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## Starfish and Abalone: Case Studies of ASD Youth in Transition

### Introduction

ASD youth present a unique set of issues when transitioning from the family home into post-secondary education or competitive employment. Frequently, the focus of the young person, and of his/her family, has been on completing high school: the major milestone has been obtaining a high school diploma or a GED. And given the difficulty with which many of these youth have obtained their diploma, it should not be surprising that families have not been able to spend a great deal of time planning for 'what comes next'.

Additionally, public and most private schools are woefully unable to help these teens prepare for adulthood. Lack of funding, lack of skilled or trained professionals with adequate resources, and lack of time in the school day all add up to very slim transition services for this group.

Finally, even if they can get qualified for services (which is rare), state vocational rehabilitation services are simply not up to the challenge of working with this population. As one VR director in California told me during his presentation on transitional services at the 2007 ICDC (International Career Development Conference) in Sacramento, California: "Please take these kids. I can't help them."

In private practice, I see them every day. Over the course of time, I have come to realize that there are two distinct groups of youth: the starfish and the abalone. Starfish are the teens I see prior to high school graduation. They are hanging in there, making progress (albeit slowly), and have their heads above water at least some of the time. With assessment, planning, training, and a lot of coaching and support, they will be able to attain independent lives and sustain competitive employment.

The other kids are the abalones: completely underwater and thoroughly stuck. They come to me after high school graduation, sometimes many years later. They may have had some transition services in high school, and maybe even a general plan on what they were going to do – go to adult ed classes, attend a local community college, go out and get a job. And, most of them started on those paths. And then they failed.

They failed because they no longer had structure. They failed because the mainstream world does not understand them, nor does it have patience for them. They failed because they still need social skills and independence training but are not receiving it. They failed because they take jobs that are a poor match for their abilities and personalities.

Frequently, these young adults either return home or never leave. Their parents are frustrated and tired, and homes are often filled with conflict and a sense of despair. In a veritable death spiral, these ASD youth become seriously depressed and anxious and absolutely incapable of either attending college or of holding a job – no longer children, and yet unable to become the adults society expects them to be.

### **Case Study: James**

James is a 17-year-old Caucasian male with High Functioning Autism attending public high school. He is in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and is about 50% mainstreamed. James' mother made contact in an effort to secure a good post-secondary educational plan for James. She was concerned that his only interest was in professional athletics, and she did not see how he would make a living in that field. James is a bright, earnest, young man who has a great deal of insight into his strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. He is very much into track and field, and has been on the high school team for two years. He also enjoys other sports, and has been on several teams over the years. He clearly identifies as being an athlete.

James was very diligent about completing his assessments before intake. In fact, he completed all of the available assessments, even though he had been instructed to take only three. He was fastidious about keeping every appointment, and always had his homework completed. James' Strong indicated that indeed he had a deep interest in athletics, as well as an interest in animal care and helping professions. He has a strong sense of compassion and desire to help others, and has been involved in the Lions youth volunteer program for four years. James also has a very keen sense of what is right and wrong, and dislikes anything that compromises his sense of ethics or anything that is overly bureaucratic.

During sessions, James maintained reasonable eye contact and reciprocal conversation. He has a good sense of humor, and can laugh at himself as well as at situations. He did tend to get frustrated when things didn't go exactly as he had planned – for example, his mother was a few minutes late in picking him up, which resulted in him making a few urgent phone calls asking where she was. When he got in touch with her on the third call and she assured him she was on his way, he calmed down.

James' main barrier to success is academic. He is very good at English, history, and earth sciences. He has difficulty with math and math-based science (such as chemistry), but is a diligent student and knows how to get help for himself (unusual for this population) and frequents the tutoring center. He voiced a desire to become fully mainstreamed before graduation, which is definitely possible given his academic dedication.

Midway through the assessment process, his mother stated that after conferring with the school staff, James would not take the SAT tests as they would be too stressful and not yield good scores, and wondered how that would impact his college career.

