

## Tapping into the Power of Families: How Families of Youth with Disabilities Can Assist in Job Search and Retention

*“Consumers benefit from the expertise their families bring to the process, their commitment to their welfare, and the personal family networks that lead to job opportunities.”*

*26<sup>th</sup> Institute on Rehabilitation Issues*

Families and other caring adults play a vital, yet unrecognized role in helping young people with disabilities explore careers, build work skills, and be successful in employment. Reasons why families are unrecognized in the career development process vary. Families themselves may not see the connection between work skills and everyday activities in the home. They may not realize that their knowledge of their son or daughter can contribute to the employment-related transition goals of their child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). They may think that schools, youth development professionals, or state vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs don’t need their help, or may be unaware of how they might partner with such programs. Perhaps they simply have not been asked.

While many school, youth employment, and vocational rehabilitation professionals value family involvement and understand that involving families in their son’s or daughter’s program can lead to more positive career development experiences and successful

*This InfoBrief explores the important role families and other caring adults play in the career planning, job search, and job retention of youth with disabilities.*

employment results, this has not always been the case. Past models of case management placed the professional in a position of power and input from family members was not welcomed. Families who are seeking to maintain high expectations for their family member’s future may be discouraged from actively participating in the work preparation, exploration and placement processes.

The purpose of this brief is to give families and other caring adults information on how their involvement can make a positive impact on a youth’s work readiness, career exploration, and workplace success. Educators and other youth service professionals can also use this information to consider how to involve family members in a young person’s work readiness and career development.

Families are often the first, most knowledgeable, and most consistent “case manager” youth with disabilities have. Families possess valuable information about a youth’s strengths, interests, and needs. In a time of dwindling resources, family involvement can help professionals, such as teachers, social workers, and mentors, to streamline their assessment process, access personal networks for job opportunities, and build work readiness skills in the home.

### The Changing Definition of “Family”

A young person may live in any number of family constructs, including ones in which couples are married, cohabitating, or the same sex, or in single-parent, blended, grandparent-led, foster care, or group home. A youth’s “family” may not always include a mother and father. Rather, a sibling, aunt/uncle, grandparent, neighbor, teacher, peer, or other influential adult may play a guiding role for a young person. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth defines family this way in its *Family Guideposts*. “Family is defined broadly as adults and children related biologically, emotionally, or legally, including single parents, blended families, unrelated individuals living cooperatively, and partnered couples who live with biological, adopted, and foster children.” It is important that professionals working to help youth prepare for and find employment acknowledge the many forms “family” can take, and allow input and participation from a wider variety of adults who have a positive influence on a youth.



### Work Goals Start at Home

All families want their sons and daughters to be employed. This desire needs to hold true for youth with disabilities as well. Families can begin youth on the path towards successful employment by helping youth create goals for themselves. Even at a young age, youth begin to think about what types of jobs they may want. “I want to grow up and do what mommy does.” or “When I get bigger, I’m going to be a policeman”. Families can use this common curiosity to begin instilling an expectation that their family member will be employed as an adult. If the expectation of employment is there from an early age, it will be easier to build more specific skills and higher expectations as the youth gets older.

### Families Can Build Work Skills at Home

Where do people learn the skills needed to be successful in the workplace? How does a person learn to be responsible, problem solve, appropriately interact with others or take work direction? Does it come naturally? For some youth it might. However, many youth need opportunities to learn and practice these skills. Entry level jobs have been a traditional way young people learn work skills, but recently the number of entry level jobs available to youth has drastically decreased. Youth with disabilities may have greater difficulties finding work experience opportunities. Given these barriers, how do families help youth build the “soft skills” needed to be successful in the workplace?

### *Interacting Appropriately with Others*

No matter what job a person has, it is necessary to interact with co-workers, suppliers, customers, or the community in an appropriate way. Employers are more likely to fire an employee if they have trouble interacting with others in workplace.

From an early age, families can have their youth practice appropriate interactions with family members, friends, relatives, teachers, and workers in stores they frequent. Families can reinforce that interacting appropriately with people does not mean that they have to like them. Discuss the different types of communication one might use in different environments such as on the street, in a professional setting, and with peers, family, and coworkers. Doing so, would help youth understand what might be acceptable and expected in one setting may not be appropriate in another. Youth who are given the opportunity to practice how to deal with people in a variety of situations may respond better if conflict should arise.

