

Creating a Path



**How to Support Families
and Young Adults with
Autism to Prepare for
Competitive Integrated
Employment**



This publication was made possible through a collaboration between the Autism Society of America (ASA) and Thinkwork at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), University of Massachusetts Boston. In particular, ASA and ICI would like to recognize the efforts of Uchenna Nwangwu, graduate student from the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development at ICI/UMass Boston and Jaimie Timmons, Research Associate at ICI, who led the development of this publication.



Autism Society



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Introduction

The transition from school to adult life can be challenging for many families. Families with young adults with Autism are no exception. These challenges can include low expectations from teachers and other professionals around employment for youth with Autism, disjointedness between schools and adult employment systems, and parent doubts about the possibility of their youth with Autism achieving employment goals.

Because of such challenges, preparation activities for young adults with Autism are key to post-high school success in employment. While transition planning is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), these school-based activities often fall short of providing the foundation most families need. Research shows four primary predictors of future employment success:

1. **Career exploration and work-based learning**
2. **Building the young adult's soft skills**
3. **Developing the young adult's self-determination skills**
4. **Family involvement in employment planning**

The purpose of this toolkit is to share considerations and resources for professionals and other supporters as they work with families and youth to prepare for competitive integrated employment. This toolkit will explore the value of each preparation activity and share strategies for families and young adults with Autism to put them on a path toward competitive integrated employment.

Competitive integrated employment is full-time or part-time work at minimum wage or higher, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with coworkers without disabilities. (Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, 2014). For a detailed overview of Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Autism, including why it's important and the range of resources, read the Autism Society of America's [Competitive Integrated Employment for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Toolkit for Professionals and Advocates in the Autism Community](#).

1. Career exploration and work-based learning

Career exploration and work-based learning experiences are essential to defining interests and making informed choices about the young adult's plan for employment. However, while many young adults without disabilities naturally begin to explore part-time employment, those with disabilities often do not. This can limit their opportunity to learn the right job match or "fit" for employment and can hinder their ability to identify and define their strengths and interests. Furthermore, many young people with disabilities learn about employment in simulated school-based environments, which can restrict their exposure to real-world workplace situations.

Career exploration and work-based learning can help young people with Autism:

- » identify how their interests and strengths relate to work
- » describe the skills and activities associated with jobs that interest them
- » identify training and education needed to successfully pursue those careers
- » better understand accommodations they may need for a job
- » learn the skills associated with a particular job of interest
- » learn soft skills that are beneficial to all employees
- » expand their social circles and meet new people

What is career exploration?

Career exploration means investigating and experiencing different work situations. It means learning about different jobs and how they might fit with the young adult's interests and skills. The goal is to gain exposure to all kinds of careers and interests.

What can professionals and other supporters do to promote career exploration and work-based learning?

CONSIDER USING EXISTING CAREER EXPLORATION AND PLANNING TOOLS.

Such resources can support individuals to create a personal trajectory for their employment futures such as [Charting the LifeCourse](#). The Charting the LifeCourse framework was created to help individuals and families of all abilities and all ages develop a vision for a good life, think about what they need to know and do, identify how to find or develop supports, and discover what it takes to live the lives they want to live, including employment.

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CAREER EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES THAT MAY BE OFFERED AT SCHOOL.

These can include career fairs, career days, and career-related guest speakers; workplace visits and tours; career or skill-building camps; hands-on community service projects; and after school programs. Encourage parents to gather information from their youth's school and to learn about how young adults can be involved.

HELP SUPPORT CAREER EXPLORATION THAT CAN OCCUR OUT OF SCHOOL.

This can include visiting businesses in the community and watching other people at work, job shadowing, speaking to family and friends about where they work, and bringing their young adult to visit their own place of employment. For parents, it can be as simple as talking with their young adults how they became interested in their job and explaining how they got their position. Exploration should be ongoing. Young adults can be encouraged to explore careers they may not have previously considered and encourage them to learn about the education and skills required for those careers.

Creating a Trajectory: Using Charting the LifeCourse.

