



OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS can help young adults with an ASD acquire the skills needed to succeed in college life. These include being independent in self-care and daily tasks, participating in social events on campus, making friends, and tolerating the sensory features of a crowded and often confusing environment. The following tips are from occupational therapy practitioners working with students at the college level.

If you want to:

Find a college that is a good fit for the student.

Consider these activity tips:

When visiting schools, focus on how each can help the student succeed: How much support does the college offer? How flexible are the philosophy, teaching methods, and curriculum? How large are the classes? How many classes can a student take and still maintain full-time status? How extensive are the support services? Will there be a residential advisor on the dorm floor? What types of contracts/waivers can be put in place to maintain student confidentiality yet still share enough information with the family to ensure health and safety?

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

- Evaluate the student's abilities and help identify schools that will play to these strengths.
- Provide information on the types of free supports offered to students who self-disclose a disability, and the supports offered for a fee, at particular schools.
- Collaborate with the college staff to identify potential challenges and solutions and develop strategies to support the student.
- Collaborate with residential advisors on the best living space for the student: some colleges offer drug-free and/or quiet dorms, or they offer single rooms. A small house may be a better fit than a large dormitory.

Help the student participate in social activities on campus.

- Watch videos of campus events and point out specific behaviors. Attend events together before the student is enrolled to help clarify expectations.
- Ask the university staff how to find a peer support network, even if you have to pay for this service, so that the student has others to go to events with. This is particularly important in the beginning before the student finds friends with similar interests.
- Share ways to build up to additional new experiences based on the student's particular skills, challenges, and references, without adult input.

- Evaluate the student's strengths, and match these strengths and interests to social opportunities on campus and in the community, identify adaptations or modifications to help the student succeed, and provide education or training to others to support the student in social activities. Consider how inclusive the opportunities are, the demands on group members, how often they meet, and how student participation can be encouraged.
- Review the social rules of these activities, and help the student practice how others are expected to behave. For example, during college sporting events one shouldn't yell at the referee or heckle the other team as is sometimes seen on TV.
- Help the student learn ways to be flexible when participating in activities with others.
- Review and practice self-advocacy and self-disclosure discussions which may assist others in understanding the student's social difficulties.

If you want to:

Help the student manage self-care activities like sharing a bathroom, eating in the cafeteria, staying on schedule, and maintaining personal belongings.

Help the student tolerate new sensory experiences, such as fire drills at night, loud and crowded spaces, the noise of roommates, and/or the smells of a common bathroom.

Consider these activity tips:

- Discuss the “hidden rules” of college life, relative to dorms (e.g., clean up after yourself, wait your turn in the bathroom, do not borrow personal items without asking, and compromise on TV or music choices) and academics (e.g., manage your time without help from professors, share information during study groups, don’t monopolize class time with questions).
- Designate a specific place for each item in the room, especially school supplies and class materials. Use labels if necessary to ensure items are returned to the correct location.
- Review and practice how to go to the residential staff when assistance is needed.

- Suggest that the student avoid situations that may become overwhelming (e.g., loud concerts, games, and rallies) and that he or she sit in an alcove or another quiet area in the cafeteria during busy times.
- Help the student decide whether to be identified as having a disability and possibly have some disability awareness offered in the dorm (to help others understand why music and lights may need to be lowered).

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

- Analyze how the student performs activities, and address needed strategies and skills to complete daily tasks within the dorm and campus environments.
- Identify the type of assistance needed to help the student be independent, whether from others or via technology (e.g., smart phone reminders).
- Work with residential and other staff on accommodations for the student.
- Collaborate with the resource counselor or education team to create a daily checklist or schedule in a format most appropriate for the student. Address things like setting the alarm, attending class, and getting to the cafeteria during posted hours.

- Work with college staff on a system to manage potentially stressful or anxiety producing situations. For example, the student may need a private room, a safe place on campus to go when overwhelmed, a buddy system, relaxation strategies, a mentor, etc.
- Identify appropriate calming or stimulating sensory experiences that the student can use throughout the day to support self-regulation.
- Work with college staff to modify the requirements of academic output. For example, if verbal responses are a challenge, are written responses acceptable? Is the student entitled to extra time for test taking?

Need More Information?

Students who were eligible to receive occupational therapy in the school environment through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) can seek assistance from the local Board of Education to develop a transition plan as they prepare for college. Once enrolled, students can self-identify to the college office responsible for supporting students with disabilities to determine what services are offered free of charge and what additional services are offered for a fee. A plan of support can be created under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), or for an additional fee. Additionally, the local autism resource center can identify occupational therapy practitioners in the region who could offer services to the college to develop and implement support strategies. You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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