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Effects of Vocational Support Programs on Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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PATIENT CARE ISSUE

- Autism spectrum disorders (ASD): “A serious neurodevelopmental disorder that impairs a child's ability to communicate and interact with others” [13]
- Vocational support programs: programs intended “to maximize employment outcomes by providing services such as assessment and diagnosis, counseling, job search assistance, assistive technology, and on-the-job training” [12]
 - Also known as, vocational rehabilitation and supported employment
- 1 out of every 68 children in the United States is diagnosed with ASD every year and the rates are only increasing [2]
- 50-75% of adults with ASD are unemployed, but have the desire and ability to be employed [7][8]
- Youth with ASD are transitioning into adulthood with a lack of employment, inadequate social skills, and a diminished quality of life [3][8][9]

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE QUESTION

Question: In transition-age youth with autism spectrum disorders and related diagnoses, how do vocational support programs versus the absence of these programs effect employment rates, social skills, and quality of life?

P: Transition-age youth with autism spectrum disorders and related diagnoses

I: Vocational support programs

C: Absence of vocational support programs

O: Employment rates, social skills, and quality of life

REGISTERED NURSE INTERVIEW

An RN at Achieve, a program that helps ASD diagnosed individuals transition into adulthood, noted the following impacts of vocational support programs [1][15]:

Employment Rates

- Participants were capable of transitioning into business in the community (e.g. food service, custodial, etc.)
- Participants showed more productivity and increased work ethic after participation in the program

Social Skills

- Some learned to interact with peers and supervisors- talking through conflicts rather than throwing tantrums

Quality of Life

- Felt productive in society by working for and earning their own paycheck
- Enjoyed going to their jobs and performing their assigned tasks
- Required medication amounts decreased during program hours

METHODS

Databases searched: Cochrane Collection Plus, CINAHL, Medline, PubMed, UpToDate

Key words: Vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, vocational services, developmental disorders, transitional services, ASD, and employment rates

Inclusion criteria: Articles pertaining to the use of vocational support programs in transition-age youth with ASD and related diagnoses; articles analyzing vocational support program effects on the outcomes of employment rates, social skills, and quality of life

Exclusion criteria: Articles analyzing different interventions, age groups, or outcomes other than those identified for this review

Number of articles: Twenty-four articles were initially found, nine articles were critiqued and included in this review

RESULTS

	Employment rates	Social skills	Quality of life
Carter, Austin, & Trainor (2011)	X	X	
Dutta, Gerve, Chan, Chou, Ditchman (2008)	X		
Cimera, Burgess, & Wiley (2013)	X		X
Hillier et al. (2007a)	X	X	X
Hillier, Fish, Cloppert, & Beversdorf (2007b)		X	X
Lawer, Brusilovskiy, Salzer, & Mandell (2009)	X		
Taylor et al. (2012)	X	X	X
Wehman, Chan, Ditchman, & Kang (2012)	X		
Wehman et al. (2012)	X	X	X

SYNTHESIS OF EVIDENCE

Employment Rates:

- Employment rates for recipients of supported employment were consistently higher than those without supported employment [18]
- After vocational rehabilitation, the employment rate of the participants was 62% [8]
- Implementing vocational rehabilitation early yielded an employment rate of 69.1% compared to the late implementation employment rate of 52.2% [6]

Social Skills:

- Individuals with ASD lack social skills but still want to socialize and interact with others[7]
- After participation in vocational rehabilitation, individuals had an increased awareness of other peoples' thoughts and feelings resulting in some friendships [9]
- These increased social skills were key factors which allowed these individuals to gain and maintain employment [9]

Quality of Life:

- Supported employees with ASD can and do become more independent in performing competitive employment tasks [19]
- Parents reported that their child gained social interests and positive outlooks of their own situations, enhancing their quality of life [9]
- Vocational support programs have a positive impact on their participants because they allow the participants to feel accepted within a group, have the opportunity to meet people with similar diagnoses, and participants are able to discuss challenging issues they may face [9]

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Additional research is needed in this area of healthcare
- Nurses should be further educated and made more aware of vocational support programs
- Nurses should encourage clients with ASD to participate in vocational support programs
- Nurses should educate patients diagnosed with ASD and their parents about available resources

LIMITATIONS

- Lack of research on sustained outcomes of vocational support programs
- Inability to do exhaustive, up to date research due to limited resources relating to area of study
- Limited generalizability to US population due to use of research conducted in various countries

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Roberta, RN from Achieve in Binghamton, NY [1][15]

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