### *Maintaining Personal Appearance for Work*

Youth often express themselves through the clothes they like to wear. Being asked to wear dress clothes or a uniform can be seen as disrespectful to their individuality. However, there are very few jobs that don’t expect some level of appropriate appearance from their employees.

Families are in a position to teach youth the difference between times when proper dress is called for, and times when they can choose what to wear. Situations like school, church, weddings, or certain family functions can be used to practice dressing appropriately for different occasions. Families can schedule times once a

month where the family will dress up and eat at a restaurant. During these outings, have youth cover up any visible tattoos, leave baseball caps at home, forego gum chewing, and make sure pants are pulled up. Consider it a dress rehearsal and draw the correlation between dressing up for certain situations and dressing appropriately for work so youth understand the similarities.

This same concept carries over to other aspects of personal appearance. Youth should be encouraged to shower at least every other day, and to have a hairstyle that helps maintain personal appearance. Hygiene basics like teeth brushing, body odor awareness, and clean clothes are expected in the workplace, and for some youth this may not be obvious. Family members are in the best position to give specific guidance to their son or daughter on these issues.

### *Responsibility*

Employers want workers who are responsible enough to show up on time and do the tasks they are assigned. Chores in the home are an excellent way to help youth build a sense of responsibility that can carry over onto a job.

Assign tasks in the home that are the sole responsibility of the youth. For example, parents can make it the responsibility of their son or daughter to collect the trash from around the house and to bring the garbage can to the curb on collection day. Parents should check their youth’s work and give feedback on how well the task was completed. It may be necessary to



create a system of rewards initially so the youth has an incentive. Other ways to build responsibility could include tasks such as waking up and getting ready for school independently, caring for a pet, helping plan a family menu for the week, maintaining a clean room, being responsible for certain aspects of yard work, or babysitting.

Parents may already have these expectations in place for youth, so the value comes in relating the responsibilities a youth has at home with potential responsibilities a youth may encounter on the job. Jobs need to get done both at home and at work. A youth who recognizes this is better prepared for the world of work.

### *Problem Solving*

The ability to solve problems as they arise is a skill desired by employers. What do you do if a customer is unhappy? How do you overcome barriers to finish an assigned task? When should you ask for help if needed? Eventually, youth will learn that things won't always happen as planned. Fortunately, family life presents plenty of opportunities to practice problem solving. Families can give youth the opportunity to give input to solve common problems such as cleaning the house, accommodating guests, budgeting, making decisions on recreational activities or finding a needed service. If a problem has already been addressed, families can explain how they handled the situation and relate the situation to the workplace. For example, if the family needs a new dentist, the young person could do the research, develop some recommendations and discuss it with

the family. As the family discussion occurs, an analogy can be made to doing similar research in an office environment to locate a graphic artist, an editor, or a printer. Instead of jumping in to solve a problem a youth might have, families can ask the youth to list all the possible solutions and consider them together to find a good one.

### *Working as Part of a Team*

Teamwork is required in most workplaces. Even in a job where most tasks are completed independently, there is still a strong expectation that people will work together to meet the goals of the company. Families can work with their youth so they understand the importance of working as part of a team. Volunteering is a wonderful way for families to build this skill. Find a volunteer activity that requires teamwork to complete a task and sign up as a family to help. For example, a local food bank may need help taking donations, placing them into categories, and stocking shelves. This would be hard for one person to complete, but easy for a group of people. Families can also encourage youth to participate in school- or community-based activities, such as sports or fine arts, that require teamwork to produce a finished product.

### *Taking Work Direction*

Most workplaces have goals, whether it's to serve food quickly, manufacture something correctly, or provide a service that meets customer requirements. A major expectation of employers is that an employee is able to take directions from somebody else. The inability to take work direction is often a cause for youth to be dismissed

from jobs or to quit jobs. Many youth have a hard time with this concept, especially if they have little exposure to the world of work. Taking work direction may be difficult during adolescence because it's a time that identities are forged and self-images are fragile. Families are the best source of support to help youth understand that they should not be offended when they are given directions in the home, at school, or at work. Families can remind them that taking direction is an important part being an employee and helping a business get its work done.

### **Families Play a Role in Career Exploration**

Career exploration is the process youth engage in to identify which jobs they may be interested in, to learn about the education and skill requirements of those jobs, and to participate in activities that allow them to experience what it is like to do those jobs. Families support youth in this process in many ways.

