

On the Page – ASD Community Voices



Meet Jackie Barrett

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At age six, I was diagnosed with having severe Autistic Disorder, an unknown learning disability, and a speech impairment.

I learned that I had Autism when I was around age ten or eleven when I had a strong enough speech and vocabulary level to understand Autism and learning disability, and why I was so left behind my other peers for a normal age level.

Thoughts on my early school years...

During my elementary school years, because I was in a Special Education class and not a regular class with an IPP, I was in a class with other learning and developmentally disabled students. The other disabled students treated me well, and like a member of their family.

During my elementary school years, school work was a little challenging in my weak areas like reading, writing, and mathematics since I was two grade levels behind my peers.

Thoughts on Junior High School...

The junior high and high school years were a little different. While I did have some friends, some children bullied and picked on me because I am different. Although I didn't have many friends in school, I did have some friends in my extra curricular activities like the Special Olympics and piano lessons.

When I was in Grade 7 and 8, I got bullied often because I was different – even during class. At class, some of my classmates would throw spitballs and erasers at me. Outside class, some kids would bash my head into the walls or body-slam me into the lockers, walking on my heels, and calling me derogatory names.

In my late junior high school years, when I moved from a transition to academic level, the biggest challenge was catching up with my peers. Since the transition and special education levels are at least two grade levels behind academic levels, I had to adjust quickly to an academic environment.

High School challenges...

High school was a little challenging since I was struggling a lot in English courses even though I was doing very well in other subjects. Due to my learning disability, I was just getting by in English. I didn't have any special supports since I was in a full academic class. However, for Grade 12 English, I did have a private tutor to get assistance in this subject, and an effort to achieve a high enough mark to get into university.

Since I was in a full academic environment without an Individualized Program Plan or IPP, I had no special academic or social supports. In the early 1990's, suburban Halifax high schools like J. L. Ilesley didn't have many developmentally disabled students, meaning support for them was grossly limited.

On the teen years in general...

I had some trouble making friends as a teenager, especially in my junior high school years, because children would often pick on me with no teacher/administrator intervention. As a result, I didn't have a desire to make friends in my classes. I had lots of friends during my high school years since the students are more mature and more aware of my disability.

Because Autism and PDDs were rare during the late 1980's and early 1990's, there weren't other teens with Autism I could interact with. Most of my friends had mild learning disabilities, and I often got along with them well.

As a teenager, I was involved with Special Olympics Swimming, piano lessons, Weight Training, Intramural Volleyball, Student Council, Model Parliament, and Model United Nations.

To develop a good support system for a teen with ASDs, I feel provincial Autism related societies should have teen or adult support groups where they can interact with each other and know they are not alone. Secondly, provincial societies should have more social events for teens with ASDs to build their socialization skills. For example, Nova Scotia's Provincial Autism Centre has occasional Adult and Teen Get Together events on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. Through these social events, adults and teens have a chance to meet others with ASDs, share their experiences, perform various extra-curricular and recreational opportunities, and reduce barriers and stigma associated with it. I believe other Autism societies across Canada should adopt similar models to the Provincial Autism Centre in Nova Scotia.

The biggest challenges for teens with an ASD are lack of socialization opportunities, inappropriate accommodations in the school system, stigma and stereotypes from students and teachers, insufficient education supports in common weak subjects, and not enough social opportunities specifically for them.

Life at University...

Leaving public school and joining the adult world was not difficult for post secondary school or university since I didn't need much in a way of academic supports. The only difficult part was I had to

use my real name “John” instead of my given name “Jackie” because of fears I’ll be tormented and abused.

Since the remaining students didn’t have developmental or learning disabilities, I felt a little lonely because I had little chances to interact with similarly disabled peers.

University was still one of my life’s best experiences since I got to meet and socialize with students from across Canada and world wide. Another thing I loved about university is accepting new challenges in every course on a daily basis. I also loved studying five hours a day and five days a week.

Although I was likely the only Autistic student at Saint Mary’s, I was accepted like any other student.

Working life...

After graduating from university, I had many difficulties getting a job, and gaining valuable employment experience associated with working. I even had trouble applying for jobs paying close to minimum wage because employers had vague or cliché excuses such as over-educated or disability related.

My experience with being able to find and keep a job is that you have to stay persistent and aggressive in your job search. While many employers will turn you down, there will be some who value your skills and talents, and benefits to their company.

The supports people with ASDs need in the workplace are consistent employment services even after getting your job, never be afraid to state your accommodations, have access to a job coach to make transition as seamless as possible, never be afraid to ask for help when needed, and make sure you work on building your communication skills.

Independent life...

I lived independently in 2004 and early 2005 when I had a great job. However, due to insufficient job prospects and academic upgrading, I made a heartbreaking decision to move back with my parents.

I don’t think there are enough supports in place for people with ASD’s wanting to live independently.

On socializing...

In the Special Olympics, I don’t just meet individuals with Autism, I also meet athletes with various disabilities including Downs Syndrome, learning disabilities, Fragile-X Syndrome, Prader Willi Syndrome, and Epilepsy, so socializing can be a challenge.

Anytime you socialize with someone without an ASD, the key to effective socialization is not getting obsessive about your skills and abilities, using language that is appropriate to them, not using “technical” language or jargon, and not getting offended if someone puts you down or lashes out at you – explain your disability and how it affects socialization, and get some practice being in social situations.

Support from others...

What has helped me to develop the talents and skills I have is an effective support system from teachers, parents, relatives, and other family members. My mother, aunt, and grandmother have been very helpful in my success.

On the language of “cure”...

When it comes to Autism treatment, I am very frustrated when I hear there’s a “cure” for Autism. I believe there will never be a cure for Autism, but it doesn’t mean that the person can’t have a successful life if he/she receives early intervention.

Those who think Autism is curable don’t see the realities of this disability.

Thoughts on autism research...

I feel that Autism research is very confusing, especially in the causes and treatments.

Autism research is generating great theories into the causes including toxic chemicals and heavy metals, major illnesses, heredity, etc. I believe research on Autism should continue.

On working together...

I believe as more Autistic individuals are speaking up and joining various interest groups, the Autism community will become more empowered and get their voices heard.

The problem with Autism groups is that they are too divided, hurting our chances of getting our voices heard. For example, you have groups for Asperger’s sufferers, CDD sufferers, and not a unified voice.

If Autistic people want a stronger voice at government and community levels, then support groups should join to become a united society, giving people with Autism and their families a stronger voice.

Approaches to change...

The best ways for autism organizations like ASC to advocate for more and better services for Autism sufferers and their families are: government lobbying for additional programs and early intervention services; fighting for services with government and not the courts; getting all Autism related societies to merge as one united group to get a stronger voice; getting societies and support groups to expand their service base to meet unique needs of Autism individuals; greater education about Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders to all government services: and, greater Autism Awareness Training.