

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-109](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

About a half a million youth with ASD will enter adulthood over the next decade. As they exit high school, they must obtain services as adults. Previous GAO work has shown that students with disabilities who are transitioning to adulthood face challenges identifying and obtaining adult services. GAO was asked to study the services and supports youth with ASD need during the transition to adulthood. This is the first in a series of reports.

GAO studied (1) the services and supports transitioning youth with ASD need to attain their goals for adulthood, (2) the characteristics of these services and supports, and (3) how youth with ASD can be fully integrated into society. To address these objectives, GAO convened a roundtable discussion on March 3 and 4, 2016. GAO selected 24 panelists, including adults with ASD, service providers, researchers, and parents of youth with ASD. GAO interviewed prospective panelists in advance of the discussion and selected a panel with a broad base of expertise reflecting the diversity of the autism community.

The panel described the services and supports that youth with ASD may need to help them achieve five goals for adulthood: postsecondary education; employment; maximizing independent living; health and safety; and maximizing community integration. GAO analyzed the transcripts of the panel as well as documents provided by panelists. GAO is not making recommendations in this report.

View [GAO-17-109](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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YOUTH WITH AUTISM

Roundtable Views of Services Needed During the Transition into Adulthood

What GAO Found

Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) transitioning to adulthood may need a wide range of services and supports to help them achieve their goals, according to a panel GAO convened in March 2016. ASD is a highly individualized condition with characteristics that vary in degree and type from person to person. Autism characteristics may hinder or help youth achieve their goals—such as postsecondary education and community integration. For each goal, the panel described services and supports that youth (ages 14-24) with ASD transitioning to adulthood may need to address autism characteristics and other health conditions that affect their ability to attain the goal. GAO grouped these services into 14 broad categories.

Key Services Needed to Support Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Behavioral interventions	Mental health care
Case management/ coordination	Postsecondary education planning and supports
Communication services	Residential supports
Day programming	Social supports
Family Education and Supports	Transition Planning Services
Life Skills Education and Experience	Transportation Supports
Medical care	Vocational supports

Source: GAO analysis of roundtable discussion. | [GAO-17-109](#)

To support a successful transition into adulthood, the panel said youth need to be able to access services that are individualized, timely, equitable, and community- and evidence-based, among other things. The panel discussed the need for timely, individualized services that address the variation in autism characteristics and any changes over a person's lifetime. For example, a person's verbal abilities may change over time, and their needs for communication services would also change. The panel said transitioning youth with ASD need equitable access to services regardless of their race, gender, family income, or location. For instance, the panel said that female and minority youth may be diagnosed at a later age and thus receive fewer services during school and may need additional transition planning services. The panel also emphasized the need for services within youths' local communities in order to foster access and community involvement. In addition, the panel said that while services should be evidence-based, more research into program efficacy is needed.

To improve the ability of autistic youth to fully integrate into society, the panel cited the need for a new approach to providing supports and better public understanding of autism. Such an approach would place a shared responsibility for inclusion on both society and youth with ASD. For example, according to the panel, youth with ASD should learn workplace social expectations and meet them to the extent they can, but employers should also recognize that some social rules, such as expecting individuals to smile, can be difficult for some individuals with autism. The panel also said that widespread knowledge of autism could lead to better understanding of autistic youths' potential and enhance their chances of attaining it.