### *Inform Planning Tools*

Most services for people with disabilities involve the creation of a plan that drives activities and outcomes, including needed supports and accommodations. For students in special education, the plan is the Individualized Education Program (IEP) which drives the educational supports and services for that student. For students with disabilities who are not in special education but who may need accommodations, the plan is known as a 504 Plan. If a young person is involved with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) the plan is an



Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) that addresses training, supports and accommodations, and services needed to move the young person into a job. And many school districts are adopting Individual Learning Plans (known under many names) that ask all students to plan a course towards graduation and life after high school. There are even Family Service Plans. Who writes these plans? Ideally they are written as a partnership between the professionals, families, and students/youth.

So, for example, a high school student with a visual impairment or a learning disability may have language in his/her IEP in school to receive digital textbooks and specialized software for a computer. When developing an IPE with the vocational rehabilitation counselor, the student will need to understand what technology (e.g. scanner, CCTV, specialized software, etc.) the student will need for the job the youth intends to do and make sure that specialized equipment is in place when he/she starts the job. Some of the equipment may be similar to what the student used in school, and some may be updated versions. The student and his/her family will need to understand what VR can pay for and what the employer is reasonably expected to pay for.

Families can use their knowledge of a youth's strengths, interests, and needs to help streamline the assessment and planning process and the creation of a service plan. Without family input, a professional has to engage in a long process of getting to know the youth before being able to plan for him or her. Additionally, families often can

provide information about their youth so a plan can be crafted to avoid situations that pose barriers for their family members. Often, youth with disabilities will have several service plans in place at once. Families are in an ideal position to make sure there is consistency across all the plans, make sure they reflect high expectations, and ensure that all responsible parties are working towards the same goal.

### *Seek Multiple Work Experiences*

Youth benefit from having as many opportunities to practice work and explore different careers as possible. Sadly, youth with disabilities are often not offered many work experiences. Schools and other service providers can only do so much to provide these opportunities. Families who understand the importance of multiple work experiences can help their youth find such things as volunteer opportunities, job shadowing, informational interviews, and workplace mentoring programs. Families can also advocate that career exploration and work experiences be incorporated into a student's IEP or IPE. The more opportunities to practice work a youth has, the better their employment outcomes as adults are likely to be.

### *Use Personal Networks*

The majority of people secure employment through word of mouth and personal networks. A person's "personal network" is the informal system of family, friends, co-workers, neighbors and other people one associates with in life. The term sounds technical, but everyone has some sort of personal network. Families can access their own networks to help find job and work experience opportunities for their youth. For example, let's say a youth is

interested in learning more about landscaping careers. Families can ask people in their personal network if they know anybody who works in landscaping and see if they can arrange a job shadowing or summer job opportunity. If people consider how they found past jobs, they may discover that they have already used the power of personal networks.

### **Families Can Support Success in the Workplace**

Once a youth finds a job, families can play an important role in helping the youth understand, keep, and grow in the job.

### *Transportation*

A job doesn't do a person much good if the employee cannot get to the job and transportation isn't available. Families need to consider how a young person will travel to and from a job site. If a youth does not drive, this can pose a challenge. In fact, transportation remains a significant barrier to people with disabilities finding and maintaining jobs. Families can ask that a youth explore public transportation options or work toward achieving a driver's license as part of their IEP, or seek transportation training (sometimes called travel training or orientation and mobility training) at a local disability service organization, such as an independent living center or visual services center. In rural areas, it may be necessary for families to be the main mode of transportation for youth. Families may also explore community or nonprofit transportation options or organize a system of volunteers to help.



### *Understand the Role of Benefits and Supports*

Many people with disabilities receive supplemental income or medical supports through public programs. In fact, many families may rely on a youth's financial benefits to supplement their overall family income. A common misperception is that people will lose their benefits if they are employed. Though it is true that many of these programs do have income restrictions, it is also true that several programs assist people with disabilities so they can remain employed while maintaining benefits. Families should learn about the impact work income will have on their youth's benefits. Fortunately, there are people at the national, state and local level who can help interpret work incentive and benefits planning rules.

