

EMPLOYMENT & TRANSITIONING

The ROAD to INDEPENDENCE

Home is almost always where discussion of employment and a child's aspirations begins. Parents should take an active role in helping their child prepare for employment.

By Patricia Birbiglia

We can all recall looking for our first job as a teenager or young adult and the angst it may have brought.

Riding our bicycles or walking to the neighborhood businesses to ask if they were hiring could be intimidating. This was only then followed by the equally dreaded interview and the apprehension of the first day on the job. Would I do well? How would my coworkers treat me? What would my boss be like? It's a scenario we can all relate to and one that was accompanied by having to choose a career path to pursue after our secondary education ended. Really, how many 17 or 18 year olds truly know, or are ready to plan for, what they will do for what seems like the rest of their life.

The transition into the adult world, particularly the workforce, presents a challenge for all young people. Looking for a first job, and not really knowing how to navigate the job process, can be even more overwhelming for young people with disabilities. Add the nature of today's multi-tasked work environment, tough competition for jobs at all levels, and the fact that people with disabilities continue to be employed at much lower rates than people with no disabilities, and it is clear that employment preparation and engagement for our younger generation is more important than ever. However, with adequate support and planning by family, school staff and even the involvement of community service providers and resources, the transition can be positive and a springboard to independent living and integration into the community.



TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD PREPARE FOR AND SECURE EMPLOYMENT

Home is almost always where discussion of employment and a child's aspirations begins. It's where many youngsters express their desire to be a teacher, artist or astronaut when they grow up. While schools and community based organizations play an important role in helping students with disabilities find employment opportunities, parents can take an active role in helping their child prepare for employment.

"There was never a question that I would work," shares Susan Quinn, who experienced the onset of her disability at the age of 10, began working after she graduated from college and sees each job she has held as a stepping stone. "Our family had a strong work ethic and I was expected to contribute the same way as the rest of my siblings."

Since parents often know their children better than professionals and can easily identify their talents and unique skills, their knowledge can help guide a student to make educated and thoughtful decisions regarding career paths or jobs. Parents themselves, or their network of friends, coworkers, neighbors, and relatives, may be able to provide students with opportunities for volunteering, career exposure or an on-site work experience. These connections and "first-steps" often allow students with disabilities a better understanding of the world of work and its relevancy to education.

"Having been born with cerebral palsy, I can say that my parents played a significant role in my education and preparing me to become employable," explains Mark Turan, who has held positions at the offices of local politicians and is now

- Raise aspirations from early on, even before the teen years. Encourage your child to read books that describe careers, often written for all age levels.
- Find out your child's learning style, if you haven't already, since not only will it determine how they learn and retain information best in school, but on the job. It may also assist in determining what careers may be a good match. In a work environment, visual learners learn best by watching someone at work. It may be best for auditory learners to be in a workplace where instructions can be well explained. Kinesthetic learners need to be physically involved with the learning process.
- Make sure your child understands his or her disability, including personal strengths and limitations. Lifting heavy boxes in a stockroom will likely not be a good fit for someone with weak motor skills, but stocking the shelves or racks may be.
- Put them to work at home. Assigning daily and weekly chores encourages them to manage their time and have their performance critiqued. Praise them for a job well done and don't be afraid to explain where they can improve their performance.
- Vocational evaluations can be valuable in identifying possible career paths as they examine talents, interests, hobbies, etc. Situational assessments in a controlled or semi-controlled work environment give youths the opportunity to "try out" specific job tasks to identify what they did and did not enjoy doing. (Remember, it's OK to uncover things they didn't like.) Work sites may include retail, hospitality, clerical, food service, and mail room environments.
- Encourage volunteerism as it can often build confidence, fit with a hobby or interest, help build a resume and possibly lead to employment.
- Get them to speak up for themselves. Have them order at a restaurant, place a take-out order over the phone for pizza, purchase their movie ticket or speak directly to a doctor.
- Enroll them in programs that are open to high school students at community colleges, universities, and technical schools to broaden their knowledge and life experiences.
- Apply for a summer internship at a local company or explore the Emerging Leaders Program. This highly competitive program places undergraduate and graduate college students with disabilities in fulfilling summer internships throughout the U.S. and provides them with leadership development opportunities. Applications are due by January 18, 2013; for more information, visit emerging-leaders.com.
- Encourage self advocacy. While you may regard yourself as their leading advocate, and will continue to play an active role, they need to speak up for themselves and communicate what accommodations they may need to perform best.
- Don't overlook developing independent living skills. Planning and preparing a meal, making their bed, or doing the laundry teaches them to follow steps and be more responsible. Plan community integration activities such as travel training to the local mall, library or the supermarket.
- Look to community based organizations in your area that have established school to work transitional programs that help foster independent living and workplace skills for guidance and assistance.
- Set up job shadowing opportunities with family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers since this is a good way to expose them to possible career choices. Participate in a "take your child to work" day.
- Use the dinner table or other time together to talk about your career. Discuss your day to day responsibilities to paint an accurate picture of a typical work day.
- Conduct a practice interview that includes some commonly asked interview questions. Encourage them to make eye contact and speak at a volume level that can be heard. Some community based organizations include refining interviewing skills as part of the program they offer.
- Don't get discouraged if it takes some time for them to find a job. The competition is tough, given the state of the economy and the current unemployment rate. Stay positive and cheer them on.

