

GEARING UP FOR ADULTHOOD

PARENTS AND SIBLINGS SHOULD HELP INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM NOT BY DECIDING FOR THEM BUT BY EMPOWERING THEM TO UNDERSTAND THEIR PERSONAL INDIVIDUALITY, SAYS **LINDSEY CASSAR**

a dulthood frightens a lot of people because of its associated responsibility, rules, expectations, personal control, and self-management. Factor in autism and things get even more complicated. What are the crucial aspects that contribute to the formation of identity of an adult regardless of having a disability or not? How can the family assist in achieving this identity?

In his theory of developmental stages, Erik Erikson

speaks about identity formation which starts at birth and persists into adulthood. The most important years are during adolescence where the teenager is faced with physical growth and sexual maturation, as well as career choices. Erikson explains that, through integration of previous experiences and current ones, the young person tries to carve out an individual identity, as well as a social identity based on the

groups they are part of.

This phase tends to be a challenging for all young people, as the transition to adulthood is not usually smooth or plain sailing. A person with disabilities goes through the same process and we need to acknowledge that they too need guidance and care throughout these years. This is where the parents and siblings should take an important role in their life, not by deciding for them but by empowering them to understand their personal individuality.»

“ This is what having an identity really means: shaping and reshaping ourselves through the freedom of having good or bad experiences

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The need to belong

We are born into a predetermined society and instantly form part of different groups like our family and our culture. Moreover, we join other groups like sport clubs or scouts, in which we meet new people and participate in different activities. All this helps us build a social identity.

When we hit our teens we tend to search for a sense of belonging and connection with others. A person with disabilities looks for just the same thing. This includes being accepted and integrated in the family's chores, decisions and errands, to be part of peer groups discussing topics and laughing at jokes. To belong, connect and participate in society, rather than just being part of it, is an essential part of becoming an adult. In this light, parents and siblings need to give their children an active role, both in the family and in the rest of society.

Self-awareness

Through these experiences, we build certain beliefs and attitudes about ourselves, about the world around us, and about the interaction between the two. These mindsets are one part of our identity, which govern our behaviour towards certain situations or other people's behaviours. Siblings and parents can help young people map out these beliefs and attitudes, and thus help them become more self-aware. This process also helps us detect early warning signs of harmful characteristics like low self-esteem, low self-confidence and dependency. Understanding oneself and being

aware of personal flaws, harmful characteristics, knowing our values, what we think is good and what is bad, as well as what is important, gives a young person a direction. This helps a young adult understand that society poses certain expectations as well as



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rules on us and that these must be respected.

Values and Norms

Values and norms aid in understanding that certain behaviours and emotions need to be regulated. There are various methods by which we can self-regulate our actions. These include emotion management and mindfulness. The family is the primary social institution in which we learn certain values and norms. Having a disability doesn't make it any different. In fact, certain values and norms, if not learnt at an early age from parents and siblings, are then very difficult to acquire.

The family can help the person understand what social responsibility means by treating them with impartiality and guiding their behaviour through real-life experiences. This way, the person will understand that for every action there is a reaction and that as adults we are responsible for our actions.

Apart from knowing our flaws and working on them, it is crucial to identify our imperfections and accept them with no judgement. It is also important that young people accept other people's flaws without making fun of them or intimidating them.

Coping Skills

What happens if we are mistreated? What effective coping skills can we use?

Coping skills, decision-making skills, communication skills and teamwork skills are examples of domain general skills that can be learned. All these aid in intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, domain specific skills relate to a specific job.

Exposure to different specific skills helps the person understand what

drives their motivation towards learning and what may drive their motivation to work. Identification of strengths may help a person channel the skills they would want to work on, while enhancing confidence and self-esteem and diminishing the possibility of failure.

Knowledge is power

Knowledge in different areas or general knowledge also aids in inspiring the person's preferences. Moreover, it gives the person a means of interacting with others and building friendships based on common interests and goals. The family plays an important role in knowledge transfer by backing conversation with facts.

Moreover, the family is crucial in helping their young adult determine their likes and dislikes, by observing their reaction in different situations and by giving choices and autonomy as well as by encouraging them to try out new things, be part of groups and to make new friends. Rather than trying to predict what is best for them and over-protecting them from developing themselves naturally, this awareness is acquired through experiences, preferences and mistakes.

All of the above give us direction and a possibility of building dreams and setting goals, which are realistic and based on knowledge. It also helps us live up to society's expectations, nevertheless understanding our flaws and limitations and accepting them as part of ourselves, while working at self-improvement. This is what having an identity really means: shaping and reshaping ourselves through the freedom of having good or bad experiences and being empowered to live one's individual life. <>

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AUTISM AWARENESS

Nearly a quarter century ago, the Autism Society launched a nationwide effort to promote autism awareness, inclusion and self-determination for all, and ensure that each person with ASD has the opportunity to achieve the highest possible quality of life. As Inspire we work to ensure that our actions, through our services and programming, support individuals living with autism as well as their families. We also work towards acceptance and inclusion in schools and communities that results in true appreciation of the unique aspects of all people. We want to get one step closer to a society where those with ASDs are truly valued for their unique talents and gifts.

