What helps Autistic students prepare for life after secondary school?

This study explored what Autistic adults remembered about leaving school. They talked about choosing what to do next, learning everyday tasks, and adjusting to social changes. Some also described challenges when moving from a regional or rural area.

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At a glance

Who may find this snapshot useful and why?

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This snapshot may help Autistic students and families think about what support they may need when preparing to leave secondary school. Teachers, schools, and services may also find it useful. They could use it to plan earlier, involve students in decisions, and match support to each student's goals and needs.

What is this study about?

Leaving secondary school can bring many changes. Students may need to choose work, further study, or another pathway. They may also need to learn new everyday tasks. This Australian study asked Autistic adults what helped when they left school and what support they wished they had received. The researchers also looked at whether people from regional and rural areas had different support needs. The study aimed to identify ways schools, families, and communities could better support the move into adult life.

Why did we choose to create a snapshot of this study?

Autistic students and families may already know that leaving secondary school can bring both opportunities and challenges. We chose this study because it shares what Autistic adults said helped them leave school. Their experiences may help students, families, and schools plan for life after school. This includes the importance of listening to Autistic students and understanding their individual needs.

What are the key takeaways from this research?

1 Exploring different options helped people make choices about life after school

- Autistic adults said it helped when they could explore different options, rather than being expected to follow one path.

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- Some also found university experience programs, work experience, and volunteering helpful.
- Having a say in their own future helped people choose paths that matched their interests and goals.

2 Learning and practising everyday tasks was helpful

- Autistic adults said it was helpful to learn everyday tasks, such as using public transport, filling out forms, and applying for jobs.
- They also wanted more support to learn about managing money, finding housing, using government services, and looking after a home.
- Family and friends sometimes helped by practising these tasks together. For example, one person described learning which bus they would need to take to university.

3 Support for social changes could have helped

- All 10 Autistic adults described feeling unprepared for some of the social changes after leaving school.
- They wanted support to meet people, make friends, and practise communicating in ways that felt comfortable to them. They wanted that support to respect Autistic ways of communicating.
- Some people wanted support from Autistic adults who had already left school. They felt these adults could share useful advice from their own experiences.

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4 Moving away from home created extra challenges for some people

- Some people from regional and rural areas needed to move to a city to study or find other opportunities. This created some challenges, like finding housing, understanding rental agreements, paying rent, and managing money.
- Moving away also meant leaving familiar places, family, and friends.
- One Autistic adult talked about receiving help from family and friends when travelling to the city and finding somewhere to live.

What can I do with this information?

These are some ways you could use what the researchers learned. The researchers did not test whether these suggestions work.

For Autistic students preparing to leave school

- Ask your school's careers adviser, counsellor, or a local community organisation about different options after school. These might include TAFE, university, work, volunteering, or other activities that interest you.
- Make a list of everyday tasks you want to learn or practise before leaving school, such as catching public transport, managing money, or applying for jobs.
- Think about what might change in your friendships and social life after school. You could look for groups or activities where you can meet people who share your interests.

For parents, families and supporters

- Ask the Autistic young person what they want to do after school and what support they would like from you.

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- Help them explore different options by arranging visits to TAFE, university or workplaces, based on their interests and choices.
- Offer to practise everyday tasks together, such as planning a bus trip, filling out forms, or making a budget. Remember that independence can include asking for help, sharing tasks, and receiving support when needs change.
- Help them find Autistic adults who are willing to share their experiences of leaving school, studying, or working.

For teachers and school staff helping students prepare for life after school

- Give students opportunities to learn about TAFE, university, work, and volunteering. For example, organise workplace visits or invite people to talk about different jobs.
- Ask students about their interests, goals, and what they want to do after school. Make sure their choices guide planning, rather than relying only on grades or academic results.
- Include practical activities, such as planning a journey using public transport, completing job applications, or learning about renting a home.
- Support Autistic students to tell you about the friendships that they want, and respect what they say. Offer ways for students to prepare for changes in friendships and social activities that might come after school. This could include connecting students with groups based on shared interests or inviting Autistic adults to share their experiences.
- Start talking about life after school before the final year, so students have time to explore their options.

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For people supporting Autistic students in regional and rural areas

- Help students explore opportunities both locally and outside their area, including online courses, TAFE, university, work, and volunteering.
- If a student is thinking about moving away, help them look into housing, rent, transport, and living costs before they make a decision.
- Help students plan visits to places they may study or live. For example, they could practise travelling from their accommodation to a TAFE campus or university.
- Ask students what support they would like to stay connected with family, friends, and their community if they move away.
- Consider whether students need extra time or support to explore options that are not available close to home.

Questions to think about based on this study

If you are an Autistic student preparing to leave school

Which post-school options would you like to try before deciding what comes next?

If you are a parent, family member or supporter

Which everyday tasks could we practise together before school ends?

If you are a teacher or school transition worker

Has this student had opportunities to explore more than one post-school pathway?

If you support students in regional or rural areas

If this young person may need to move, have housing, travel, and money been planned for?

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One thing to remember

Leaving school is about more than choosing a training course or job. Autistic adults said real choices and preparation for everyday and social changes helped them move into life after school.

Looking more closely at the study

Why and how was the study done?

There is limited research asking Autistic people what helped them prepare for life after secondary school. The researchers wanted to learn about this from Autistic adults' own experiences. This included what support they found useful, and what they wished had been available. The researchers also wanted to understand whether students from regional and rural areas needed different support from students living in cities.

This was an interview study. Researchers spoke with people to learn about their experiences, thoughts, and views. The researchers interviewed Autistic adults about leaving secondary school. Interviews were held by phone or Microsoft Teams. People could use voice, video, or live chat. The researchers looked for common ideas across the interviews.

Who was involved?

- 10 Autistic adults from Australia took part.
- They were aged 21 to 48 years.
- Six had attended secondary school in a big city. Four had attended school in a regional or rural area.
- Seven were women and three were men.

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- Seven described themselves as White, two as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and one as Asian.
- The study included people with an autism diagnosis from a health professional and people who self-identified as Autistic.
- Most had left secondary school many years earlier. Seven had left school more than 10 years before the interview.

Who shaped the research?

- An Autistic research consultant guided the study design, interviews, and analysis and gave feedback on early findings.
- Autistic and autism community members gave feedback on recruitment information and interview questions.
- The interview guide was tested with an Autistic adult and changed after their feedback.

What questions are still unanswered?

- Some Autistic people in the study left school many years ago. Would Autistic young people leaving school today describe the same supports as helpful?
- Fewer than half of the people in this study had attended secondary school in a regional or rural area. Would other Autistic students from regional or rural areas say the same transition supports are helpful?
- The study described the experiences of the Autistic people as a group. What supports work best for Autistic students with different communication, cultural, and support needs?
- Autistic adults said that support with social changes after school could make the transition easier. How can schools help Autistic students manage social changes while respecting their ways of communicating and being?

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One study rarely changes practice.

When making decisions, it is important to consider this study alongside:

- People's values, needs, and lived experience.
- Findings from other research studies.
- Professional knowledge and expertise.

All of these are important parts of an evidence-based approach.

Citation

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