



Helping Your Special Needs Child with Employment

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With the pandemic almost in the rearview mirror, employment positions are opening and there are more opportunities than ever before for people with disabilities to enter the workforce. Having realistic expectations and being well-prepared will help to ensure a successful job search and utilizing available resources can make the process easier.

Particularly with the younger disability population, it is important to understand there are different programs and support services, so it's critical to first identify and research state-funded programs, vocational support groups and other resources that can assist with employment needs. It's also important to have conversations with the individual seeking employment and consider what will help them find a meaningful arrangement.

Job coaches might be available and are often supported by Medicaid-funded programs. An effective job coach can help navigate and address issues with potential employers, while supporting the applicant with coaching, training, and other services. Some state-funded support programs may be able to assist, but many case workers have been overwhelmed with pandemic-related employment issues and are often fielding a high number of inquiries. Disability service agencies can also lend support, but parents need to have realistic expectations about how much support these agencies will be able to provide.

In some states, reverse job fairs have been successful in matching interested individuals with positions. Instead of a typical job fair, which can be intimidating, a reverse job fair pairs specific companies who are interested in hiring with applicants seeking employment. At the job fair the representatives from hiring organizations understand the issues that might affect individuals with special needs, and the ability to have one to one communication in a non-stressful environment is ideal to have productive interviews. Companies like Amazon, Target, Ball, and other STEM-organizations have participated in these fairs, and more employers are thinking outside the box in this way (and others) to find qualified applicants.

Parents are used to supporting their children in an academic setting and should expect that this support will need continue when their child is seeking employment opportunities. Educational environments tend to be more aware and more tolerant of individuals with

disabilities, but that won't always be the case in a new employment environment, and informal support provided by parents will often be critical to a child's success.

Preparing for employment

Having a grasp on an individual's unique skillset and talent will be helpful in identifying positions they might find success and value. Researching open positions and understanding what qualities and skills an employer is looking for will also help in ensuring a good match and that environment will likely provide an enriching, safe and positive experience. Finding a successful placement will provide structure and routine, while providing important opportunities to socialize, make connections and of course have a dependable source of income.

Many children with special needs find success in employment but might need assistance finding the right opportunity and environment. For example, an individual may be highly intelligent but perhaps lack the typical social skills or executive functioning required of an in-person position. In this case a remote position might be considered and provide a win-win for the child and the employer. For others, a regimented or routine based position might be a good fit, and for others who enjoy working with people a customer service position may provide a rewarding experience. It is all about the individual and all about the fit.

Application process

Often, we take for granted some of the social skills that help create a good first impression, whether it is shaking someone's hand, looking a person in the eye, or even making light conversation. These seemingly simple actions can be challenging for some, and it can be helpful for parents and other adults to practice role-playing scenarios and do mock interviews so the jobseeker can feel more comfortable when they prepare to apply for a position.

Keeping pertinent information readily available is also useful before applying for positions. Having Social Security numbers, information about prior employment, competitive pay rates, etc.... can assist in completing all the required forms during the application process. Then once an interview has been secured parents may need to provide some extra support – make sure they are up and dressed for work with the appropriate clothes, address transportation needs and help develop an understanding of the expectations of the position.

Securing a position

Once employment has been secured parents should help their child with the transition process, like what they might do with any major life change. As most parents with special

needs children know, change of any kind can be challenging and consistent family support is often critical.

If possible, caregivers and advocates should keep open communication with the child and the employer to assess any areas of concern or any specific challenges. Many parents might be surprised to find their child excels in the workforce and be eligible for promotions and financial bonuses based on their work performance. This circumstance often will provide the child with a sense of purpose and a source of positive self-esteem, enhancing their overall feelings of independence. At the same time, parents might need to provide external support and continue to advocate for their child and provide stability at home to help their child get into a comfortable routine and ensure a healthy work and life balance.

Staying connected

Once the child has been successful in their position it is important for parents to stay connected and be proactive in continuing to manage expectations. Understanding the performance metrics, how and when an evaluation will occur and helping facilitate communication with supervisors and colleagues may provide a source of great comfort to both the child and their employer.

In the cases of criticism or other feedback, parental support can also be very meaningful. Issues involving work quality, productivity and performance are typical for employee-supervisor conversations, yet these situations require sensitive communication and understanding and can be aided by an honest conversation between the supervisor and the parents, in addition to the child.

The reality is that some employment situations don't work out, and helping a child manage disappointment and feelings of rejection can be a good life skill, particularly if they have learned new skills during that experience and can be ready to embrace a new position. There are many new and expanding opportunities around the country for individuals with special needs to secure meaningful employment and while it might take longer than expected, finding the right fit will undoubtedly have benefits in both the short and long term.

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