

Autism x 2: Transitioning into Adulthood



Maureen Bennie, February 2019

A few years ago, I wrote a post about the experience of raising my two children with autism. I first wrote this piece from the point of view when my son and daughter were quite young. Recently, someone from China contacted me to ask if she could translate the post because it would encourage families and give them hope for the future.

My children have been out of school for almost two years now and are well into adulthood. Marc is about to turn 22 and Julia will be 20 next month. I'd like to share where we are now because when your children are younger, it's hard to imagine what the future will be like for them. You feel like things will never change or improve or and you can't see the results of all your efforts.

Transitioning to Adulthood

When I was creating a transition plan for Marc and Julia, I focused on four areas to keep myself from becoming overwhelmed and unfocused. The four areas were:

1. Further Education
2. Work Opportunities
3. Leisure/Recreation
4. Free time

I kept in mind that all four of these areas could help build skills toward independent living, create a sense of well-being, and add to enjoyment of life.

Further Education

For further education, I looked at Continuing Education courses, the public library (lots of free offerings), courses for people with disabilities at a small university, community-based classes, and lectures offered around the city. I was able to piece together some great courses that furthered the interests of Marc and Julia.

Some examples are:

- computer courses
- first aid
- health and fitness
- tutoring in math/reading
- music and art

My son has always enjoyed the school setting, so he really wanted to continue learning in an academic setting. Julia was more reluctant but in the end was willing to try because I showed her how university was a lot different from school. She didn't have to stay all day and there were restaurants all over campus. This intrigued her and was enough to motivate her to try a course per semester.

Work Opportunities

In the area of work, I started very early and had the kids volunteer at a local Farmer's Market once a week from the time they were 11 and 13. The shifts were 3 hours and the environment was a gentle one (outdoors, no loud music or confined spaces). It has been a great success and taught them a lot. They learned to report to a manager, wear a uniform, no tech devices were allowed during work, and they each had job descriptions with tasks to fulfill. Their independence has grown so much that they need very little supervision at this job. The added bonus is my son now has this huge diet of fruit and veggies which I believe was from repeated exposure to these items in a gentle, non-overwhelming environment. Marc used to eat less than 15 foods until the age of 16.

Julia had a dream of working with cats, so we got involved with the Meow Foundation when Julia was 14. You have to be 18 to volunteer with them. I made sure Julia became familiar with all aspects of their organization for 4 years by attending their adoption days, fundraisers, pet store visits, sponsoring cats every Christmas, and we adopted a cat from them as well. When Julia turned 18, she was able to do a great interview, with my support, for the volunteer coordinator. I think Julia's ability to do all of the cat facial expressions from their website list of cats they had over the years impressed her the most.

Because Marc likes formal learning situations, we had him attend several sessions of Ready, Willing, and Able. He loves movies and was given a work experience for 5 months at a movie theater close to our home. He excelled at this job and is waiting to hear if he will get a permanent paying job.

Both kids volunteer twice a week at an autism society that has a local food bank that only services families/individuals with autism. They create the shopping list, do data entry, shop for the groceries every week, and then have to put them away into the correct categories. Lots of life skills being learned there in a real environment!

Leisure/Recreation

I know from my work in the Low Arousal Approach that regular physical activity is important for keeping anxiety at bay. We have our kids swimming, bowling, and working out 3 times a week.

Because Marc likes organized classes and being with a group, he also has a dance class, attends yoga, horseback rides, and he recently added Aquacize. That has been wonderful for him because it combines his love of the water with music.

Julia takes painting class once a week with a community group. She has done very well and recently had a month-long show which earned her some money to put towards a trip she wants to take. She didn't want to do the art show, but once there was some motivation there, she jumped on board.

Julia also takes a cooking class once a week and has a home baking program two days a week. I've now added errands to her list twice a week like picking up a few groceries, getting hold items at the library, and taking the bottles back. She gets to keep the money but once a month, she has to use the money to buy supplies for the cats at the Meow Foundation as they have an on-going wish list of donations that they need.

Free Time

When it comes to free time, the kids have both shared and different interests. They play Wii games together on the weekend and both love looking up things that interest them on YouTube. Marc is an avid reader and reads aloud to himself about 3 hours a day. His books of choice are adult non-fiction ones. He also likes to meditate to classical music once a week for an hour in his room. On weekends, the kids go to films, plays, dance recitals, library lectures and concerts.

This may sound like it all costs a fortune, but it doesn't. I applied for something called a Fair Entry card that offers a greatly reduced entrance fee for all city recreational facilities. I found out that if you go the symphony box office an hour before the program starts, you can get tickets for just \$25 rather than

\$90. We also have an Access card that allows 2-for-1 entries to many venues around the city and across Canada.

I would encourage you to contact your local autism society or disability resource center because they will have information on how to access opportunities for free or at a reduced price. Local libraries offer so much as well and are huge community hubs for all kinds of activities.

Final Thoughts

Although our entry into adult services was a very rough and scary one, things are going well now that the initial adjustment period to such a huge change from school is over. I see great development and learning continuing for both Marc and Julia, and they are both happy and healthy. They still remain the best of friends but are also spreading their wings doing things apart that they love and coming together for the activities they like to do together like swimming. I could never have guessed when they were little that their lives would turn out as well as they have. It's been a lot of hard work and planning, but it has paid off.

Keep at it because it is hard to imagine the future for your children and what they will be like when they are little. If you give them a good foundation in a variety of areas, it will serve them well as adults.

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