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## Transitioning to adulthood : challenges and first steps

By AUDREY MURRAY and ALEXA MEILLEUR

For many young adults, transitioning to adulthood is a difficult task. This transition can be even more complex and involve additional difficulties for young adults on the autism spectrum. Whether one wishes to undertake postsecondary education, find work or move into an apartment, transitioning to adulthood requires higher levels of autonomy. Unfortunately, few services currently exist to support young autistic adults during this transition. Those without intellectual disabilities seem particularly prone to falling through the cracks of service provision. Although these young adults have high potential, they are more likely to drop out of school and find themselves in unstable professional situations. What can we do to better

support young autistic adults as they gain their independence?

This is the question a McGill University research team, led by Aparna Nadig and Tara Flanagan, had in mind when developing a transition support program for autistic people on their way to autonomy (*McGill Transition Support Program*). In 2018, they published a promising study evaluating the program's efficacy. The program's sessions targeted three key domains: social communication, **self-determination** and collaboration. The team was also interested in whether the program had any effect on quality of life, self-determination, and social problem-solving skills in their participants.



## An Innovative Program

Participants in the program took part in one 2-hour session a week, for a total of 10 weeks. Two graduate students facilitated these sessions, each made up of 4 to 6 people.

The novel aspect of the *McGill support program* is that content is largely determined based on the needs expressed by participants during the first session. Of 15 available modules, each group was able to pick 9 modules from the curriculum depending on their interests (see table).

**Table:** The 15 curriculum modules of the McGill Transition Support Program

Social Communication	Self-Determination	Working with Others
Initiating	Preferences, Interests, and Strengths	Knowing your Context
Listening	Problem-Solving	What makes Good Partners
Making an Impression	Self-Advocacy	Preventing and Resolving Conflict
Perspective Taking	Self-Regulation	Getting the Bigger Picture
Non-Verbal Communication	Choice-Making	Teamwork

“Guiding principles of the McGill Transition Support Program sessions : encourage self-assertion, value each individual’s strengths and interests, create a safe space for sharing, etc...”

## A rigorous study

In order to evaluate the program’s efficacy, 34 autistic adults (aged 18 to 32) with no intellectual disability participated in a **Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT)**. An RCT involves randomly splitting the group of participants, with half of the group participating in the 10-week intervention program (“active” participants). Meanwhile, the other half of participants were put on a waiting list to receive the program (“passive” participants). This allowed researchers to compare program effects between “active” and “passive” participants. The waiting list condition meant that the “passive” participants were also able to take part in the 10-week program, following the first cohort.

The team measured quality of life, self-determination skills and social problem-solving skills before and after the program’s 10 sessions. Researchers administered self-reported questionnaires to participants, meaning

that participants reported their own impressions following the program. Contrary to other similar studies, this research took into account autistic participants’ opinions in evaluating the program. Whilst family members were able to report their observations, autistic adults were considered the experts on their own impressions and learning. Finally, in order to measure social problem-solving skills, participants completed a task, which consisted of reading social situation scenarios representing daily life, and having to answer questions on these vignettes.

## Promising Results

The results of this study revealed that “active” participants having taken part in the 10 sessions of the *McGill Transition Support Program* reported improved self-determination skills and higher perceived quality of life following program participation, when compared to “passive” participants. These results were also reported by family members who evaluated the program’s efficacy.

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### Self-determination

Being self-determined involves feeling in control of one’s life, and able to undertake concrete actions to improve one’s quality of life. A self-determined person can make decisions according to his or her own interests and personal values.

### Original article:

Nadig, A., Flanagan, T., White, K., & Bhatnagar, S. (2018). Results of a RCT on a Transition Support Program for Adults with ASD: Effects on Self-Determination and Quality of Life. *Autism Research*, 11(12), 1712-1728.

Another interesting finding was that, one year after participating in the program, positive effects were still present in some of the participants.

### Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT)

An RCT is a type of study used to determine whether an intervention is effective. In these studies, two groups of participants are randomly formed. One of these groups receives the intervention (intervention group) and one does not (control group). These two groups are then compared in order to determine if the intervention was effective.

It is notable that, contrary to what the research team expected, no improvement was found for the social problem solving task. Researchers mention that the absence of results in this case could be explained by the fact that the program did not specifically address social problem solving, for example through role-play.

Another interesting finding was that, one year after participating in the program, positive effects were

still present in some of the participants. Of six participants having filled out the follow-up questionnaires, two reported increased/maintained self-determination, and three reported maintained quality of life. Although this study recruited a small number of participants, it is encouraging to see that a short training program targeting the needs of young autistic adults can improve factors considered essential in transitioning into adulthood, whilst respecting their autonomy and independence. 🌱



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## Siblings Wanted

We are recruiting siblings of autistic people aged 14+ to participate in a study!

This project aims to better understand the experience of growing up with an autistic sibling. This research will provide recommendations to improve current services in order to better meet the specific needs of siblings of autistic people.

**WHAT?** Fill out an anonymous online questionnaire.

**COMPENSATION:** We will be drawing 10 \$25 gift cards amongst participants

**DURATION:** 15 minutes

To participate, here is the link to the questionnaire!  
<https://sondages.uqo.ca/index.php/611792?lang=fr>