



C U Y A H O G A C O U N T Y  
Board of Developmental Disabilities

# **The Impact of COVID-19 Among the DD Population in Higher Education**

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Supporting and empowering people with developmental disabilities  
to live, learn, work and play in the community

# Who We Are

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*Mission: support and empower people with developmental disabilities to live, learn, work and play in the community*



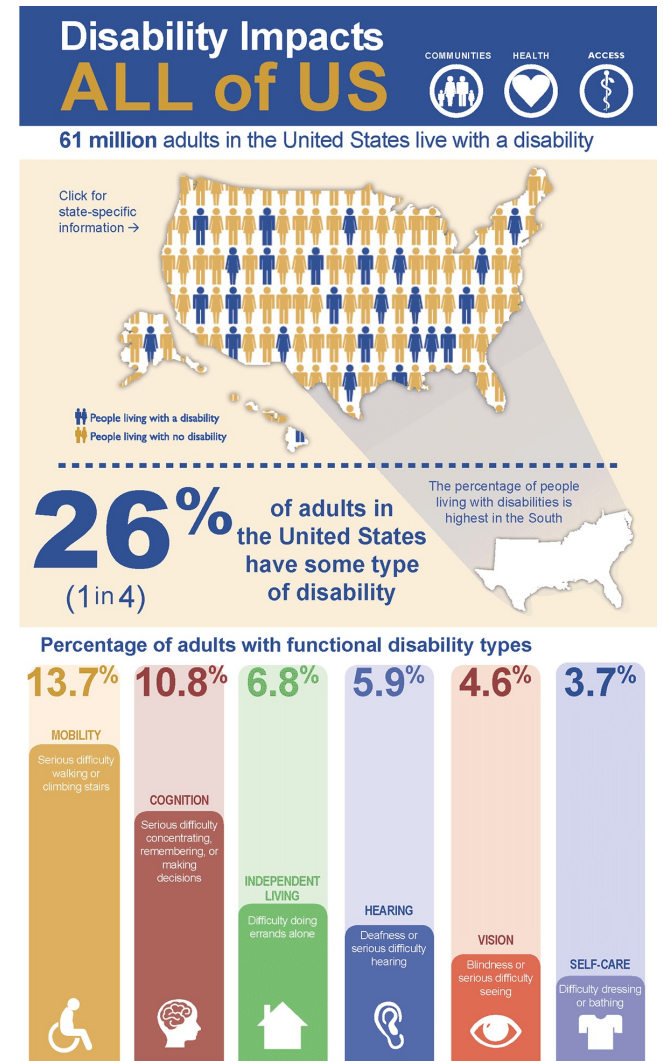
# Session Objectives

- Recognize the concerns and challenges faced by the DD community during the COVID-19 pandemic including the physical, psychological, and social impacts
- Identify contributing factors to the unique challenges experienced among the DD population during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Recognize the benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic for some in the DD community
- Identify practical strategies and resources that can be utilized to better support individuals with DD through the COVID-19 pandemic



# Overview

- 61 million adults in the United States live with a disability
- 26% (1 in 4) of adults in the United States have some type of disability



(Courtney-Long, Carroll, Zhang, et al., 2015)

CDC 2015



# Who We Serve

- People with Developmental Disabilities (DD)
- 1 in 6, or about 17%, of children aged 3 through 17 years have one or more developmental disabilities
- A severe, chronic disability of a person that:
  - Is attributable to a mental or physical impairment
  - Is manifested before age 22
  - Is likely to continue indefinitely
  - Person exhibits substantial functional limitations
  - Person requires a combination of lifelong treatment/services that are individually planned and coordinated

(Zablotsky et al., 2019)



# DD and COVID-19

The DD population considered **one of most vulnerable groups** during the pandemic

**Why?**



# DD and COVID-19

- Comorbidities of underlying medical conditions/ complexities of conditions
- Reliance on caregivers to help them live their lives
- Increased exposure to others
- Lack of access to PPE (especially in beginning of pandemic)

(CDC, 2020 & 2021)



# DD and COVID-19

- Lack of understanding/appreciation of information regarding social distancing and other safety measures
- Limitations in practicing recommended safety precautions (e.g., hand washing and social distancing)
  - Inability to tolerate/follow-through (e.g., sensory issues w/ wearing a mask, inability to remain 6 ft.)
- Unable to communicate symptoms of illness to get care in timely manner

(CDC, 2020)



