

## **Family-Centered Transition Planning for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

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Young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) frequently transition from high school to adult life lacking the skills and supports needed to participate as full members of their communities. The resulting social isolation and dependency on families or intensive disability support services has been identified as a serious social problem, compounded by a significant increase in incidence of ASD diagnosis in recent years. The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire and the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies at the University of Maine are proposing a collaborative two-year project to demonstrate a Family-Centered Transition Planning model. The model has three components, designed to empower families and transitioning students to take a leading role in the process of transition planning:

1. The first component involves a series of 6 structured training sessions for the families of transitioning students called SPECS (Specific Planning Encourages Creative Solutions). These evening group sessions (a) present a model and associated tools for family-centered planning, (b) inform families about post-school options for individuals with ASD and how to make creative use of funding and service systems to achieve individualized outcomes, and (c) teach strategies for negotiating, advocating, and building partnerships with service providers.
2. The second component is facilitating plan development with the individual families following training. A Planning Facilitator will assist transitioning students with ASD and their families to form a group of supportive individuals, including school and adult service representatives and conduct 2 – 3 planning meetings held at the family's home or other chosen location to develop a plan for meaningful community participation following high school, including employment and/or postsecondary education.
3. The third component is facilitation of career exploration activities – such as job shadowing, volunteer work experiences, or investigating colleges – with the student, family and school, in accordance with each plan. Full-time Planning Facilitators in NH and ME will assist with planning facilitation and career exploration for about 8 months for each family following the completion of SPECS training.

We will enroll 40 youth with ASD between the ages of 16 – 18 at enrollment from collaborating high schools in NH and ME, and one parent for each youth. To test the impact of the model, participants will be randomly assigned to a Year 1 group and a Year 2 group, with the Year 2 group receiving typical high school transition services during Year 1. Data will be collected at enrollment and after 12 months (prior to the initiation of services for the Year 2 group) to measure the impact of Family-Centered Transition Planning. Data will be collected on parent future expectations using a self-report survey. Data will be collected student self-determination using a self-report survey and on student career maturity and healthy functioning using an interview-based survey. Record review will examine the quality of the transition objectives on the high school's IEP using a document analysis checklist. Semi-structured interviews with students and families will explore their transition experiences using qualitative methods. Results will be disseminated through publications and conference presentations.

**Keywords:** Adolescents with Disabilities, Developmental Disabilities, Family Professional Collaboration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Parent Education, Research, Vocational Training, Youth in Transition