### **James' Treatment Plan**

James completed the full five session protocol for career/post-secondary education, and then extensively discussed several options, narrowing the field down to two choices that were particularly appealing to him. For the sixth session, he and his parents came in to discuss the final recommendation report.

James has decided that he would either like to go into the field of Kinesiology (Physical Therapy/Athletic Trainer) or Assistive Animal Trainer/Handler. Three options were presented for pursuing these careers, in view of the fact that he was not going to take the SAT: enroll in the Physical Therapy certification program at the local community college offering this program, and enter the workforce; take his general ed classes and then transfer either to University of Texas, Austin (for Kinesiology or Animal Behavioral Science) or the University of Florida (Kinesiology) and simultaneously enroll in College Living Experience for assisted care and instruction on independence skills, or transfer to Cal State Hayward (Kinesiology) and simultaneously enroll in College Internship Program in Berkeley for the same purpose.

In discussing this with James parents, it was noted that if he chose to take the two-year route, he would need additional services to learn independence skills before

he could successfully transition. Additionally, a two-year degree would somewhat limit his hiring potential, and definitely limit his earning potential.

James' father voiced the concern that both Kinesiology and Animal Behavior would require quite a lot of science, which is not James' strength. It was duly noted as a concern, but the parents were counseled that James only needs passing grades in these classes, and will receive appropriate accommodations including extensive tutoring – especially if they chose CIP or CLE – and although completion of a four year degree might take six years, with James' perseverance and dedication, he should be able to successfully complete this course of action.

James and his parents decided to enroll him in CIP and Cal State Hayward for a four year degree, and Cal State agreed to waive the SAT requirement. James and his parents were invited in for a free follow-up session to discuss job placement when James neared his completion of his degree, and encouraged to stay in contact with any ongoing or new issues that might arise.

### **Case Study: Claire**

Claire is a 17-year-old female with Asperger Syndrome attending public high school. She primarily attends special ed classes with one mainstream English class, which is her passion. Her parents describe her as a loving, kind child but who is “quite disabled” by her ASD. They were very concerned about her ability to cope post-graduation, and sought help in identifying options for both post-secondary education and job placement. Claire's parents made it clear that money would not be a concern, and that they would be interested in any solutions that best fit her needs regardless of cost.

Claire is a winsome young woman who has difficulty establishing or maintaining eye contact. She can stay on topic for a bit, but tends to wander off after three or four rounds of conversation. Claire is eager to please and willingly follows requests. Both she and her parents describe her as a serious student, and she clearly loves to learn. It was noted that she was in special ed classes not because she could not handle the academics but because she needed extra help with executive functioning areas such as completing and turning in her homework, starting and completing projects, completing exams within the given time, and taking notes in class.

Claire has no friends from the high school, but one or two friends she has met from a local social skills group she belongs to. She has several hobbies she is quite enthusiastic about, one of which is drawing, particularly drawing the video game

character Sonic the Hedgehog. According to her parents, her room is filled with these drawings, and she spends hours a week on this activity.

The familial focus has been on getting Claire through high school, but they are aware that they need to make plans for her future. Claire has definite ideas about what she would like to do as an adult, and while her parents support her enthusiasm, are concerned about the feasibility of her goals. Claire has relatively good insight into her strengths and weaknesses, and understands that attending college will be a challenge, but one she believes she would like to try.

### **Claire's Treatment Plan**

Claire had no problem completing the assessments, once her mother got her to sit down and take them. According to the Strong Interest Inventory results, she would enjoy a career in either writing or art, which fit well with her current interests. She was asked to bring in a sample of her writing for evaluation. Unlike many people with Asperger Syndrome, she has strong analytic writing abilities: she is able to use transitions, compare and contrast ideas, to state a hypothesis and demonstrate it adequately, which are all frequently weaknesses in ASD writing. Given this, Claire was asked if she would like to participate in an informational interview with a professional writer who has NLD. At first she was unclear as to what the purpose was for this exercise, but when it was explained that it would be a good way for her to find out what writing for a living was like, she accepted the idea. The next session was used to create a list of questions that she wanted to ask, including an introductory statement and a way to complete the interview. She rehearsed the interview on the telephone two times, and then completed the interview with the writer in the following session.