Families can also explore programs like Individual Development Accounts (IDA) that allow a person with low income to build assets through matching funds from a variety of sources. IDAs typically provide the ability to build funds towards postsecondary education, the purchase of the first home, or the starting of a small business. Families whose youth don't qualify for an IDA can also consider other asset building tools like Supplemental Needs Trusts (sometimes referred to as a Special Needs Trust) that allow for assets to be accumulated without impact to government benefits.

### *Identify and Solve Challenging Workplace Situations*

There may be times when challenging behavioral, medical, or logistical situations arise for a youth

in the workplace. The last thing anybody wants is for these situations to lead to a youth losing the job. Families can use their knowledge of the youth to help identify and address workplace issues. For example, if a youth has challenging behaviors, families can work with employment providers to create a plan to respond to any potential situations. Instead of an automatic dismissal from employment, the employer can engage the plan and resolve the issue.

### *Maintain High Expectations*

We all have hopes and dreams for our children. Part of those dreams is the expectation that our children will achieve great things. The presence of a disability should not automatically lessen the expectations parents have for their son or daughter. Families are the perfect advocate for maintaining the expectation that their youth can and will be employed. Families often provide the baseline for what others will expect of a youth. If a family member expresses doubt that a child can achieve something, then others such as educators or employment counselors may follow suit. High expectations benefit youth and set the stage for others to expect great things as well.

### **Guideposts for Families**

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), in collaboration with the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor, developed the *Guideposts for Success*. Based on 30 years of research, the *Guideposts* identifies what all youth, including youth with disabilities, need to make a successful transition to adulthood. The *Guideposts* are

organized using the following five categories:

- School-based Preparatory Experiences
- Career Preparation and Work-Based Learning Experiences
- Youth Development and Leadership
- Connecting Activities
- Family Involvement and Supports

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth's [Guideposts for Success](#) outlines the following issues related to family involvement and engagement. Families and other caring adults need to have:

- High expectations which build upon the young person's strengths, interests, and needs and fosters their ability to achieve independence and self-sufficiency;
- Been involved in their lives and assisting them toward adulthood;
- Access to information about employment, further education and community resources;
- Taken an active role in transition planning with schools and community partners; and,
- Access to medical, professional and peer support networks.
- An understanding of their youth's disability and how it affects his or her education, employment and/or daily living options;
- Knowledge of rights and responsibilities under various disability-related legislation;
- Knowledge of and access to programs, services, supports and accommodations available



for young people with disabilities; and,

- An understanding of how individualized planning tools can assist youth in achieving transition goals and objectives.

As families are exploring these issues, they may want to ask themselves three basic questions: Am I informed? Am I supportive of my youth? And, Am I involved and engaged in helping him/her and or the school and other service providers?

### In Closing

Youth with disabilities benefit from many supports and experiences to explore careers and build work skills. School programs and workforce development efforts are seen as the main suppliers of these supports, but families play a vital role as well. It is important that families and other caring adults leverage the school years, learn the expectations of employers, use everyday activities in the home to build work skills, and understand that they are partners in helping youth prepare for and maintain employment. Families who are knowledgeable about employment, are willing to provide needed supports and experiences, and who maintain high expectations for success give youth a much better chance to be successful in the job search and in the workplace.

### Resources

**National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth**  
[www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info)

### The Guideposts for Success

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/guideposts>

### PACER Center

[www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)

### Find Your Local Parent Training and Information Center

[www.taalliance.org](http://www.taalliance.org)

### National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY)

[www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)

### Find Your Local Center for Independent Living

<http://www.ncil.org/directory.html>

### National Secondary Transition and Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC)

[www.nsttac.org](http://www.nsttac.org)

### National Post-School Outcomes Center (NPSO)

[www.psocenter.org](http://www.psocenter.org)

### Information about Individual Development Accounts

<http://www.wid.org/publications/individual-development-account-question-and-answer-sheet-a-guide-for-ida-consumers-with-disabilities>

### Information on Supplemental Needs Trusts

<http://www.wid.org/programs/access-to-assets/fact-sheets/special-needs-or-supplemental-needs-trusts>

### Disability.gov

<http://www.disability.gov/>

### Office of Disability Employment Policy- Youth

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/youth/>

### Find Your Local WIPA

<http://www.socialsecurity.gov/work/WIPA.html>

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Information Brief was written by Sean Roy of the Pacer Center. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email [contact@ncwd-youth.info](mailto:contact@ncwd-youth.info).

This Information Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at [www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info). Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-16519-07-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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