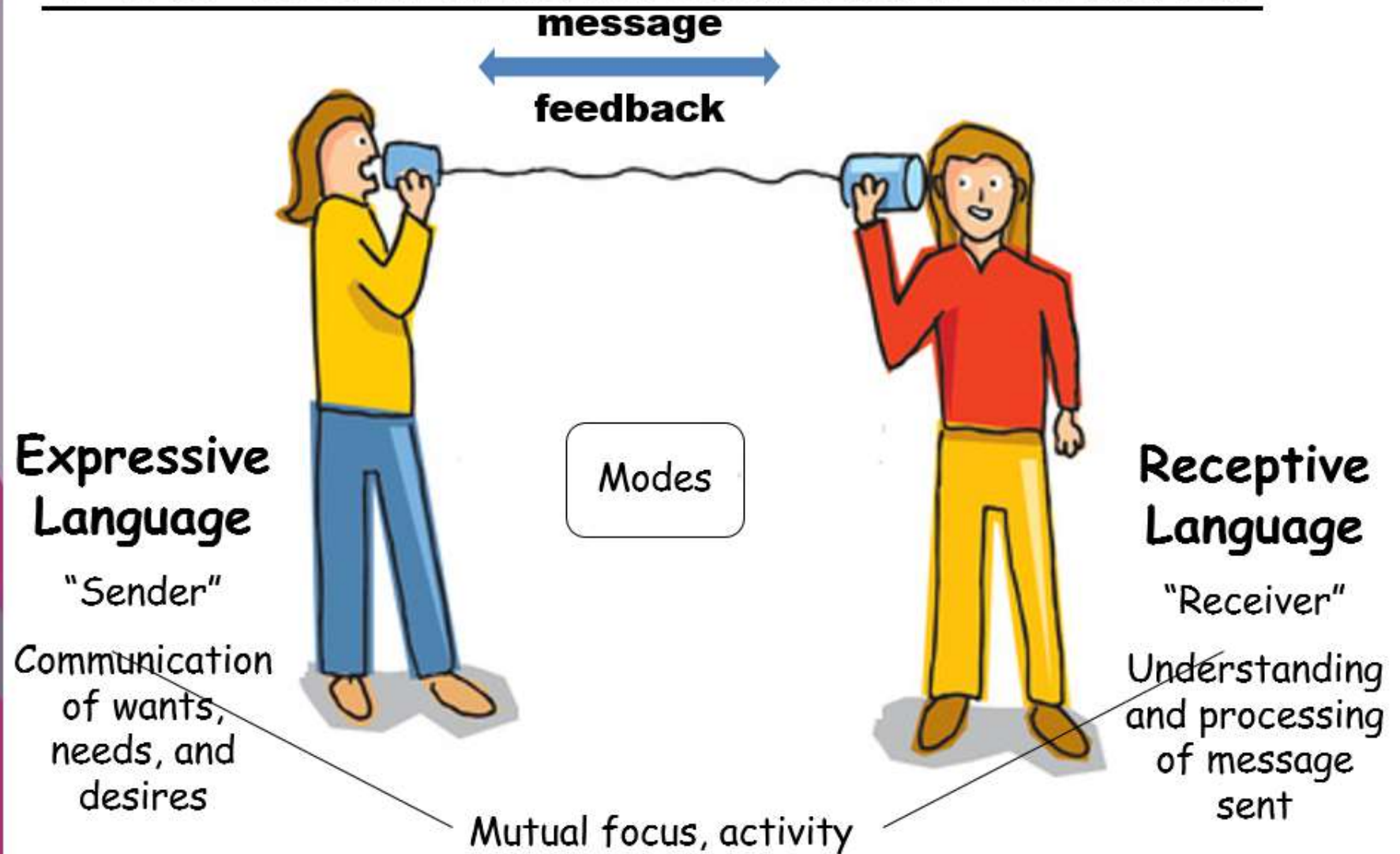


# Communication

- People with DD may be likely to have some degree of receptive language disorder (may have difficulty understanding)
- Some may also have expressive language disorder (may have difficulty being understood)



# Communication 101: The Communication Model



# DD & Mental Illness

Adults with disabilities report mental distress almost 5 times as often as adults without disabilities (Cree, Okoro, Zack, & Carbone, 2020)

Mental health issues are more prevalent among the DD community than in the general population. 30%-40% of all persons with ID/IDD also have a co-occurring mental health condition (Murin, 2016)



# Impact of COVID on DD Population

- Exacerbation of existing mental health symptoms
- Increase in depression, anxiety, anger, frustration, irritability, restlessness, and fear
- Why?