During debrief, Claire was enthusiastic about the potential of being a writer, and possibly an illustrator as well. The range of writing professions was discussed, from technical writing to journalism to fiction. Although Claire was most enthusiastic about fiction writing, she was counseled that this was generally an 'adjunct' career best attained after securing a more predictable way of earning a living. Claire understood this, and in discussing her options decided that she would like to attend a four-year college and pursue a degree in journalism, preferably at a college out of state. Given her ongoing needs for intervention, she was referred to College Living Experience for her residential needs, and final selection of an appropriate college from five that offered BAs in Journalism that were associated with three of the CLE campuses.

In the final session, this was presented to Claire's parents. They were rather surprised that Claire was so excited about attaining a four year degree, and that

she wanted to go to school out of state. They immediately made plans to tour the three CLE residences to which they had been referred over the summer break, and Claire has enrolled in a writing class through the high school's Middle College program.

### **Case Study: John**

John is a 23-year-old male with Asperger Syndrome who lives at home with his parents. He was diagnosed at age 14, and received some interventions through his IEP, but not given much in the way of transition planning. Upon graduation, John "took a break" and "hung out with friends". This went on for over a year, until his father told him that he either needed to go to school or get a job.

In part because school had not been a pleasant experience, John chose to get a job at a local computer store. John liked this job in that he got to tinker with computers and peripherals, which is what he loves to do – take things apart and figure out how to put them together again. However, he had difficulty with the managers who he described as "rip off artists" because they frequently sold items that had been used as brand new, which upset his sense of personal ethics (a common occurrence with ASDs individuals).

Additionally, John would easily get frustrated with a sudden change in priorities with regards to what he needed to be doing at a given time, and this led to several meltdowns, where he would get angry and feel out of control. Rather than "freak out" at work, he would simply excuse himself and go home and have his "meltdown" in private. These would range from kicking things in his room to slamming doors repeatedly to going into his backyard and screaming. He finally quit this job before he got fired. Since then, he has returned to his psychiatrist and has been taking anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication to help with impulse control. Both he and his father noted that the intervention is helping.

Since then, John has had two other jobs, both of which he felt unsuccessful at and again quit before being fired. He has taken "a few" classes at the local community college, but has only finished one. He noted that the classes seemed "pointless" and that the instructors "didn't get him" and that one actually yelled at him because he asked too many questions. John's response to this instructor was to yell an expletive at him, walk out of the class and never return. At that point, John's father sought vocational intervention for John, and asked to attend all sessions with his son.

When asked if John had received any additional interventions such as neurofeedback or cognitive behavioral therapy for self-regulation and impulse control, his father stated that he had not, and wondered out loud if these would be beneficial. This was rather surprising as he is a behavioral pediatrician working with children and adolescents with oppositional and mood disorders. John was immediately referred to a local MFT who specializes in CBT with neurodiverse adolescents, as his behaviors will continue to be a barrier to John's vocational and academic success if not treated more aggressively. John's father directed John to contact his psychiatrist and ask the doctor what he thought about the intervention. (At the end of the assessment, John had still not contacted his doctor or the referred MFT. Two reminder emails were sent post-assessment, but no response was received.)

Although he complained before and after the assessments, John completed them on time and was interested in the results and what they said about him. He was particularly impressed with his results on mechanics, for although he knew that this area interested him, he had never seen it as a real 'career'. During career exploration, John's father asked that the career of musical instrument repair be considered, as he thought this would be a perfect fit for John. John was clearly less than enthusiastic about this suggestion, but agreed to consider it.

