Adults with Autism: When Parents Age out of Being the Care Giver: Where do They Go?

Ruth Irwin, PhD, RN
Assistant Professor
Duquesne University School of Nursing, Pittsburgh, PA

Autistic aloneness can be a unique characteristics present in children. Its predominate feature is characterized as being self-absorbed and ignoring the outside world. Autism, now referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), extends along a continuum where some persons express high intellectual abilities while others need supervision. Some adults with Autism may exhibit child-like acting out behaviors, solitary play, temper tantrums, yelling, being easily frightened, acting out, appearing aggressive, or expressing inappropriate sexual desires. This behavior by an adult can be frightening to others.

Approximately, 1 in 68 eight years old children are diagnosed with Autism. It is difficult to track the true number of people diagnosed with ASD, especially as they age. However, 81% of adults with ASD live in their homes with aging parents. Living arrangements are determined by income, available community group home settings, and county waiver resources. Although adults with autism die 16 years earlier than persons without Autism, adults with Autism are often placed on long waiting lists for available residential homes specific for adults with Autism and/or on lists to obtain the correct county waiver for eligibility for services. Autism is not well understood or funded. Where will these adults live when the parents are no longer able to care for them? These are ethical and policy questions that need to be discussed.