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Where do you see yourself next year?: annual goal priorities among autistic transition-age youth

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Introduction: When examining intervention outcomes for youth with ASD, it is important to consider youth's own goals and dreams for the future. One method to generate and assess progress toward personalized outcomes is Goal Attainment Scaling (Ruble et al., 2012). Drawing from the baseline of a randomized-controlled trial, we investigated the types of transition-related goals the youth preferred, as well as how the intellectual disability (ID) and high school status influenced goal choices.

Methods: Participants included 185 transition-aged youth with ASD ages 16-26 and a participating parent for each. Goals were collected using a novel method called Goal Attainment Scaling-Community Based (Lee et al. 2021), which we developed for the larger intervention study. Parents first chose 5 transition-related goals from a goal bank and then customized them based on the youth's strengths and challenges in a semi-structured interview. Youth then selected and further personalized their preferred three goals. We used descriptive statistics to analyze how frequently youth selected goals in each of 5 domains: Employment and Post-Secondary Education (EPSE), Daily Living Skills (DLS), Healthy Living (HL), Social & Spiritual (SOC), Safety & Security (SAFE). We examined frequencies stratified by whether youth were in high school and whether they had ID.

Results: The most frequently chosen domain was EPSE at nearly 60% (59.5%), followed by DLS (51.9%). Somewhat less frequent were goals related to SOC (44.9%) and HL (41.1%); the least frequent domain was SAFE (36.8%). While youth in (n = 115) and out of high school (n = 70) tended to choose EPSE goals with similar frequency (59.1% and 60.0%, respectively), youth out of high school selected DLS goals more often (58.6%) than youth in high school (45.2%). Youth without ID (n = 114) chose EPSE goals nearly twice as frequently as those with ID (71.9% versus 39.4%). Alternatively, youth with ID (n = 71) more often selected DLS goals (66.2%) compared to youth without ID (43.0%).

Discussion: Youth most often chose EPSE and DLS. Interestingly, these two domains yielded the greatest difference in selection patterns when analyzing high school and ID status. Although youth without ID were less likely than youth with ID to choose DLS goals, previous research has shown that assistance with DLS remains a need for autistic youth without ID (Duncan & Bishop, 2015). DLS goals in our sample were more salient to youth out of high school, reflecting increased independence and the need to develop these life skills in adulthood. Given that many youth rely on the school system for services, further research could explore high school implementation of daily living skills instruction.

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