executive associate to the president of a large non-profit organization. “They stressed the importance of a good education and the open, honest communication between me and my parents was very important and helpful.”

Turan recalls his first work experience during what he describes as his rebellious high school teenage years. “I decided I was too old for camp so my parents said that if I was not going to camp, I had to get a job because they would not allow me to do nothing all summer.” That summer he worked for his father who was a key administrator at an area college and helped with the cleaning of buildings on campus. “I rode with him to and from work every day for six weeks,” he said. “It felt good to get that paycheck every two weeks. It was a

SIGNALS THAT YOUR CHILD IS READY FOR EMPLOYMENT

- They are asking to work, or show an interest in earning or having money of their own.
- They have volunteered and successfully performed independent tasks.
- They are able to hold conversations with adults and peers.
- They can perform daily living activities on their own.
- They can control their behavior and perform multiple tasks, once directed.
- They have developed some decision making skills.
- They have the skills and resources to get to and from a job.

feeling of accomplishment and pride. As that summer came to an end, my father told me to start looking for a job for the following summer because he felt it was time I got something on my own. At first, my feelings were hurt, but it turned out to be the best thing he could have done. I spent the next few summers working with the custodial staff at the local high school where I had camaraderie with coworkers my age and it felt good to get a job on my own.” Turan then indicated that those sum-

mer positions gave him additional confidence to later pursue work and careers that reflected his interests and capabilities.

Schools are often a conduit to helping students with disabilities get ready to make the leap from school to work. For example, students can be guided into specific courses that meet their interest and academic aptitude. For many years, school districts have partnered with local community based organizations with expertise in transition and in developing work experience opportunities that enhance a student’s employment outcome. Providing work-based learning during the school years generally leads to better post-school employment outcomes.

In her capacity as transition specialist from the Regional Special Education Technical Assistance Support Center, Cathy Pantelides trains school district professionals and families to address programs and practices that will improve outcomes for students with disabilities from secondary to post-secondary settings. “Many studies have proven that volunteering or participating in an internship, whether paid or unpaid, are the best predictors of future success in the workplace,” states Pantelides.

Gaining employment exposure and discovering interest areas while in high school are not only helpful to the student but to the entire IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team in further assisting a student to succeed in school and as he or she transitions to other opportunities. To meet with long-term success, students need to develop life skills that will prepare them for greater independence. It is important that they develop an understanding of “self” and learn self-advocacy, as well as problem solving skills, and apply those as needed, in a work setting.

“When I was younger, finding a way to do simple household chores from a wheelchair helped me develop troubleshooting



know-how, a skill someone with a disability needs every day,” notes Quinn. “I never know what I’ll encounter at home or work on a daily basis but I have the skill set to figure it out.”

Employment should be seen as one important destination on the road to independence for both adolescents and young adults with disabilities. In addition to money management skills that may be acquired through earning a regular paycheck, a part-time job opens the door for improving social skills, cultivating relationships with peers that may lead to friendships, bolstering self confidence and building a resume that can enable youths with disabilities to successfully compete for jobs and secure full-time employment that ultimately leads to empowerment.

Now that he is a father himself, Turan can appreciate more than ever the support and wisdom of his parents. “The fact that my father pushed me to get a job made it easier for me after graduating college to go into the ‘real world’ and make it on my own.”

Once a job is secured, Quinn offers this advice, “Do your job well. Once you’ve mastered it, people will see you just like everyone else, not as a person with a disability.”•

About the Author:

Patricia Birbiglia is the Director of the Abilities, Inc. Youth Transition and Placement Services at The Viscardi Center. The Viscardi Center is a network of non-profit organizations providing a lifespan of services that educate, employ and empower people with disabilities. As an experienced rehabilitation professional, she has developed and implemented numerous programs for over 30 years that have transformed the lives of individuals with disabilities. For more information, contact The Viscardi Center at (516) 465-1400.