Start by supporting families and young adults to develop a vision for their employment futures through self-exploration. Encourage families and young adults with Autism to explore planning tools that support the identification of strengths, interests, and future visions as it relates to employment. [Charting the LifeCourse: Daily Life and Employment](#) is a place to start. This guide is designed to help identify questions to ask, things to do, and resources to lead to employment.

Career exploration and work-based learning

ENGAGE IN VOLUNTEERING, INTERNSHIPS, AND COMMUNITY SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES.

Volunteering refers to typical unpaid activity with non-profit groups that are open to all citizens. These might include helping at a food bank or working on a clothing drive for a faith-based organization. Internships are temporary positions, either in for-profit or non-profit organizations, with an emphasis on job training. Volunteer work, internships, and unpaid job exploration can be effective strategies for youth with Autism looking to gain work-related experience. However, youth should take on these activities carefully, with a clear understanding of the purpose of these activities.

As with anyone else who volunteers, it's important to think through the reasons that someone with a disability is giving his or her time and talents for free. What are the benefits to the individual?

- » Volunteering may be a step toward employment. It can be a great way of exploring interests, developing skills, gaining experience, building a resume, and making connections that lead to future paid jobs. Volunteer activities should be based on an individual's interests and preferences.
- » When individuals are not working or underemployed, they may choose to volunteer to keep busy and active while looking for paid work.
- » **Volunteering should not be a long-term substitute for paid employment.**

Adapted from [Volunteering, Internships and Unpaid Work Experiences: Legal and Practical Guidelines](#)

LOOK FOR PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT WITH PROPER SUPPORTS.

Most importantly, start to look for a part-time job where work-based learning can occur! As you engage with an employment support professional*, consider some of the following best practices.

- » Work-based learning should be individualized and driven by student preferences and needs rather than availability
- » Youth should be fully involved in choosing and structuring their experiences
- » Youth should be exposed to wide range of jobs and careers, including those outside of “traditional” youth employing industries
- » Experiences are “age and stage appropriate”
- » Experiences are predominately at workplaces in the community, not school-based
- » Work site learning is structured and links back to classroom instruction
- » Youth have opportunities to perform meaningful job tasks in the workplace that build career skills and knowledge
- » Periodic assessment and feedback are built in, and progress is documented
- » Experiences include opportunities for developing student self-determination and self-advocacy
- » Students develop an understanding of their workplace support needs and how to advocate for them

[Adapted from Employment First MA Work-Based Learning](#)

*Please refer to the Autism Society’s **Competitive Integrated Employment For People with Autism Spectrum Disorder** for information on connecting with an employment support provider, including state departments of vocational rehabilitation, intellectual and/or developmental disability agencies, and community rehabilitation providers.

2. Building Soft Skills

Soft skills are personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people. Many individuals with Autism have characteristics that could make them attractive to potential employers, including punctuality, attention to detail, consistency, and reliability. Whatever skills the person possesses, it is important to emphasize the strengths and the contributions they can make to a business.

Soft skills are critical to employment success—not only for young adults with Autism, but for all workers. Youth with Autism might require deliberate and intentional time and opportunity to practice soft skills.

Let's explore some common soft skills:

PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem solving and critical thinking refer to the ability to use knowledge, facts, and data to effectively solve problems. This doesn't mean you need to have an immediate answer, but that you have the skills to figure it out.

COMMUNICATION

How we give and receive information and convey our ideas and opinions with those around us can be verbal (sounds, language, and tone of voice), aural (listening and hearing), non-verbal (facial expressions, body language, and posture), written (journals, emails, blogs, and text messages), and visual (signs, symbols, and pictures). Some challenges in the workplace are learning the specific communication styles of others and how and when to share your ideas or concerns.

COLLABORATION/TEAMWORK

Employers often look to hire people who know how to work well with others. Teamwork involves building relationships and working cooperatively, contributing ideas, communicating (both giving and receiving), and understanding different opinions.

