Planning a better future for people with autism

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Carol Schall, director of technical assistance, VCU-ACE

In the world of special education, transition is the move from school to adult life. For most of us that move can be awkward, but for people with

disabilities—particularly autism—it is especially complex.

In school, everything's laid out for you, said Carol Schall, Ph.D., director of technical assistance at the Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence. You have a little bit of choice, but not that much.

"So if you are going into the 10th grade, you might have a few choices about electives, but pretty much you're going to take the same classes that everybody else takes," said Schall, who is also director of the Virginia Autism Resource Center. "You have choices at home, but your friends are going to be the people that are going to school with you. … Transition then is that point in life when you move from everything's laid out for you to the whole world is open to you."

The process of transition for individuals with disabilities is complex because they move from a one-stop shop to dealing with several agencies such as the Department of Rehabilitative Services or an independent living center. And each agency has its own eligibility requirements.

"There are all kinds of challenges related to figuring out how you go about putting all the pieces and parts to make your life work," Schall said.

It's fitting that Schall works with the "father of transition," ACE Director Paul Wehman, Ph.D., a professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation with joint appointments in the Department of Rehabilitation Counseling in the School of Allied Health Professions and the Department of Special Education and Disability Policy in the School of Education. For the past three years, the two have led a team of eight in the development of a unique autism assessment tool, collaborating with Autism Speaks, a national leader in autism advocacy.

One problem they hoped to solve was that the majority of youth who

graduate from [high school](#), regardless of their ability, don't end up in the next step that leads to independence. Compared with other disabilities, individuals with autism have worse outcomes when it comes to employment, post-secondary education, independent living and other quality indicators that most [high school graduates](#) want.

What they discovered was that exiting assessments didn't test for self-determination—the most critical skills needed for someone transitioning from one stage of life to the next.

"Self-determination is basically all of those skills and abilities that equal my ability to identify my choices, to make a plan to achieve that and to enact that plan," Schall said. "So when you think about somebody graduating from high school, they have to make choices about what they want to do next, where they want to go to do that and how they're going to get there.

"If you can't makes those choices and make a plan and enact that, you really can't functionally be fully included in your own planning process."

In addition to assessing self-determination, the new tool also asks the person or their caretakers what they like to do at work or school, rather than just measuring how well they can perform a specific task.

"We observe them doing things that they like to do to get better information on how best to guide the team to make good education decisions," Schall says. "This is all about a better future for people with autism."

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