

EDUCATION – ADOLESCENCE TO ADULT YEARS

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Chantal Charron, MA, CCC-SLP, is a speech and language pathologist with 20 years of experience. Her professional area of expertise and interest is achieving social understanding, independence, and interdependence for individuals with ASD and other disabilities. She currently assists transition students with planning community activities and spends her summers with students with Asperger's syndrome who are preparing for life after high school.

Bob Steinkamp, MA, EdS, has been involved in teaching, consulting, and supervision for 36 years. He has worked mainly with students with moderate cognitive impairments and is currently teaching college special education courses. He also facilitates life coaching groups at a local community college.

Jane, Chantal, and Bob are authors of *The Planner Guide: An Organizational and Reference System for People with Social and Cognitive Challenges*.
www.theplannerguide.com



Connecting the Dots of Life toward a Meaningful Future

By Jane Burke, MA, Chantal Charron, MA, CCC-SLP and Bob Steinkamp, MA, EdS

At a recent autism strategies workshop, the facilitator asked each of us to make a list of ten tasks we performed that morning at home to get ready for the day. After we generated our lists, she asked us to categorize each task by the skill required. The skills were:

I – Independence
S – Social
A – Academic

A typical list read as follows:

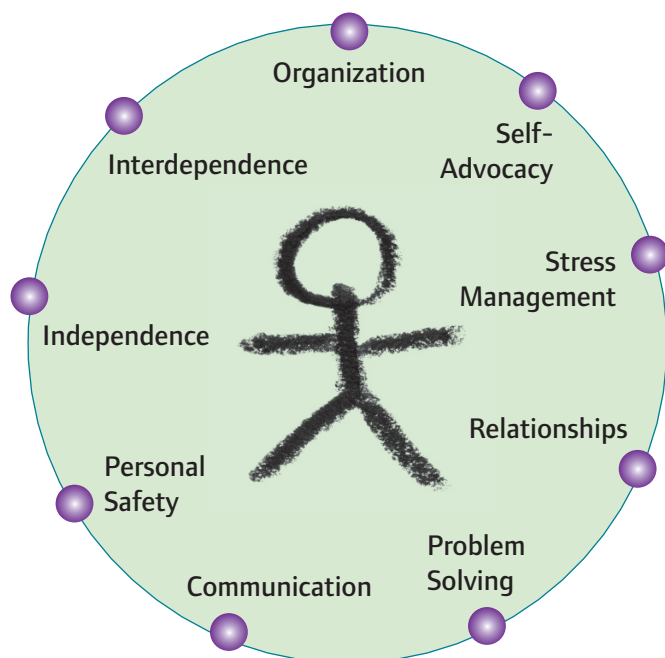
1. Shower – **I**
2. Make and eat breakfast – **I**
3. Clean up the kitchen – **I**
4. Start a load of laundry – **I**
5. Get dressed – **I**
6. Call school to excuse an absence – **I,S**
7. Check email – **I,S**
8. Gather up needed items for work – **I**
9. Fill the car up with gas (including talking to the gas station clerk) – **I,S**
10. Drive to work – **I**

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Connecting the Dots of Life!

Teach individuals to think and act on their own behalf.

These areas include:



Generating this list reminds us of the importance of teaching our students to think and act independently. Academic and social skills are critically important, but individuals need to learn to do as much as possible independently in order to live life to its fullest potential.

We gained our direction from our students in Adult Transition Services, an

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educational program in mid-Michigan that has served students with autism and other special education identifications, all of whom require moderate levels of support. Recently, Michigan's high school academic guidelines have become more stringent, requiring a more rigorous academic focus, thereby leaving some students with high-functioning autism and/or Asperger's syndrome unprepared for functional aspects of life beyond school.

As a result, adult options have expanded. As educators, we have found our services have changed and evolved, but our mission of connecting the dots of life has remained a constant. We are also involved with life coaching classes for adults, which are held on a college campus. A summer program is also offered for high school seniors and recent high school graduates with Asperger's syndrome. These students all have had varying levels of an academic focus with minimal concentration on independence for tasks required post-school for life at home, at work, and in the community.

After years of education and varying degrees of assistance, many of these students have pockets of learned information that do not always connect to the events in their lives. They are not always able to think or act for themselves. Year after year, students have entered these programs with varied skills that have minimal or no apparent connection to each other or to their daily lives. What these individuals have in common is that they have been directed to do things at various levels and in varying degrees for most of their school and home lives, and because of the lack of emphasis on teaching them to be more independent, these actions have created prompt dependence and learned helplessness.