John then asked that he be allowed to do the career exploration phase without his father being present. His father agreed. This session yielded several career options that were very, very appealing to John. He was particularly interested in a two-year program in biomedical technology, which would allow him to work as installation and repair technician for biomedical equipment, a job that would allow him to tinker to his heart's content and a job that would be predictable and not have a great deal of interpersonal contact.

### **John's Treatment Plan**

In the final session, John presented his desire to attend a two-year college in pursuit of the biomed technician and to either continue to live at home or to live in a nearby residential program where he could start learning to live independently. His father first asked if he had looked into instrument repair, and was told that that career required practical knowledge of music theory, which John did not have and was not interested in. A discussion of all the areas John looked at ensued, and then returned to the biomed career. John actively 'sold' the idea, based on his love for diagnostics, tinkering, and high-end instrumentation, and stated that he was going to call the junior college the following week and talk to the program director and the disability specialist about accommodations.

The conversation then turned to the need for independence training, and the options that were available. When noted that a specialized residential facility could cost up to \$35,000 annually, John's father stated, "Well, you can tell your mother that she can choose between a new kitchen or you moving out!" The message was clear that John would be living at home while he attended college.

At termination, John had enrolled in the program of his choice. He and his father were encouraged to look into CBT and to begin planning on how he would acquire life skills while living at home so that he could transition successfully upon graduation. They were invited to return at any time for further guidance, referrals, or for independence training.

### **Case Study: Sean**

Sean is a 19-year-old male with ADD who currently lives at home with his parents. Sean was diagnosed with severe ADD at age 8, has been on an IEP ever since, and has been on and off both anti-depressants and stimulants under a psychiatrist's supervision since age 10. He is currently on both types of drugs and states that he is compliant in taking them daily.

Sean received transition planning from his high school, and because school had been so difficult for him, he and his parents agreed that he take a 'gap year' as a breather before going to college. At the end of the second summer, he attended a program hosted by SALT at the University of Arizona designed to help kids transition into the regular SALT program. However, while he liked the program well enough, he missed his friends and family very much, and became depressed at the thought of living so far away, and so returned home. He began smoking an increasing amount of marijuana and became more depressed.

Alarmed by his rapid decline, Sean's parents secured the services of a well-known educational consultant in the San Francisco Bay Area to provide an assessment and recommendation report for Sean. The consultant gave Sean 16 behavioral, psychological, and academic assessments, ranging from the WAIS-III to the MACI to the Rorschach Inkblot. Since then, Sean enrolled in community college twice. After dropping out the first time, he was thrown out of the house for smoking marijuana, and was told he could not come home until he re-enrolled. He did, and was allowed back home, but dropped out again, citing that he "just didn't have the energy to do it." It was at this time that Sean's mother made an appointment. She was informed that she or Sean would need to secure a copy of his latest IEP or preferably, the psych report from the previous consultant. She stated that since

Sean was now an adult, that he would have to procure it himself. She set up an appointment for Sean two weeks in the future.

One week later, she called to state that Sean was very resistant to bringing a copy of the report in, and that he and his father had had a terrible argument about it over dinner the night before, with his father stating, "I spent over \$10,000 on that report, and I'm not going to spend another penny unless you give it to her, and if you don't do it by Friday, I'm throwing you out again!" Sean walked away from the dinner table and refused to come out again until his father had left for work the following morning.

Sean's mother was encouraged to have him come in for intake, and not worry about the report at this time. She was also encouraged to speak to her husband and to try to keep the family conflict surrounding Sean's situation to a minimum for the time being. She agreed.

Sean appeared for his intake on time. He was dressed as a typical young adult, and was a bit shy and nervous. The career/educational counseling protocol was explained to him, and he began to warm up a little bit. When he was asked about the report from the previous counselor, he explained that he didn't like being bullied by his father, and that the report was useless and embarrassing and that he didn't want strangers reading it. When asked how he felt about it now, he said he had no problems retrieving it and delivering it for review, and so agreed that he would.

