

FRIDAY 9.50am lightening talk room 102 **0013 SUCCESSFULLY SUPERVISING DOCTORAL STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM**

Emma Goodall^{1,2}, Matthew Bennett²

¹*Healthy Possibilities, Australia*, ²*Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia*

Challenges for autistic spectrum PhD students:

- Finding a supervisor who wants to supervise you AND is interested in your research topic
- Social challenges of the candidate – supervisor relationship
- Negotiating supervision meetings and support on offer
- Conflicting communication styles
- Understanding and responding to feedback

Strategies

- For candidates - Be clear about what you want to research and why – ask supervisors/candidates why they want to work with you
- Be upfront about the type of relationship that the candidate and supervisor each expect – for example is the student required or expected to be a teaching assistant or not. Is the student expected to interact with other PhD candidates or join in other types of activities such as monthly group meetings or conference attendance? How negotiable are all these things?
- Collaboratively create a clear supervision-candidate contract that details HOW you will communicate (text, email, phone and/or in person) and the FREQUENCY of contact as well as REASONABLE expectations for responses to QUESTIONS, REQUESTS FOR CHAPTERS/FEEDBACK. Include when supervision meetings will be held for the coming 3-12 months (the longer the period the more reassuring for the student). Supervisors should explain what a supervision meeting will be like and may find emailing an agenda the week before or setting the agenda for the next meeting at the end of the current meeting is helpful for both parties.
- Communicate clearly – say what you mean and mean what you say, whether in writing or speech. Ensure that each person has gained the same understanding of questions, concerns and feedback. Discuss differences in communication style, for example if you as a supervisor write chatty emails and the candidate writes very brief to the point emails – what could the unintended consequences of this be?
- Supervisors – do not expect autistic PhD candidates to engage in social chit chat before getting ‘down to business’ at supervision sessions. Some may, some may not. Reassure candidates you will not perceive them as rude or uninterested if they do not do so, this can prevent a lot of unnecessary candidate stress.
- Feedback needs to be very clear for autistic students, comments such as “I really like this paragraph” or “you need to tighten up this section” are often meaningless and anxiety provoking. You need to detail:
 - What works well and WHY, with clear specific examples and explanations
 - What does not work well and WHY, again with clear specific examples and explanations
 - Provide possible solutions during early drafts, explaining what the solution improves on and how/why

- Supervisors need to be clear about the PhD process every step of the way, autistic students can misinterpret a number of process steps due to communication style differences.
- Supervisors need to expect the unexpected – I assumed I had finished my PhD when I had written 100,000 words. Matt initially did not realise that essay writing rules were not the most important aspect of a thesis – highlighting the research is.
- Supervisors need to expect hyperfocus from their autistic students at times and a complete lack of understanding about what to do resulting in no work being done at other times. Both Matt and I can write huge amounts in a short space of time, but are bewildered by unclear instructions.
- Autistic candidates need to work out how to respond to feedback that they may initially be emotionally overwhelmed by. Understanding that supervisors exist to support candidates to successful completion rather than purely as critics can be useful! The clearer the feedback provided ALONG with RATIONALE the less problems will be experienced by candidates. Neither rudeness nor tact have any place in a supervision session.
- Helping students identify the most important findings can be an important part of this type of supervision because an autistic student may assign a different level of importance to their various findings than supervisors and/or potential examiners.
- Autistic PhD candidates usually strive for the best but at times this is problematic when supervisors are requiring snapshots or overviews instead of details.

Abstract

The majority of research about students on the autism spectrum have explored school experiences, such as bullying (Cappadocia, Weiss & Pepler, 2012). There is also research on these students in tertiary education (Gelbar, Smith & Reichow, 2014). This research, however, has only explored the learning experiences of undergraduate students. In this presentation Matthew and Emma will discuss their experiences of studying and supervising at a postgraduate research level. They will discuss the challenges they faced as autistic spectrum PhD students in regard to the supervision process and the usefulness of particular strategies used by Emma in supervising Matthew that helped his redrafting process. This presentation will explore the conflicting communication styles and social challenges of the PhD supervision and thesis development process for both autistic spectrum PhD students and their supervisors. Suggested strategies will enable this process to be more effective and less stressful for both supervisors and their autistic spectrum PhD students.

References

- Cappadocia, M. C., Weiss, J. A., & Pepler, D. (2012). Bullying Experiences Among Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 42(2), 266-277.
- Gelbar, N. W., Smith, I., & Reichow, B. (2014). Systematic Review of Articles Describing Experience and Supports of Individuals with Autism Enrolled in College and University Programs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(10), 2593-2601.