# Psychosocial Stressors

- Increase in various factors that contribute to a greater amount of stress in a person's life
  - Many already existing pre-pandemic



# Psychosocial Stress Factors



# Limited Community Resources

- Mental Health Supports/Services
  - Existing issues in serving DD population pre COVID-19 exacerbated
  - Move to telehealth



# Limited Community Resources

- Other Community Supports
  - Usual community-based supports (e.g., Board of DD staff, teachers, professors, specialists, etc.) not available due to social distancing requirements
    - Not as many home visits or face-to-face visits
    - Increases vulnerabilities of abuse/mistreatment
  - Disability/accessibility accommodations were hindered
    - Unclear for some students of where to find/obtain support (Meleo-Erwin et.al, 2021)





# Communication

- Having difficulty in understanding language or expression of language can significantly impact:
  - Ability to follow rules
  - Ability to understand the consequences of negative behavior
  - Ability to give “true” answers to questions
  - Ability to problem-solve
  - Ability to participate in conversation



# Factors that Affect Understanding

- The Message Being Sent:
  - Speed of communication
  - Length
  - Complexity
  - Word order
  - Word meaning/vocabulary
  - Vocalics (tone of voice, loudness, rate, pitch, stress)

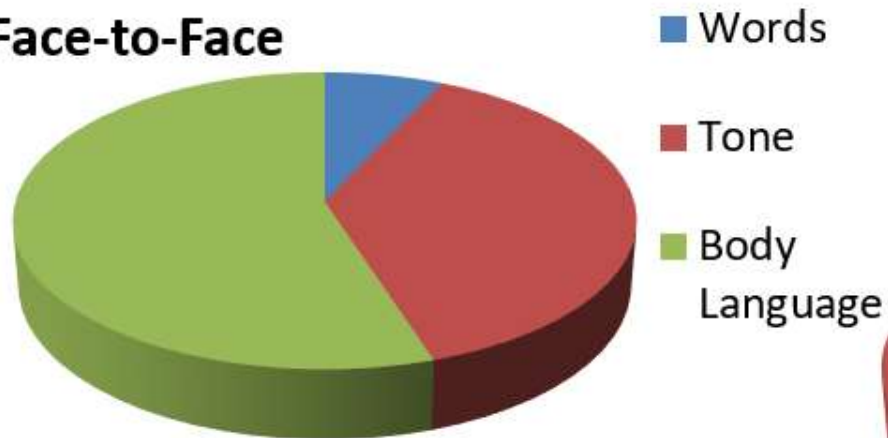


*Just because we HEAR the message  
does not mean we UNDERSTAND*

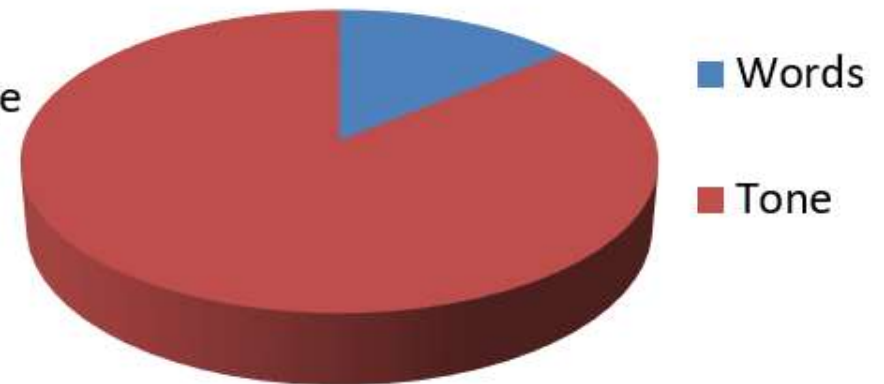


# Communication

Face-to-Face



On the Phone



**It's not just the WORDS we use.  
We communicate more with HOW we say them.**

Source: Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of *Silent Messages*



# Isolation



- Stay at home orders
- Unable to see family and friends
- Restricted access to school, work, vocational habilitation, and day supports.
- Leisure activities/groups cancelled/unable to meet in person
  - Rely on these for social involvement/community inclusion
- Lack of understanding/appreciation for necessity of social distancing
  - Perceived as a punishment or being left out



# Relationship Strain

- “Lockdowns have forced those who cohabit to remain in close proximity with each other and thereby have increased the opportunity for domestic provocation and intimate partner altercations.” (Boman & Gallupe, 2020)
- “Maumee Police Department demonstrate that there has in fact been an increase in substantiated intimate partner violence incidents in 2020 (73 incident by 5/26/20) compared to 55 at the same point in 2019.” (Boman & Gallupe, 2020)
- “Domestic argument calls have more than doubled (2.5x higher) during the COVID-19 lockdowns compared to the same time period in the pre-COVID year of 2019.” (Boman & Gallupe, 2020)
- IDD population at a greater risk of becoming a victim of crime



