

Get Out and Experience Life!

I am seeing too many kids and young adults on the spectrum who are not getting out and doing things. They have turned into recluses who do not want to come out of their rooms. I was absolutely not allowed to do this. I had horrible anxiety attacks, but I still had to participate in activities at both school and home.

When I went away to boarding school at age 14, Mr. Patey, the headmaster at Hampshire Country School, had really good instincts on when to back off and let me do my own thing and when to insist on participation. When I became interested in taking care of cleaning stalls in the horse barn, this was encouraged because I was learning work skills. I was even given insulated boots so my feet would not freeze in the winter.

Mr. Patey drew one important line in the sand. He did not let me become a recluse in my room. I had to attend all meals and classes. He also insisted that I be on time. Every Sunday I had to dress appropriately for chapel and was required to attend. When I got really anxious and did not want to attend the campus movie night, he made me the projectionist. I had to participate with the school community.

Good and Bad Accommodations

Accommodations such as a quiet environment for study and extra time on tests are really helpful. But it is important to avoid accommodations that will reinforce a victim mentality. An example of a bad accommodation: allowing a student to do a public speaking assignment over the Internet. When I did my first public speaking in graduate school, I panicked and walked out. After that, I learned to use good audiovisual aids to give me cues and to prevent me from freezing up. When I did my first cattle-handling talks, I brought lots of pictures that illustrated behavioral principles. Creating excellent slides compensated for my early weak public speaking skills.

I often get asked about homeschooling. For some kids, this is a good option, but there must be lots of opportunities for social interaction with other children. I was teased and bullied and had to leave a large, regular high school. For some teenagers, finishing high school online would be the right thing to do. If you choose this option, the teenager *must* have opportunities to interact with peers and adults through activities, volunteer work, and job experience. Teens *must* learn work skills and how to cooperate in a work environment.

Trying New Things

For individuals on the spectrum to develop, they need to be “stretched” to try new things. When I was 15, I was afraid to go to my aunt’s ranch. I really didn’t want to go! Mother gave me a choice of going for either a week or all summer. When I got out to the ranch, I loved it and chose to stay all summer. I would have never known how much I loved working on a ranch if I had not given this experience a chance.

Developing Independence

Another problem I am observing is too many kids on the high end of the spectrum who are being overprotected and coddled. They are not learning how to independently perform tasks such as shopping, ordering food in restaurants, and practicing decent hygiene. Parents and teachers can encourage independence by taking kids out into the community. At first, the child should be

accompanied by an adult during shopping or going on the bus. After a few trips, the individual can do it by himself.

Weighing Likes and Dislikes

There are individuals with ASD who get good jobs and then quit because they “don’t like it.” I have seen people on the spectrum leave good jobs with sympathetic bosses because they did not want to work. A vital lesson one has to learn is that you sometimes have to do stuff you don’t like. I like my work as an animal science professor, but there are some tasks that are not fun. A good job has more tasks you like than tasks you hate. A person on the spectrum needs to learn that if he has a job where he is treated decently, but does not like the work, he should stick with it long enough to get a good recommendation for the next job.

Encourage your child to try new things, go new places, and develop new skills. Provide a variety of life experiences for your child as he grows. Allow your child to stretch beyond his comfort zone and relish the adventure!