A Transition Model That Works - Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement

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Employment is a defining characteristic of adulthood, yet the emerging data regarding vocational outcomes for young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been less than optimal. Close to half of young adults with ASD are unable to secure employment after high school (Shattuck et al., 2012). If they are employed, these young adults earn significantly lower wages than peers with other disabilities (Roux et al., 2013), and they struggle with job retention (Taylor, Henninger, & Mallick, 2015). The federal Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) system, dedicated to promoting employment for people with disabilities, also strives to support people with ASD with only 60% of those receiving VR services exiting with a job and with a weekly median income of just $160 (Roux, 2016).

Of support programs that do seek to improve employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities, the Project SEARCH internship programs have proven to be consistently successful transitioning most of its graduates to competitive employment (Christensen, Hetherington, Daston & Riehle, 2015). Specific to individuals with ASD, Project SEARCH secured competitive employment for 87% of the young adults with ASD in one study, while the control group, which did not participate in Project SEARCH, had an employment rate of only 12% (Wehm et al., 2013).

Internships are a proven model of success to teach skills that are necessary for employability, including the development of initiative, communication, responsibility, social skills, teamwork and work ethic (Robles, 2012). A long-established, international program, Project SEARCH requires total immersion by its participants in the workplace for one year. Interns rotate through multiple worksites, gaining hands-on training and opportunities to explore career options. In addition, Project SEARCH provides comprehensive instruction in skills that are pivotal for employment, such as successfully gaining and appropriately maintaining employment, self-advocacy and financial literacy.

As part of its commitment to improving life outcomes for adults with ASD, NEXT for AUTISM has been supporting the unique needs of transition-age youth who are moving into adulthood from supportive high school environments. Our organization has championed the development of an autism-specific Project SEARCH model, called Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement (PSAE), which resulted from a long-standing collaboration among NEXT for AUTISM, Project SEARCH and the TEACCH Autism Program at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. This enhanced, ASD-specific curriculum includes assessments and instructional strategies that are tailored to the unique needs of individuals with ASD.

NEXT for AUTISM’s PSAE enhancements include the TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP) an assessment specifically designed to evaluate the skills of transition-aged individuals with ASD. The TTAP examines vocational, interpersonal and communication skills, all of which are particularly difficult for many individuals with ASD but are necessary for them to successfully enter the workforce. Using an ASD-specific assessment enables each intern to receive targeted instructions for their specific needs during their enrollment in the program. The use of ASD-specific, evidence-based strategies has proven success, such as visual supports and clearly articulated steps and schedules.

References


Recent Graduates of Project Search Autism Enhancement

Project SEARCH from page 4

(Wong et al., 2015) are also intentionally incorporated into the PSAE program. Additionally, professionals implementing PSAE must receive ASD-specific training on how to address the social, communication and behavioral needs of the interns with ASD. These ASD-tailored interventions were designed to ensure optimal outcomes for people with ASD who choose to enroll in Project SEARCH.

PSAE was initially piloted in collaboration with New York-Presbyterian Hospital, ARC Westchester and the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in White Plains, New York. Between 2012 and 2016, participants of PSAE were students attending the program during their final year of high school. In 2017, the program expanded to accept only those young adults with ASD who had already completed their high school education therefore eliminating the role for BOCES the institutional education partner. The 2017-18 PSAE graduating class had nine interns, all of whom graduated into competitive employment. Since the program’s inception, almost three quarters of overall graduates have gained employment. Of those, 89 percent have retained jobs in a variety of work places including a law firm, biotechnology company, court house, grocery store, and restaurants.

When the 2018-19 interns currently attending the program at New York-Presbyterian were asked about their decision to enroll in PSAE and what they hoped to get out of the year-long program here’s what they shared:

- Tyler said that he chose to participate in Project SEARCH because “I wanted to learn how to be a responsible adult along with learning transferrable skills that I can use everywhere in my life.”
- Carly shared that she hopes to learn to be more independent.
- Shannon hopes to “learn the skills that will help me in the work field.”
- James is an intern who “wants to learn how to get a job.”

All of the Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement program interns are motivated to work and hope to use Project Search as a bridge to employment.

The PSAE training package is now being disseminated nationally to organizations and educational institutions which have successfully implemented the program in places as diverse as the urban core of Philadelphia, PA to Rogers, AR. Given the need for quality transition programs for youth with ASD, NEXT for AUTISM hopes to continue to champion the dissemination of PSAE nationally and internationally.

Employment is a possibility for many young adults living with ASD. The data are clear that the current model of high school completion and entry into adulthood is not garnering the desired vocational outcomes. The skills taught by NEXT for AUTISM’s Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement are the critical skills that young adults with ASD need to master to step confidently into adulthood and secure their first jobs.

For more information about Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement, contact NEXT for AUTISM info@nexfromautism.org or 212.759.3773.