# Relationships Continued

- Direct Service Providers have experienced a staffing crisis
  - Shortage of staff
  - Inconsistency of staff
  - Staff unfamiliar with individual and their communication



# Major Disruptions in Routines

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
  - Rely on rigid routines to reduce anxiety
  - Ongoing ambiguity of future, perpetuates feelings of anxiety
- Continual changes in practices, policies, procedures, etc.
- Extended time to process, accept, and acclimate to changes
- Issues with new environment
  - More distractions, limited privacy, lack of structure and routine
- College or university students with cognitive and learning disabilities struggled to adapt to the new format of course delivery and the new expectations (Meleo-Erwin et.al, 2021)



# Technology Issues

- Inability to afford or access technology to connect to family, friends, medical & mental health services
  - Contributes to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness
- Lack of hardware, devices, software, or subscription services needed for various learning/activities
- Individuals are confined to their residence
- Lack of technology (tablets and smart phones to stay connected to friends and family, healthcare providers, and to participate in online learning)





# Financial Changes

- Loss of income (layoff, unable to get to work, vocational programs closed)
- For some, families must leave jobs to care for loved ones/assist with daily support with education
- Increase in unexpected expenses



# Higher Education

- Census survey administered from May 18 to July 2020 to undergraduate students at 9 large, public research universities
  - 28,311 undergraduate students
  - Students with physical, learning, neurodevelopmental, or cognitive disabilities reported experiencing **significantly more** challenges and hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic than students without disabilities
    - Financial hardships
    - Housing insecurity (less like to live in safe environments)
    - Existing issues exacerbated during pandemic
- (Soria, Horgos, Chirikov, & Jones-White, 2020)



# Exacerbating Factors: Executive Function Challenges

- Executive function refers to a family of top-down mental processes needed when you have to concentrate and pay attention, when going on automatic or relying on instinct or intuition with be ill-advised, insufficient, or impossible (Burgess & Simmons 2005, Espy 2005, Miller & Cohen 2001)

Core executive functions are:

- Inhibition and interference control
- Working Memory
- Cognitive flexibility



# Exacerbating Factors: Executive Function

- Lack of structure and/or routine has made distance learning challenging for people with DD
  - Routines decrease anxiety, increase control, maintain emotional well-being, and reduce challenging behaviors
  - Without the impetus of leaving home for school each day, some students have decreased motivation to complete ADLs (hygiene, preparing food), creating health and safety issues



# Exacerbating Factors: Executive Function

- Not having immediate feedback from/access to professor
- Doing so asynchronously is challenging for students who have executive function differences



# Exacerbating Factors: Sensory Issues

- Decreased sensory breaks with online learning can make focusing/attending to task challenging and fatiguing



# Successes

- There are some positive outcomes
  - Remote supports and learning: preferred method for some
  - Reduces stress of social situations and expectations
  - Fewer distractions in the learning environment
  - Limited transitions throughout the week decreases anxiety



# **First-Hand Perspective from Grace Blatt**





# Introduction



**Grace**

Family

Education

Goals

Role at Cuyahoga DD



# The Decision Is Yours

- One has to realize that they need to meet their psychological health needs (Maslow, 1954)
- Recognize that they are stressed and have anxiety that things are not the way they used to be
- Coming to the conclusion that they need help to cope with these emotions of stress and anxiety



# Positive Aspects of the Pandemic

- Not as easy to be left out of a group or group event
- More time to decompress between events
- Not worrying about getting lost in new locations
- Allows for more family time
- More control of time management for schoolwork
- Improves my test taking skills
- Less opportunities to engage in unstructured small talk and free time which can be anxiety provoking
- More predictable and consistent daily schedule and routine



# Negative Aspects of the Pandemic

- Cabin fever
- Lack of social face-to-face interaction
- Loneliness
- A more sedentary lifestyle
- No change or pleasant surprises (everyday is mostly the same)
- Eating more
- More depressive thoughts and feelings (Palgi et al., 2020)



# Enhancement of Life

- Be on more committees and help be part of more organizations due to no need of transportation
- Don't have to engage in small talk with other students before or after class
- Time to relax by crocheting, and making jewelry
- Not worrying as much about stimming or keeping my hands busy in public places
- Learn at a faster pace which is comfortable to me



# Enhancement of Life (continued)

- Have been able to express my feelings and try new jokes on my family without being ridiculed for being weird or inappropriate
- More time to make decisions
- Slower paced deadline and expectations
- More planned events less spontaneous events
- Work on coping and social skills when I feel anxious right in the comfort of my own home without anyone judging me