PROFESSIONALISM

Conducting oneself with responsibility, integrity, accountability, and excellence is important. Professionalism means communicating effectively and appropriately and always finding a way to be productive. Professional employees look clean and neat and dress appropriately for the job. Professionalism is not an easy skill to develop since it is a combination of many different skills and can take years of experience to perfect.

Adapted from [US Dept. of Labor Soft Skills to Pay the Bills](#)



What can professionals and other supporters do to promote building soft skills?

Understand that for many youth with disabilities, including those with Autism, soft skills have to be introduced, developed, refined, practiced, and reinforced over time. It is important to provide a safe and predictable environment where youth can make mistakes, learn, and know they can continue to try.

Any of the suggestions in the **career exploration and work-based learning** section offer a venue for practicing soft skills! Identify specific skills to build, practice, and monitor. There is also a range of curricula, including [Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success](#) written by the Office of Disability and Employment Policy at the United States Department of Labor. The curriculum offers activities for participants to practice communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking, and professionalism.

3. Building youth self-determination

Self-determination is the process of defining one's own direction. A self-determined person creates their own personal goals and takes responsibility for their actions. They participate actively in determining how these goals will be achieved. This can occur with or without support from others. A self-determined person knows, and fully understands, what choices are available and knows how to find help if they need it. Self-determination is different from self-advocacy, which means speaking up for your rights.

Many young people with Autism are stopped from making their own choices as they grow up, mostly because others presume they are incompetent. Strong youth self-determination has been known to predict good employment outcomes in people with disabilities.

What can professionals and other supporters do to encourage youth self-determination?

UNDERSTAND THAT SELF-DETERMINATION IS A SKILL THAT YOUTH OFTEN MUST LEARN.

The freedom to make choices and take risks has not always been available to some people with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities. Youth with Autism will learn self-determination with real-life experience, like taking risks and making mistakes. It includes knowing how having Autism might affect one's life and their decisions. It is important to be aware that for some, understanding that choices are available, making decisions, and owning the responsibility for decisions are skills they need to practice and learn.



PRACTICING MAKING DECISIONS

Part of building youth self-determination is creating opportunities of youth to practice making everyday decisions from an early age. Supported decision making is an approach that allows youth with disabilities to make choices about their own lives with support from a team of people they choose. Their team becomes a support network to help youth with decision making. Youth with Autism may need assistance making decisions related to school, health care, relationships, and finances, but they can work with a trusted network of supporters to review and consider options to help them make their own decisions. Learn more about supported decision making.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP AT IEP MEETINGS.

Another opportunity to develop youth self-determination is by having students lead their own annual individual education program (IEP) meetings where they discuss their own progress and set goals for the following year. Student-led IEPs can empower youth to actively contribute to the planning and implementation of their goals.

Ways to help youth with Autism to take leadership during the IEP process include:

- » **Support students to learn the IEP terminology and processes.** Professionals and others can support students to develop a better understanding of the IEP components and related terms from the IEP document and during the meeting.
- » **Seek student's input about the IEP in advance.** A student-led IEP should include the student's own ideas, interests, and preferences.
- » **Provide rehearsal opportunities.** Students with Autism would benefit from rehearsing useful skills prior to an IEP meeting. Simulation meetings can help students practice introducing themselves, asking questions, expressing personal strengths and interests, and practice using Zoom or a PowerPoint presentation.

[Adapted from Virginia Dept. of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Center](#)



Adapted from PACER's "[The Transition to Employment: What Parents Can Do Now](#)"

4. Family Involvement

Ongoing family involvement is critical to ensuring future success in competitive integrated employment. In fact, high parent expectations are often a stronger predictor of post high-school employment than the young adult's skills and school programs. All young adults with Autism need parents, family members, and other caring adults who not only maintain high expectations for employment, but who provide positive reinforcement and remain involved in their lives and assist them toward adulthood. **Through their involvement, families can help youth meet the other three predictors (career exploration and work-based learning, building soft skills, and facilitating youth self-determination)!**

Families are important because they can:

