

Yale Child Study Center

*Autism & Developmental Disabilities Group
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I am a clinical nurse specialist in psychiatry and an associate research scientist at the Yale Child Study Center. I have worked for the past 12 years with Professors Ami Klin Ph.D. and Fred Volkmar, MD, both internationally renowned for their clinical work and research on autism spectrum disorders. I also have a first cousin of exactly my age who was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. I have an intense personal and professional interest in helping persons with autism spectrum disorders find their place in our community.

At present I interact with children, teens and young adults with autism spectrum disorders and their families in a research capacity and through clinical work. Some of the young adults I have known for ten years, and I still see them regularly. While families have done every thing they can to help their child gain independence and maintain a satisfying lifestyle, the lack of support for young adults in terms of vocational and educational experiences is a huge obstacle. As you would expect, managing college, gaining employment, and negotiating in the adult world (outside of a school system) are incredibly difficult for these individuals. They don't lack intelligence, but they have profound difficulties with the navigating in the social world, and this is truly what is critical for success in any community or at any job.

Providing support services to these individuals makes all the difference in the world. I have one young person in the existing Pilot program who, prior to this resource,

had been fired from three jobs. She was perfectly competent to do each job, and in every case she tried to do her best, but she didn't have the social skills needed to be in the workplace. Of course she was disheartened and discouraged after losing each job, as were her family members. It's to her credit that she's continued to persevere, and also to the credit of her supportive family.

Since joining the Pilot program, this young person has been working successfully at a volunteer job in a nursing home, and recently gave a presentation at her local library. I believe the job coaching she receives through the pilot program is key in helping her maintain this job. This young person has friends and participates in social activities – the movies, her church choir, etc. Not every thing always works out, but that's true for everybody.

The one-to-one mentor she has been working with is helpful in guiding her in terms of behavior and social judgment, and the programs of the Pilot project provide additional support. The importance of this kind of guidance can't be underestimated. Persons with ASDs can be easily victimized in many ways because they are naïve in terms of understanding that others might want to take advantage of them.

I'd like to see every young adult with an autism spectrum disorder in Connecticut participating in community life as fully as possible. The prevalence of the disorder is increasing; more and more children are identified in our school systems every day. Every one of these children will grow up. They can contribute in meaningful ways to our community if they are given the chance. Thank you.