ATTENDING COLLEGE WITH SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DEFICIT
INTRODUCTION

At an early age James* was diagnosed with ADHD and General Anxiety Disorder. After struggling to succeed in a public school setting, he attended a private high school where he was able to complete his studies in 4 years and graduate with his class in the spring of 2016.

Following graduation, he decided to pursue a lifelong dream of attending college, studying Computer Science to support his growing interest in computer programming. As part of his preparation for the transition from High School to College, James took part in the NEXT STEP: College Success & Independent Living program at Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston, MA. Designed specifically for students, ages 16-20, who present with a social communication deficit and are serious about attending college after high school, NEXT STEP consists of three Saturday day-long sessions throughout the academic year, as well as a week-long overnight dormitory experience based at Boston College.

James and his mother were willing to share their experiences with freelance health and wellness writer, Jeffrey Hodnett, in hopes that they can encourage other children with Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Non-Verbal Learning Disorder, or related learning differences to consider higher education after graduation. Part 1 tells of James’ first-hand experiences and in part 2 we focus on his mother’s perspective of the first year away at college.

*Please note: James’ name has been changed to protect his privacy. Portions of this interview have been edited for brevity or clarity.
WHAT WENT INTO THE DECISION TO SEND JAMES AWAY TO COLLEGE?

I can say that what helped me let my son go to college was knowing I had done everything I could think of to help address his challenges. I believe this fact is very critical to the mental wellbeing of a child’s parent. We can’t know how things will end up, but there’s a solace to be found in a belief that one did everything they could.

I can’t speak to what other parents are able to do, but I knew I had done everything that I physically and emotionally could have done for him (I was pretty exhausted). Many people within his support network had recommended against him going directly to college without a gap year, which can spread out the transition. However, he really wanted to go immediately - and I ultimately decided to let him. I’d bet that the fact that so many people did not think he was ready was very motivating for him.

Next Step was instrumental in the process of my son being able to consider college. While he had always done well academically, the prospect of going to college caused him a great deal of anxiety. I simply can’t believe our good fortune in finding Next Step.

The visits to college campuses were pivotal for my son. He credits Next Step with making him feel comfortable with the idea of going to college. He also said that the program helped him learn to go up to a “stranger” to ask a question.

While the kids got to know one another, had pizza, and learned a lot about college, the parents were able to meet with one another and hear from a superb psychologist about many topics. The psychologist was extremely bright and knowledgeable about kids with non-neurotypical profiles. Next Step also provided us with exceptionally well-researched written information - on topics ranging from cognitive development to effective means of stress reduction. I kept the binders. Throughout the program, Next Step gave the parents so much critical, highly relevant, and useful information.

WAS THERE ANYTHING YOU DID THAT HELPED YOU PREPARE FOR WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOUR SON WENT TO COLLEGE?

I can say that what helped me let my son go to college was knowing I had done everything I could think of to help address his challenges. I believe this fact is very critical to the mental wellbeing of a child’s parent. We can’t know how things will end up, but there’s a solace to be found in a belief that one did everything they could.

Frankly, it was pretty difficult for me for about three weeks. I think that parents of non-neurotypical kids are usually physically with them more - by necessity - than other parents. So, for me, not having him around was a huge change.

Having spent about ten years with my life revolving almost exclusively around him - which was what I wanted - his going to college meant that I had to go out and establish new areas of my life.
WERE YOU ABLE TO STAY IN TOUCH AND SUPPORT HIM WHILE HE WAS AWAY?

When my son went off to college, I was very nervous about how he was doing and didn’t have much information (and I also missed him). Many people told me not to call him - to wait for him to call me. This was terrible advice, and I believe we both suffered unnecessarily because I followed it. And it seemed that my son saw that I wasn’t calling and felt that he wasn’t supposed to have frequent contact with me “if he was handling college well.”

After three weeks of this, I came to the conclusion that this was a stilted and very unnatural way for us to interact, especially given how close we’d been for years. So, I called him more, and he ultimately wound up calling me most days to say hi, or just say that he’d had a great lunch! That felt comfortable to him – brief, frequent calls.

Throughout his first year, he was basically local so I would visit at least once a month. He came home whenever he wanted to – usually about every two months. We also we texted frequently, which he liked.

HE MANAGED TO EAT IN THE CAFETERIA, WHICH IS A LOUD ATMOSPHERE AND, THEREFORE, NOT PARTICULARLY COMFORTABLE FOR HIM. HE GOT HIS LaUNDRY DONE REGULARLY, GOT TO CLASS ON TIME, AND HE GOT ALL HIS ASSIGNMENTS IN ON TIME. I WAS ASTONISHED. I THOUGHT HE COULD POSSIBLY HANDLE A FEW OF THESE THINGS, BUT NOT ALL OF THEM.

Spending 5-days on a college campus with Next Step also really helped him with sleeping away from home. It was clear that the Next Step team were highly educated and had true expertise about kids who are a little different.

BESIDES THE TIME AND COMMUNICATION – HOW DID HE HANDLE THE OTHER ASPECTS OF BEING AWAY FROM HOME?

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU’D GIVE TO MOMS OR DADS OF KIDS WITH A SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DEFICIT WHO ARE CONSIDERING COLLEGE?

This is advice I wish someone had given to me: Don’t listen to what other people say in terms of the desired quality and/or quantity of interactions with your child. Go with your gut. Let your child know you’re there to talk when they want and send them short text messages if you’re worried about “calling too much.”

In the end, the way we were interacting was fine and supportive for him. Have confidence in what you know about your child and what you believe is right for him/her.
ABOUT

NEXT STEP: COLLEGE SUCCESS & INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM

NEXT STEP: College Success & Independent Living is designed for students, ages 16 - 20, who present with a social communication deficit and are serious about attending college after high school. This program is appropriate for young adults with Asperger's Syndrome, Non-Verbal Learning Disability, or related learning differences. Students learn and practice key social, independent living, organizational, and coping skills needed for successful college living. The NEXT STEP: College Success & Independent Living program, consists of two Saturday day-long sessions throughout the academic year, as well as a week-long overnight dormitory experience based at Boston College. For more information, please visit https://jbcc.harvard.edu/nextstep or call (617) 278-4119.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Hodnett is a freelance writer in the Boston area who has covered health and wellness for more than 2 decades. His work has been featured by several organizations including Boston Children's Hospital, Boston Medical Center, Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates/Atrius Health, Partners, and Fresenius Medical Care.