- » connect the young adult to information and resources
- » maintain an active role in formal transition planning with schools
- » encourage exploration and transition planning outside of the resources offered at schools
- » access their own personal and professional networks to increase employment opportunities
- » support the young adult's understanding of what it means to have Autism and how it may affect their employment
- » support their young adult to practice decision making early and often in preparation for decision making as it relates to employment
- » educate the young adult around their rights and responsibilities under various disability-related legislation
- » support the identification of soft skills in the home through coaching and practice
- » facilitate knowledge of and access to programs, services, supports, and workplace accommodations
- » actively engage in an individualized planning process to assist in the development of future goals and objectives as they relate to employment

Professionals and other supporters can encourage family members to:

Support the youth's self-exploration. A young person should answer questions such as:

- » What do I do well?
- » What is hard for me?
- » What do I like and what do I not like to do?

Self-exploration can include taking career interest or personal interest assessments; exploring and identifying strengths, including how they learn best; understanding the youth's support needs; and developing a personal trajectory for their employment futures, such as those offered in Charting the LifeCourse, which was mentioned earlier.

NURTURE THE YOUNG ADULT'S CAREER EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE AND BEGIN TO TAKE SMALL STEPS.

This can reduce the anxiety and stress related to a sudden transition upon high school, particularly for young adults with Autism who may find sudden change challenging. Parents should focus more on the gradual steps they can take toward the hopeful goal, rather than the time it takes to get there.

COMMUNICATE THE EXPECTATION THAT THEIR YOUTH WILL BECOME EMPLOYED.

Parents help youth prepare for adult work by providing positive adult models to follow; exposure to careers and occupations; clear expectations – neither too high nor too low; contacts and networks in the community; positive reinforcement and positive values and attitudes around employment.

ENHANCE THEIR YOUTH'S SOFT SKILLS.

There are many ways parents can build youth soft skills, such as encouraging daily chores or responsibilities and providing rewards upon completion. Families can help youth by practicing appropriate interactions with others and maintaining a professional appearance for work.

USE THEIR PERSONAL NETWORKS AS A JOB SEARCH STRATEGY TO LAUNCH THEIR YOUTH'S JOB SEARCH.

Family members can seek opportunities through coworkers, relatives, and neighbors. They can be instrumental in combining community relationships, a young person's interests, and family or personal networks to help a young person effectively explore work-based learning outside of school settings.

Adapted from [NCWD Understanding the New Vision for Career Development: The Role of Family, Preparing for Employment: On the Home Front](#), and [Pacer's Getting a Job](#).

The authors recommend the following resources that we used to develop this toolkit:

[Competitive Integrated Employment for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Toolkit for Professionals and Advocates in the Autism Community](#). This publication offers a detailed overview of competitive integrated employment for individuals with Autism including why it's important. The purpose of the document is to share considerations and resources for professionals and advocates who working with job seekers.

[Volunteering, Internships and Unpaid Work Experiences: Legal and Practical Guidelines](#): This brief examines issues around how to carefully engage in volunteering, internships, and unpaid work experiences including the role that each can play when assisting and supporting individuals with disabilities.

[The National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth \(NCWD\) Guideposts](#): This document includes evidence-based “Guideposts for Success” for youth transitioning from school to adulthood. The Guideposts include a statement of principles; a direction that will lead to better outcomes for all young people; and a way to organize policy and practice.

[Charting the LifeCourse Nexus](#): This tool is for people with disabilities, their family members, and workplaces. The framework helps people organize ideas, visions, and goals. It also can help with problem-solving and learning to advocate for supports.

[Charting the LifeCourse: Daily Living and Employment Toolkit](#): This toolkit is focuses on day-to-day life and employment skills for people with disabilities, their families, and support people. It helps guide people with disabilities through decisions about transitioning from youth to adulthood, and includes resources for career and job searching, volunteer positions, and continuing education.

[Work-Based Learning for Students with High Support Needs: Themes, Strategies, and Policy Recommendations](#): This brief explains the research-based strengths of work-based learning, as well as effective work-based learning strategies, supports, and structures.

