

Personal Statements:helping transition to further education and employment
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First Impressions

The luxury of having a second chance to make a first impression is something which is not afforded to any of us. For people who have Asperger's syndrome, what other people think about them can be a cause of great concern, and the skills required to come across immediately as friendly, cool and in control may not come easily, particularly in unfamiliar situations. Assistance to make a good impression when meeting new people in anxiety provoking novel contexts, such as the first day at work, college or university, may alleviate some longer term difficulties around social inclusion in these tricky environments. Ideas presented here are not put forward as a universal panacea but may be useful to some individuals.

Transitions /Familiarisation Activities

People with AS, their families, and practitioners, are usually acutely aware of the requirement to take steps to smooth transitions from familiar to unfamiliar environments.(Breakey 2006, Lawson 2006) Moves from school to college or university, or into employment, represent major upheavals in the life of an adult with AS .(Attwood 1998, Howlin 1997,Martin 2005, Mawhood and Howlin 1999, Meyers 2001) Peer relationships in any context in which sustained contact is required are clearly significant. Prior experiences of isolation and bullying are too often part of the life history of an individual with AS.(Grandin and Johnson 2005, PJ 2007) Lack of social experience and anxiety about the physical, sensory and practical aspects of any new situation can add to feelings of trepidation. (Beardon 2002, Bogdashina 2006, Mitchell et al 2007) Imagining new situations outside of prior experience is difficult for an individual with AS, so having little idea what the new environment might be like will be unsettling.(Mitchell et al 2007) In addition worry about being viewed as a stereotype, as in 'Rain Man', or 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night', may well just make things a lot worse (Martin 2006). Facilitating opportunities to visit and become familiar with the environment is relatively easy in college or university, but may be more difficult in the work place. Careful transitional planning in educational contexts may involve getting to know the environment physically via campus tours, spending time in the library and eating in the establishment's food outlets.(Breakey 2006,) Campuses are generally open over summer so this takes little organising. Meeting staff prior to starting in September can also be really helpful,

particularly if a prior discussion has been arranged in order to formulate a few questions, and the individual with AS is supported by someone with the sensitivity not to take over. Fresher's week at university will require careful navigation, and assistance to deal with what may be an overwhelming sensory experience can really help an individual with AS to plug into clubs and societies which may well be the key to social inclusion in the long term. (Martin 2006)

Ensuring that individualised and appropriate support arrangements are in place from day one, following a careful transitional stage designed to increase familiarisation and confidence, is clearly possible within college and university and should be the standard to which institutions aspire. (Goode 2007, Martin 2006).

Transition out is as important as transition in. (Martin 2006) Developing employability skills while still in education in order to facilitate progress into the world of work, with assistance if necessary, is clearly important for a student with AS. Arguably educational establishments need to take on board the particular requirements of individuals with AS when thinking about careers advice. Effective work placements, which allow the individual to reflect on where their talents lie and support with the application and interview process are clearly essential components of the development of employability. When work has been secured, activities to develop confidence in the contexts, prior to starting, could mirror those described in relation to familiarisation with college or university. The question is who would be the appropriate agency to deliver such a service? NAS Prospects is quite overstretched.

Sharing Information

The idea of assisting an individual with AS to create a short statement to share with a particular audience has been trailed in further and higher education contexts with very small numbers of students (two in each setting, three male, one female, all in their early twenties). No real feedback is available because the majority of students chose not to disseminate the document. One male university student felt more comfortable simply for writing the statement, and chose not to share it with peers. A female FE student requested that her tutor keep hold of the information for later distribution should she choose (which she did not). A male FE student reported that he felt happier having had his tutor give out the statement to his group, and a male HE student who formulated a statement this summer has yet to decide. The aim of the statement is to present straightforward information to others which explains aspects of the behaviour of the individual with AS, but it may be that the work of thinking about what to write acts as a confidence booster in itself.