What are the dots and why are they so important?

The options of services (from site-based classes to community experiences) are built around the belief that skills taught in harmony with each other will create meaningful and whole learning. The "dots" are:

- Organization
- Stress management
- Personal safety
- Communication
- Problem solving
- Self-advocacy
- Relationships
- Independence
- Interdependence

Organization can be a challenge for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). In all of our adolescent and adult education programs, we require students to use planners. Complexity and format of planners may vary, but the main goal is to put information in the hands of the individual. Students learn how to organize, access, and use the information, and then they use the planner as a reference to retrieve information independently. Information could include reference guides, which are pages that provide information about how to do something or what to expect. Information could also be work schedules, stress management plans, disability statements, class lists, or contact information for other students. Of course,

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we focus on calendar use so students know what to expect and to feel in control of their lives.

Many students have not learned that certain physiological feelings are warning signs that they are becoming stressed and that they should take action in order to stay in control. Each student explores those feelings and creates an individualized plan for action to control stress. The plans are usually multi-faceted with a back-up plan in case the first option is not successful. These plans usually address different options for all possible scenarios and settings which could include different methods for calming from directing thoughts to calming activities. The student keeps the plan in his or her planner or wallet for easy access.

Many of our students live or aspire to live on their own, with varying levels of support. They often lack judgment with respect to personal safety issues, partially because they have not adequately explored adult responsibilities and opportunities. Students learn from and use reference guides with information about personal safety, covering issues from interacting with acquaintances, to obtaining help in the community, to safety checklists before going to bed at night.

We explore communication in realistic situations and focus on getting needs and desires met as well as engaging in conversation with people in different relationships, such as family, peers, coworkers, acquaintances, and strangers.

Problem solving is a main focus within all settings. Again, the idea is to teach individuals to think for themselves. Students use reference guides, calendars, or any other reference to find the information they need to solve a problem, make an arrangement, and so on. Students often need a great deal of practice with this skill before feeling confident enough to attempt to do things on their own. Often, we find that their past opportunities to act independently have been limited.

Lifetime success for students could at times depend on their having the skills

to advocate for what they need or what is best. Again, in the academic world, students often have not been taught the reason for and the process of this skill. Many students enter our programs with minimal or no information about their disabilities. Therefore, students review their IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) to learn their special education identifications. We explore the disability identification extensively, including understanding strengths and challenges. Students also compose a disability statement or letter and are taught how and why and when to use it if they so choose to meet their needs or to explain a difficulty. As set forth above, putting this information in the student's hands is empowering and gives the options for self-advocacy.

We also explore varying levels of relationships with respect to how much and what type of physical contact, conversation, and trust should occur in each relationship. Students tend to choose to delineate each category visually with real pictures of each relationship in their lives, which is helpful when studying these concepts.

While the focus of this article underscores the importance of independence, interdependence is also important. We all have a certain healthy reliance on others to provide services that we have do not know how to do or cannot do as well. It is an important skill to know how and why to ask others for what we need.

What can we offer?

With the end goal in mind of assisting students to prepare for a seamless transition into post-school life, we hold a Person Center Plan (PCP) meeting to better get to know the student and his or her family. It also offers an opportunity to explore strengths, challenges, fears, roadblocks, and dreams, and to identify the goals needed to accomplish those dreams. Dreams often include independent living, enriched relationships, social networks, leisure opportunities, community

involvement, and employment. The PCP gives the team a chance to listen to the needs of the student as he or she directs the meeting. The student's support people review and adjust PCPs annually.

Adult Transition offers a continuum of services. We have found that students leave the high school general education settings with minimal opportunities to explore their future desires and needs. The students we serve have the option of receiving services at a home base and then adding as much of an outside community schedule as desired. Students could also develop a sustainable schedule within their communities without attending the home base at all. This sustainable schedule could include social outings, work, volunteer work, and community fitness and leisure activities. The decisions about the levels, locations, and amount of service are generated at the PCP meeting, with the student leading and advocating for what he or she wants as much as possible. The goal is to create a balanced sustainable schedule for life after school.

Summer and life coaching groups also continue to explore options that afford opportunities for sustainable life opportunities.

The key to many of these opportunities is independence, often facilitated by teaching ways to reference useful information. Developing useful information should be considered while educating individuals of all ages at home and at school. Our most important goal is to empower individuals by teaching them to think for themselves!

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