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Ways to Prepare Your Child with Disabilities for Employment and Life

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My greatest struggle with autism was not my speech delay, sensory processing issues, meltdowns, learning disabilities or even social interaction, although all of these were challenges. It was, in fact, employment. Only three percent of people with autism in the US are gainfully employed. I was not gainfully employed until I was 32 years old, even though I had two bachelor's degrees and a master's.

I have now been working for over 13 years in the mental health field as a psychiatric care specialist/nurse technician, and for 18 years part-time as a professor of theology at Destiny School of Ministry. I founded Spectrum Inclusion to empower and help prepare young adults with autism and Asperger's for employment and independence.

The best description I have heard of the challenges of autism and employment came from a co-worker with Asperger's that I met when I worked at Crossroads for Youth. This individual had a master's degree in social work and was diagnosed with Asperger's as a teenager. He told me the following:

People like me with Asperger's are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. I just lack the social skills to read people and the social graces to say things that don't offend. I have been fired from my share of jobs over the past few years by saying the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time! The only job I am able to maintain is as a taxicab driver because clients are forced to listen to my stories since I am in the driver's seat.

Employment and transitioning into adulthood can be extremely difficult and discouraging for young adults with disabilities or autism. I would like to share five ways you can empower your child with a disability for employment and the transition into adulthood. My parents implemented these strategies while raising me, and I am now enjoying the fruits of their labor.

I. Teach your child basic life skills, and include those skills in your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Most high school seniors look forward to graduating with expectations of attending college or a trade school as they pursue a career. Many young adults with autism, on the other hand, fear the future and feel anxiety about the transition to adulthood when they graduate. They are especially anxious about moving out of their parents' home or attending college.

Transitioning to adulthood can include: completing school; gaining employment; participating in postsecondary education; contributing to a household; participating in the community; and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships. The skills that an individual with disabilities and autism needs for a successful transition are self-management, self-determination, self-care and community involvement.

While federal law requires that high school students develop a transition plan by age 14, the reality is that only 58 percent of students with autism have actually done so. Temple Grandin wrote the following:

About fifty thousand people with ASD turn eighteen every year in the United States alone. That's a little late to be thinking about adulthood. I tell parents that by the time their ASD kids are eleven or twelve, the parents should be thinking about what the kids are going to do when they grow up. Nobody needs to make a final decision at that point, but the parents should start considering the possibilities so that they have time to help prepare the child.¹



Parents share the responsibility of ensuring their children learn the basic skills that will enable them to function within society and gain employment. Some of these essential skills include: proper hygiene, healthy self-esteem, dependability, diplomacy, polite manners, self-advocacy and workplace politics. Be sure to incorporate these qualities into your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) as learning objectives and goals, and include tangible ways of applying them in the classroom. My parents worked diligently with my teachers in developing my IEPs so that I'd learn skills for transitioning into adulthood and be employable.

II. Don't allow hopelessness to hinder your child's ability to transition into adulthood.

Every milestone and major event in my life took me longer than my peers and brothers. I graduated from high school at 20. I was 35 before I had a long-term relationship. I moved out of my parents' home at age 36. I got married at age 37, and became a father at 41. My first book was published when I was 42. My third book, *Views from the Spectrum*, was published in May 2021 when I was 46. I am currently writing my fourth book, and have completed nine out of 12 chapters. The working title is *Autism, Growth and Transitioning into Adulthood*. These delays in achievements can be very depressing. They can create learned hopelessness, which hinders growth.

Learned helplessness is behavior that occurs when an individual endures painful or otherwise aversive stimuli repeatedly which he or she is unable to avoid. The fruit of hopelessness is despair, lack of motivation, a fear of trying new things, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

Praise and self-efficacy were instrumental in helping me overcome my hopelessness complex. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in the ability to execute the actions needed to achieve the desired outcomes. Deborah Reber, whose son has Asperger's, offered the following advice:

I'm convinced that the greatest gift we can give our differently wired kids is the knowledge of who they are, how their brains work, and what they need to do to create the life they want. Because when we guide our children along the path of self-discovery, they can feel good about themselves, develop self-advocacy skills, and ultimately grow up to be self-realized adults.²

III. In transitions, small accomplishments lead to future growth.

In my life, small accomplishments led to my success with relationships, academics and employment. Some small learning steps can occur through family chores, volunteer work and early employment outside the home.