During intake, it became very clear that Sean is severely depressed, has very low self-esteem, and believes, in his own words, that he is a complete failure. He admitted to sleeping as much as he could, and that he still smoked marijuana, in part to help him sleep at night, and that he just had no direction or will to move forward.

### **Sean's Treatment Plan**

Sean posed a difficult situation in that he does not readily trust counseling 'authorities', and with good reason. When he attempted to obtain a copy of his previous assessment (which he did the following day) he was told that the attending psychologist was no longer with the firm, and that they would need "some time" to secure it. Miraculously, they "found it" two days later, and Sean retrieved it and brought it in personally.

Upon review, it was clear that the previous assessment was of very little value, then or now. It was written in typical 'psych-ese' as if the recipient was a school

psychologist, not a confused, depressed young man. The report did not offer any new information to Sean or his family, but merely confirmed his diagnosis of ADD, anxiety and depression. The treatment section of the report referred him to see an unspecified CBT specialist for treatment, and recommended that he get accommodations when he went back to an unspecified school. (Sean's mother later stated that the consultancy had indicated that they would do a school search for Sean for an additional fee.)

The report went on to state that the ADD and depression held a 'rule out' status, reasoning that because Sean had been smoking marijuana, those behaviors could have been caused by the drug and not by clinical disorders – even though he had received both of those diagnoses prior to ever trying recreational drugs. Clearly, the assessments and the report had been performed and written by an intern without adequate supervision.

In discussing the report, Sean noted that at the end of the assessments, a person identified as an addiction specialist came in to speak with him, without his prior consent. This man “yelled and cursed” at Sean, and admonished him to get his life together and “stop throwing everything away.” Sean had been infuriated and embarrassed by this intervention.

Sean was told during session that the previous report he received was not only worthless but reckless, in that it did nothing to help him figure out what to do next and merely made him feel worse about himself. He was counseled that despite any moral issues others might have with his smoking marijuana, the simple fact was that taking a depressant (marijuana) while taking a stimulant and an anti-depressant would tend to nullify the effects of the prescription drugs, and he needed to be conscious of that. Sean agreed to try to curtail his use and to complete the entire career assessment process in an effort to determine what he should do next.

Ten minutes after he was to arrive for his second appointment, he was called on his cell. He stated that he just woke up and would be right in. He was shown his SII results, and asked how he felt about possibly pursuing a career in art. He laughed and stated he would love to, but his father had told him that he could never earn enough money. This was immediately debunked, and Sean was told of the various, and quite attainable and profitable, careers in technical illustration, graphic design, and web design. Sean was very interested in more information on these careers, and was given research homework to do.

At the end of this session, Sean was asked about his use of marijuana in the previous week. He stated that he had only used it twice, both times to help him fall asleep at night due to insomnia. He was told that in order to continue working successfully, he would need to go in and see his dispensing psychiatrist as soon as he could, with consultation notes that stated he was still depressed despite the medication, and that he was having trouble sleeping because of the stimulant and was self-medicating.

Sean was asked if he thought he could follow through, and when he hesitated, the doctor was looked up, the number was dialed, and the phone was handed to him with the instruction to make an appointment right then and there. He did. He was also instructed to make an appointment with a CBT specialist who works with adolescents. When asked if he needed help making that call, he insisted he could do it on his own, and by the next appointment, he had called and set up his first appointment.

Thirty minutes prior to each subsequent assessment session, Sean received a 'wake up' call to remind him to come in. On the last day, he answered his cell, stating he was on his way. Soon after he received his recommendation report – written in a style suitable for a young adult to read – he enrolled in the local community college, taking two core classes and one drawing class. It was recommended that he continue to come in once every other week to make sure that he stays on track, which he does. He is making good progress on his degree and appears to have his depression under control.