feelings of loss ... your friends were few, often younger than you, but friends they were and you spent time together playing the games you wanted to play, or politely looking at the thousand photographs of horses on your mobile phone. Why do they get to stay at school with all of its familiar smells and textures and colours that you have learnt to manage over the years? Just because you have reached the age of 18 it seems so unfair that you are ejected into that busy world with routines you do not understand, with noises that are



frightening, with people you do not know, who talk quickly and make facial expressions that you cannot comprehend, and everyone and everything moves so fast.

Indeed, some young women with Autism would challenge the assumption that 16 or 18 is the right time to leave school. Claire Sainsbury (2000), in her well known book ‘Martian in the

Playground’, describes it as ‘ludicrous’ to make that assumption. For her the post-school option was university but even that brought an ‘incredulous reaction’ (p.122) in



some quarters; (she went on to gain a First Class degree from New College, Oxford). She states that, like other high-functioning adults with Autism, university was the first chance ... 'to experience formal education as enjoyable and to discover themselves as competent,' with routines and flexibility that accommodated unique and creative learning styles.

In a similar vein the world-famous Temple Grandin writes, 'the really big challenge for me was making the transition from high school to college. ... In order to deal with such a major change ... I needed a way to rehearse it, acting out each phase in my life by walking through an actual door, window or gate.' (p.34). "Scripting" (Carpenter et al, 2015, ) is a valuable technique in educating young people with Autism, as a means of practising and rehearsing future scenarios which may create crippling anxiety, or melt downs in

incomprehensible social situations.

Adulthood, and the transition to it, is an emergent status realised through the gradual acquisition of certain rights, privileges and responsibilities (May, 2000). For young people with Autism such a natural progression cannot be taken for granted: adulthood is not automatically conferred and the process of acquisition is fraught with challenge and complexity.

'Acquisition' is a major dynamic within the process of Transition. There are so many new skills to acquire that it can be daunting and overwhelming for the girl with Autism; as Donna Williams (1996) says 'endless questions that I did not understand,' (p.249). Anxiety, that 'wild-savage beast that prowls beside me taking me hostage' (Limpsfield Grange School, 2015), is an ever present companion, causing chaos and inflicting terror, as the

secure structures of the adolescent years are removed, and replaced by the unknown, the unfamiliar, that abyss of the next phase of life - adulthood.

The voices of girls with Autism that we have heard so far in this article are those who are more able, at the higher end of the Autistic Spectrum, some with a diagnosis formerly known as Asperger's syndrome. Originally it was thought, based on Kanner's 1943 study of 'a new syndrome of autism', that all of these children were fundamentally intelligent. Wing & Gould (1979) in their Camberwell study, were the first to prove this assumption wrong by recognising and demonstrating that autism and severe learning difficulties (SLD) could occur together. Such children would now meet the criteria for Complex Learning Difficulties & Disabilities (CLDD) identified in the research of Carpenter et al (2011). Carpenter, Egerton et al (2015) speak of the

'new autisms' (p.13) which give a different lens with which to view the child's needs profile, and this would certainly be true of girls with autism and learning difficulties.

#### A CASE STUDY

Nasreen, Jasmine and Amanda were all year 13 students in a school for children with moderate learning difficulties (MLD). Autism was a part of their diagnosis, giving rise to overlapping and compounding learning difficulties (Carpenter et al 2015).

As a part of their Transition Programme they were considering work options. They had received talks from various employers, for example from Day Nurseries, Cafés, Garden Centres etc. Each had left them with an easy-to-read leaflet. The three students had some basic reading skills, but their comprehension was patchy. In situations where there were uncertain outcomes



their anxiety would often prevent logical thought and response, and an inability to respond to words they read.

To overcome these difficulties Nasreen, Jasmine and Amanda were introduced to a 'wordless' book (Hollins et al 2017) from the Books Beyond Words series ([www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk](http://www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk)), 'Choosing my First Job' (Banks, Carpenter & Ramalingham).

With no words to block their understanding each of the girls were able to describe the jobs illustrated in the book, talk about the characters and relate the work activities to their own aspirations. Through detailed observations it was noted that

levels of engagement increased; the girls were 'curious' about the job roles, responsive to questions and discussion, persistent in the handling of the book and interpretation of the story.

Anxiety levels had decreased and participation increased. Innovative interventions such as the example given here are crucial if we are to unlock the interests and potential of girls of all abilities across the Autistic spectrum. As NHS England (2018) has recently stated in their new Guidance on Transition for Young People with Special Needs, "It is important that we work with young people to develop a transition pathway to strengthen and support them, whatever

their needs may be."

For girls with Autism this is vital, as these words reflect....

"As a woman I function differently.

As a woman I think, see and feel. As a woman I value all that is me. My Autism is part of that deal."

from ASD: My Gender Wendy Lawson (2006) AS Poetry. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

This article is an extract from a forthcoming book, "Girls and Autism: Educational, Family and Personal Perspectives", edited by Barry Carpenter, Francesca Happe', and Jo Egerton. It will

be published by Routledge in 2019, and launched at a conference of this title in London, organized by the NAHT – [www.naht.org.uk](http://www.naht.org.uk).



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### USEFUL WEBSITES

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/>  
 When I worry about things – [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles)  
[www.engagement4learning.com](http://www.engagement4learning.com)  
[www.barrycarpentereducation.com](http://www.barrycarpentereducation.com)