# Things That Helped

- Small landscaping job that helped me get exercise
- Made friends with my neighbors by getting their mail for them on a daily and their trash cans weekly
- Decided to take as many online courses as possible rather than in person
- Turning your webcam video stream off if you need more privacy that day
  - I know I sometime have horrible eye contact. I also sometimes rock in my chair when I am concentrating
  - This could be a neat accommodation schools and universities should have for students with disabilities



# Practical Strategies to Support

## Persons with a disability

- Become familiar with your rights
  - Check out Disability Rights Ohio for more info
- Advocate for yourself
- Request support from your school's disability resource center
- Connect with your local board of DD for support
- Seek help for mental health
- Join local support groups





# Strategies Continued...

## Professionals

- Make local resources readily available and easily accessible for:
  - Food, housing, financial assistance, mental health options (counseling, support group), Medical care
- Provide information in multiple modalities to meet all needs
  - Check with organizations that support people with DD for communication tools, assistive technology, and other resources related to COVID-19
- Encourage students to discuss any necessary accommodations they need for online learning with their school's disability resource center
- Check-in regularly
- Remain approachable
- Be flexible and person centered in your approach/teaching style
  - Offer options
- Honor and respect communication differences



# How to Communicate with People with DD

- Use SIMPLE language/vocabulary whenever possible
- Be concise - Speak in black and white
- Avoid lengthy sentences
- Break down information into chunks
- When trying to establish timelines, use examples from daily routines such as lunchtime, bedtime, etc.
- Use concrete language, avoiding idioms and other figurative language
- Give choices
- Avoid yes/no whenever possible



# How to Communicate with People with DD

- Progress slowly and leave pauses for the person to process your words
- Repeat messages
- Comprehension should be checked periodically, preferably before transitioning from one topic to the next
- Everyone is different



# How to Check for Comprehension

## DO

- “Tell me what I said?”
- “Why is it important to...?”
- “What can you change?”
- “Tell me what you did wrong.”
- “Tell me what you will do differently.”

## DON'T

- Avoid asking, “Do you understand?”
- Avoid asking, “OK?”
- Avoid asking, “Did you hear what I just said?”
- Avoid asking, “Do you have any questions?”
- Avoid asking, “Do you know what you did wrong?”



Open-ended questions

Avoid yes/no questions

# Strategies

- Provide breaks, if possible
- Change settings- take a walk
- Give time for person to process
- Avoid using jargon
- Do not make assumptions about what the individual is saying or meaning



# Supports

- Assistive Technology is any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, used to maintain or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with DD
- Cuyahoga DD's AT Department
  - Assessments for equipment
  - Lends equipment and software for trials
  - Assists with acquiring/funding equipment
  - Provides training and in-services



# Supports Continued...

- Cuyahoga DD AT Specialists and SLP/AAC Specialists implemented various stopgap measures to assist individuals during the shutdown, including:
  - Loaning iPads to individuals for the purpose of maintaining the ability to connect and interact with others while quarantined, and to provide applications for games, scheduling supports, and learning



# Supports Continued...

- Utilizing Cuyahoga DD's Assistive Technology Lending Library to loan equipment
- Providing education/training





# Resources

For information on Developmental Disabilities

- CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/index.html>
- Cuyahoga County Board of Developmental Disabilities
- Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities <https://dodd.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/dodd/>

For information on DD and Mental Health

- American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities <https://www.aaid.org/education/annual-conference>
- National Association for the Dually Diagnoses <http://thenadd.org/>

For information on disabilities and higher education

- Association for Higher Education and Disability <https://www.ahead.org/home>
- National Center for College Students with Disabilities <http://www.nccsdonline.org/>

For information on disability rights

- The Arc <https://thearc.org/covid/>
- Communication Bill of Rights <https://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/NJC-Communication-Bill-Rights.pdfmonash.org>
- Disability Rights Ohio <https://www.disabilityrightsohio.org/>

For information on Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Milestones <https://www.milestones.org/>
- Monarch <https://www.monarchcenterforautism.org/webinars>
- Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) <https://www.ocali.org/>
- Center for Developmental Disability Health Victoria- [www.cddh.monash.org](http://www.cddh.monash.org)
- <https://acemh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/camh.12425>



# Resources Continued...

Resources for people and families looking at attending higher ed...

<https://thinkcollege.net/>

<https://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/postsecondary/college-options.asp>

<https://www.ohiohighered.org/students/prepare-for-college/students-with-disabilities>



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Questions?



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# THANK YOU

## Great minds think differently!

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