The holidays are a time for envisioning—envisioning sugar plums dancing in our heads, envisioning a peaceful world, envisioning our youth with autism working when we transition from high school into the community. The last vision—while certainly becoming more of a reality—needs some of that good, old-fashioned holiday nurturing to make it an actuality.

Let’s take, for example, a mother of two. When asked, “What does this young lady want to be when she grows up?” the mother chimes in proudly with, “She’s so smart and clever, she’s going to go to Yale Law School.” Everyone chuckles then asks, “And what about your son?” “Oh, Adam, he loves Thomas the Train.” Everyone smiles and the conversation moves on with a “That’s nice; my son loved Thomas the Train, too.”

The issue is that were Adam six years old and in elementary school, his perseveration with Thomas, Bertie, Edward, Gordon, and Sir Topham Hatt would be acceptable. But Adam is not six. He is 13 and next year, he will be asked by his IEP team what he wants to be when he transitions out of high school at 18 or 22, and his answer will most likely be the very same: “I like Thomas the Train.”

Looking closely at imagination (because envisioning is imagining), if we think about it, everything we do on a daily basis requires us to imagine in some way or another. Take, for instance, the simple act of grocery shopping. We slowly stroll down each aisle in the store, glancing right and left. When something on the aisle pops out at us, resulting in us stopping, we immediately begin to imagine how we will use that item. If it is spaghetti sauce, we might imagine the pasta that we will serve it with, the people who we will serve it to, and so on and so forth. The same holds true when purchasing a pair of shoes. We walk around in them at the store; look in the mirror to see how they look on our body; and then begin to imagine where we will wear them, with what dress or clothes, and even the places that we might go wearing them.

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The act of imagination requires frontal lobe engagement—the lobe we call the executive functioning lobe. When we use it, we get the most bang for our buck (so to speak) because we are able to experience deductive and inductive reasoning; use our analytical thinking processes; and, overall, have a higher level of daily active mental functioning.

So, let’s go back to the mother and her 13-year-old son who perseverates on Thomas the Train. If we can begin to help this son alter the idea he has of himself, change his self-image, then we can possibly transform the outcome of his life. If we believe that he can be more than an individual with autism who is infatuated with Thomas the Train, we need to follow up on his fixation for trains with statements like, “Yes, he may work at a train station one day.” Then we have been successful in helping our child envision a place for himself in the community, because we have helped him to imagine himself working and performing a skill in a workplace to which he can relate. He surely knows what a train station looks like, because he knows where Thomas and his friends “live.”

How many of us end up being what we told our teachers and parents we wanted to be when we grow up? I wanted to be a veterinarian. I held on to that dream until I was in college, when it wasn’t a reality any longer, so I then pursued the arts. The point is: it doesn’t really matter what the dream is in the beginning, when we are young; the important thing is that we have a dream that is fed and nurtured by our mothers, our families, our teachers, and even strangers ...

 lumber and create a place for him to imagine himself being a geologist or a paleontologist or a person who tracks landslides or tsunamis or earthquakes.”

One mother, Whitney Ellenby, Autism Ambassadors’ founder (www.bethesdamagazine.com/Bethesda-

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Happy Holidays, everyone! ■