

Employment & Income

Planning for future employment should begin well in advance of when your child is ready to look for a job.

Getting a job is a rite of passage for most kids. If you are like most parents, you will want your adult child to find competitive employment that is meaningful and satisfying.

However, the sad fact is that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 65% higher than for people without disabilities (ALLSUP Disability Study, July 2012), so getting a job can be a significant challenge. Many individuals with disabilities lose jobs they have worked hard to get due to issues with punctuality and attendance, not following through with responsibilities, not following instructions or personality conflicts. The more training and preparation we can give our children before they are employed, the better chance they have of being successful.

Planning for future employment should begin well in advance of when your child is ready to look for a job. If your child is on an IEP, he/she should have a goal related to employment in the transition plan, but you do not have to wait until then to begin the planning process. Early planning helps your child to build the necessary skills and attitude needed for any job and encourages him or her to begin thinking about work in a productive way. By setting early expectations at home, we can prepare our children for the world of work by helping them learn to take direction, to work with others, to respect their commitment to the job and to be flexible.

Why is employment so important for my young adult?

Employment for people with disabilities is important on many levels, including:

- getting the person out of the house and helping to combat isolation, loneliness and depression;
- providing a place to interact with others and make friends;
- income source;
- provides a place to learn social skills and responsibility;
- giving a sense of purpose, accomplishment and structure to the day; and
- encouraging more independence.

Tips on raising a future employee

- ✓ Start early to teach the soft skills involved in employment. Soft skills are valued personal traits that include getting to work on time, a good attitude, following through with responsibilities, ability to follow instructions, etc. Soft skills can carry over from job to job.
- ✓ Focus on your child's strengths and not on his or her challenges.
- ✓ Give your son or daughter household jobs to perform on a routine basis. Jobs can range from traditional household chores to chores that would better suit the individual's abilities. For example, an individual with mobility issues might be responsible for checking the weather on the computer every morning, looking up recipes, make a shopping list or sorting mail.
- ✓ Combine daily, routine tasks during the week with chores that require following instructions on the weekend.

- ✓ Maintain high expectations over time to encourage your child to strive for more and to gain the confidence he or she will need. Create a chore chart that your child can check off as tasks are completed. This task can help build organizational skills.
- ✓ Consider paying for services. Your child may find the concept of money difficult, so it is helpful to draw the connection between task and reward. For example:

Katarina has moderate autism and rarely used cash. The concept of cash was difficult for her. Her parents gave her cash after her weekly chores and had her place it immediately into her piggy bank. After two weeks, her parents let Kat take cash from her piggy bank, go to the store and select a modest toy that she wanted. Kat handed the cash to the clerk. She gradually became comfortable with money transactions.

- ✓ Take a look at your child's natural strengths and interests to get a sense of the sort of workplace setting that would work best. For example, does he/she like to be around people or prefer solitude? How about a preference for one repetitive task or, conversely, a variety? What is your child's communication style? For example:

Bob has Asperger's and enjoys being around people. A back and forth communication between individuals can be challenging for him; however, he loves to share his knowledge on subjects that he can really dive into. Perhaps Bob would make a terrific museum guide.

Note: While it is important to consider interests and hobbies, any future job must match your child's skill set. Interests may change and do not always lead to a good job fit. Someone who loves animals or children may not necessarily want a job working with animals or be temperamentally suited for work with children.

- ✓ Work with your school team to develop skills that are important for any job, such as filling out an application and interview skills. Make sure you have relevant and measurable goals in the IEP and transition plan to address, as appropriate, the following:
 - Personal hygiene
 - Punctuality and timeliness
 - Taking direction
 - Understanding responsibilities & using clarification skills
 - Basic social skills
 - Appropriate workplace behavior
- ✓ Practice the soft skills in the community through volunteer work. Although volunteering is not a long-term solution to paid employment, the experience can help build soft skills, create connections and add to a resume. Volunteering is also an opportunity to explore different types of jobs.

How you can help your son or daughter find his/her first job

The best way to find a potential job for your child is to network, network, network. Many parents we know have found that relationships, not want ads, provide the most job opportunities. Make a list of people you know socially, through your church, volunteer work, workplace and businesses you frequent. Tell them that your son or daughter is actively looking for a job. If they do not know of any jobs, they may know someone who does.

Develop a resume Every job seeker needs a resume. Your child can be creative about what he/she wants to include, such as work, volunteer experience, hobbies, and skills he/she is particularly proud of.

Applications In preparation for filling out job applications, have your child practice completing a generic job application. Have it laminated or place it in a protective plastic sleeve. Your child can use this as a template for filling out future job applications.

The interview You can help your young person practice interview skills through role-playing. Encourage your child to focus on strengths, not challenges, and to avoid offering too much information. Talk about appropriate behavior and expectations, such as handshaking, eye contact and speaking clearly. Practice the basics repeatedly so that your child is comfortable. If you can, record your role-plays with your child so he/she can watch, practice and repeat. You might also set up informational interviews with friends and colleagues to give your child first-hand experience. Finally, make sure your son or daughter has an appropriate outfit for an interview. Shop for clothes together and be sure your child likes them. Finally, help your child understand the importance of appearing clean and neat in the workplace.

Who can help?

While we are focusing on what *parents* can do to help their child with a disability prepare for the future, it really is a team effort. If your child is on an IEP at school, the team will be instrumental in developing realistic and relevant goals to prepare for future employment. Make sure anyone with particular knowledge of your child is included on the team. Contact VocRehab Vermont to learn what they can offer your child. If your child qualifies for adult developmental or mental health services, he or she will have an employment counselor or have access to a job skills program. One relatively new program is Supported Employment. Contact your Designated Agency for more information.



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What about Self-Employment?

Some of our young people may find working for others to be a significant challenge. Self-employment may be an option for them. The benefits of self-employment include flexibility in time and place of work, pursuit of a talent or passion, and the creation of an enterprise in which family and friends can be involved. However, starting a business is not for everyone. Your child will need capital to get a business started and it might be difficult to find investors or to get a loan.

If you believe your child has a strong interest in starting a business, along with a commitment to seeing it through, you can help him/her get started by creating a viable business plan. What is the product or service? Who is the target consumer? How will the product be produced and marketed? With self-employment, there is a need to be flexible and income is not a certainty. Does your child have the organizational skills it takes to run a business, however small, or will he/she depend on others to help? If so, are those others committed to help for the long run?

For the right individual, self-employment can contribute to a sense of pride and accomplishment. Some examples of self-employment ventures that we know include baking cookies and dog biscuits, mixing and marketing granola, making dolls, doing barn and yard work and playing music at events.

Whatever work your child ends up doing, you will want to be an active participant -- job coach, cheerleader, tear-dryer -- in his/her success!