Quite clearly the impetus to generate such a document must come from the person with AS without coercion, and there is an obvious risk inherent in the strategy. Once information is out there it is out there and it is not always possible to predict how people will react. An example of the sort of statement which may be helpful follows. The context is higher education but arguable can be adapted to other environments. Formulating such a document would need to be part of a careful process of transitional planning. Working on a statement in advance of the transition and then holding onto it to allow the student (or new employee) time to change their mind, is obviously recommended, and the temptation to think that the work is wasted if it isn't shared should be avoided.

Sample Statement (Hypothetical)

About Me

My name is Paul and I am in your tutor group for computer programming. I expect I come across as very shy to you, and in a way I am. I have Asperger's Syndrome, and this makes it difficult for me to be confident socially. I am a bit concerned that you will think I am being unfriendly. I'm not, I just feel really awkward with people until I get to know them. I hope you don't think it's too unusual for me to put all this in writing. It's just my attempt to get to know people. I have had the experience of being left out in the past and I am trying to avoid this happening again because I really want to have a good time at university.

My likes

Computers

Films

Pizza

Arctic Monkeys

Going for coffee with one or two people

Probably other things I have not yet discovered.

My dislikes

Noisy crowded places

Unreliable people

Sudden changes I am not expecting

New, unpredictable situations

Lack of clarity

*Being compared to the boy in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*.*

I'm 20 and not all that good at maths.

Please will you

Ask me along when you go for coffee

Understand that I find it difficult if arrangements are unclear or change suddenly so please be reliable

Say things clearly, like 'do you want to come to the Globe pub at six o'clock tonight with Mike and me. We will make sure you get on the right bus home'

Avoid ambiguous thing like 'maybe we'll go drinking later'. I don't know whether this is an invitation or not really.

Keep in contact with me by email.

What's in it for you?

When you get to know me you will find that I am a good laugh

I am a very reliable friend

I am very good at computer programming so might be able to help you

Trust

Please don't share this information with anyone outside the group because I want to keep control of who I tell

Questions

If you have got any questions please email me

Thankyou for taking the time to read this. Please invite me for coffee. I am keen to get to know you.

Best wishes

Paul.

Dealing with Feedback

The recommendation in Paul's statement about answering questions via email is based on the growing trend towards on line communication which may well be more comfortable for some people with AS. If the statement is distributed, responses may need to be monitored, and any hint of negative feedback addressed as bullying. This would clearly easier to do in college or university than in the workplace.

Maintaining Control

Ensuring that any statement represents the authentic voice of the individual with AS rather than their parent, or a well meaning professional is essential. The question of who would be the most suitable person to facilitate this process is complex. Someone with an understanding of the context, an awareness of AS, and who has probably not known the subject since childhood would probably be best. It is difficult to avoid the temptation to reflect on childhood behaviours if that information is available, and this can make it hard for the person with AS to leave some painful baggage behind.

Allowing a gap between the production of the document and its distribution provides crucial time for reflection. If the person with AS does not want to go any further than writing it then that is their choice and they will have been given the space to think about what it is they want from peers, tutors or colleagues.

Health Warning

Individuality can not be over emphasised and not everyone is comfortable with discussing AS at all. Bringing this idea up with someone who is trying really hard to fit in on their own terms could do more harm than good. Templates are to be avoided at all costs because of the danger of perpetuating stereotypes. It is not necessary to bring up old patterns of behaviours in the formation of this information. It is not relevant to mention a catalogue of behaviours which may challenge others, because someone behaved in a certain way as a child. There is such a thing as too much information. There is such a thing as a clean slate.

Valuing Diversity

People with AS contribute their own uniqueness to college, university and work. Underpinning the ideas described here is the notion of valuing people as they are and encouraging people to value themselves as they are. Rather than those with AS trying to change in order to fit in with everyone else, neurotypical individuals could be given the opportunity to flex their empathy muscles, to value diversity and to be more inclusive.

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