



Taylor, J. L., & DaWalt, L. S. (2017). Brief report: Postsecondary work and educational disruptions for youth on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(12), 4025-4031.

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ABSTRACT *This study examined vocational/educational disruption in the 2–3 years after high school for 36 youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Data were collected three times from parents: during youth's last year of high school and two times after high school exit. Data were coded into categories indicating any versus no disruptions in postsecondary vocation/education, and group differences in individual (behavior problems, IQ, adaptive behavior, autism severity, stress reactivity) and family (parent depression, anxiety, quality of life; family income and climate) factors were examined. One-half of youth had experienced a postsecondary vocational/educational disruption; parents of those with a disruption had more depressive and anxiety symptoms and lower quality of life while their son/daughter was still in high school.*

SUMMARY

Purpose of study To better understand stability in employment and post-secondary education (PSE) for young adults with ASD, Taylor and Dawalt (2017) study disruptions in youths' vocational and PSE experiences immediately following high school. More specifically, the authors examine individual and family factors that differed for those who experienced disruption(s). By examining participation over multiple years rather than at a single point in time, this study aims to examine patterns of sustainable employment and PSE for youth with ASD.

Framework

Adults with ASD have high rates of unemployment and underemployment. While there has been previous research examining how people with ASD gain employment and entry into PSE programs, less is known about how to sustain these activities. Some additional patterns of employment that have been observed in this population show a loss in independence over time, a correlation with family functioning and employment, instability, and a possible relationship with symptom severity and cognitive abilities. These variables of family functioning and student characteristics, and their relationship to stability, merit more examination.

Population and sample

This study examined 36 families with young adults on the spectrum from a "well-characterized, phenotypically-diverse sample" (4026).

Overview of methods



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The data were gathered at 3 different times from the student's last year of high school up to three years after graduation. Information about IQ, adaptive behavior, severity of ASD symptoms, and behavior problems was gathered from students at time 1. Family factor information including parental anxiety and depressive symptoms, quality of life, income, and expressed emotion was also gathered at time 1. Data on employment and education stability was measured at times 2 and 3. Data was analyzed using *t* tests.

Variables

- i. Student characteristics and family factors were examined as predictive variables.*
- ii. Employment/education disruptions were the outcome variable.*

Findings/Results

About half of the students experienced disruption in employment or PSE within the three years studied, most often due to failing out of a PSE program or deciding to leave vocational/education situations from lack of support. However, most young adults who experienced disruption recovered and found similar opportunities by time 3. Out of those students who did not experience disruptions, about half improved their situations, such as successfully taking on new classes or employment opportunities. The study found no significant associations with individual characteristics; family factors such as parental depression, anxiety, and quality of life all showed significant results within the disruption group.

Implications

Taylor and DaWalt's study showed that young adults on the spectrum do experience a significant amount of disruption within their careers and PSE. However, this study also showed that these youth have the ability to recover from disruptions. Considering the most common reasons for disruption and significance of family factors, more research is needed to better understand how to support families as well as their family member with ASD throughout employment and PSE participation, especially considering that significant factors are malleable.

CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS

Conceptual





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- i. Though it is clear young adults with ASD often struggle with instability when they graduate high school, this is often a period of instability for many neurotypical young people.

Data

- i. This study utilized a small sample size of mostly white males, which can skew the generalizability of results. Additionally, the young adults with ASD were largely left out of data collection. Parents of people with ASD are often very involved in their lives, though this is a valuable source of data, it should not data from the person with ASD.

Analysis

- i. Aligned with the conceptual issue, since the study did not include a comparison group, it cannot be known whether these patterns of employment/education are significantly inconsistent with a neurotypical population. In addition, significant associations with individual factors may not have been found due to the largely homogenous demographics of the small sample. Besides, this study is not really a longitudinal design. It only used a t-test to conduct the longitudinal analysis.

Interpretation

- i. The unclear directionality between parental/family factors and disruptions should be examined more clearly.

Application

- i. While the study points to the importance of considering family factors associated with employment and PSE stability for young adults with ASD, it is not exactly applicable due to the somewhat basic nature of this research and the small sample size.

FOLLOW-UP

Little Questions

- i. Taylor and Dawalt chose to exclude the two study participants who had never participated in vocational or PSE activities. Since 91.7% of participants were White non-Hispanic and 83.3 were male, what were the race/ethnicity and





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sex of the participants excluded and how may this impact the findings in which no significant associations with individual factors were found?

Big Questions

- i. How can researchers and practitioners influence family factors to improve stability in employment and PSE participation for young adults with ASD?

Next Steps

- i. Future research needs to be designed as longitudinal studies that include comparison groups with the neurotypical population.
- ii. A more diverse and representative sample should be examined.
- iii. There should be a greater focus on family and parental factors both in research on their effects and in practice regarding how they can be changed to support students with ASD.
- iv. Factors which contribute to stability should be examined.

Fast Facts or Tweetable Quotes/Data

- i. Of those who experienced disruption and had previously been involved all recovered. (Sarah)
- ii. The study found significant associations with family factors rather than individual factors. (However, this may have been due to the quite homogenous sample of mostly white males.) (Amber)
- iii. Half of the youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) did not experience the postsecondary work and educational disruptions. (Yachen)