Family chores develop skills for transitioning into adulthood because they require self-management, negotiation and problem-solving skills. Parenting expert Katherine Reynolds Lewis shared the following on the importance of family chores:

Children and young adults with autism love routines, and family chores can be a daily routine. Have children do chores at the same time each day, such as after dinner or before homework. This will teach them to be organized, boost self-confidence and raise their sense of responsibility. Some good family chores are watering plants, folding laundry, emptying the dishwasher, vacuuming, making the bed, simple food preparation, and feeding a pet.

Adults think they're helping children by doing these tasks themselves, or outsourcing them. In fact, not giving them simple household chores deprives kids of the chance to build skills and be useful. Just think about how disorienting and demoralizing it is for adults to find themselves jobless — is it any surprise that children without any real responsibilities are increasingly anxious and depressed? Moreover, parents miss the opportunity to connect with kids while teaching them cleaning, laundry, cooking, bike repair, lawn work, and other necessary tasks.³



In addition, use “first, then” language to provide rewards for chores completed. For example, you could say, “First dishes, then TV.” This way, your child knows the order of things and what to expect. Your child can’t expect the reward of TV or video games until the dishes are completed. This allows you to give the reward without your child feeling that he or she cannot watch TV or play video games if the dishes are not done. Putting a different spin on the request means your child will have a more productive and positive mindset.

Children also develop social skills and learn teamwork by volunteering. Such work allows your child to participate in the community, break free from isolation, experience a sense of achievement, and make new friends. The Humane Society, YMCA, Habitat for Humanity, food pantries, local libraries and art museums are great places for volunteer work.

A recent job study found that 42 percent of the people who are responsible for hiring workers consider volunteer work equal to full-time work experience. One out of every five managers in the U.S. hired a candidate because of their volunteer experience.

Early employment prepared me for the transition to college and a career. My dad had a Protestant work ethic and encouraged me to work from an early age. His motto was found in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 in the Bible, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” When I was twelve years old, I was cutting our one-acre lawn with a heavy push lawn mower for 10 dollars a week. I had my first job outside of the home at age 14 as a busboy. Having a job at a young age helped me to learn life skills, such as budgeting and saving money, dealing with angry customers, and making friends with co-workers. All these skills were seeds to independence and a career.

IV. Focus on your child’s interests rather than his or her disabilities and weaknesses.

Special interests lead to independence. When I was seven years old, my mom gave me a stuffed toy prairie dog for Christmas. From kindergarten until eighth grade, prairie dogs were my special interest. While most boys played with GI Joe, He-Man, Star Wars and Atari video games in the 1980s, I carried around a stuffed prairie dog named Prairie Pup. I quickly became an expert in my unique interest, and could describe every detail about a prairie dog’s life.

My mom harnessed my love for animals and prairie dogs to teach me art, reading and writing. Prairie Pup was instrumental in teaching me social skills and helping me gain confidence in communicating with girls. The girls in my third-grade class created stylish outfits for Prairie Pup: one dressed Prairie Pup in a cowboy costume, while another made an astronaut outfit. One girl even made him a Victorian dress.

In fourth grade, I won the Detroit Edison Drawing contest for Oakland County by creating a poster that showed Prairie Pup and his furry friends building a tree fort near electrical wires. The caption on the poster stated, “Don’t Become a Furry Fried Friend by Building Your Fort Near Power Lines.” For the prize, Prairie Pup and I met the then captain of the Pistons basketball team and NBA Hall of Fame inductee Isiah Thomas.

Jasmine Lee O’Neill, an author with autism, gave the following advice to parents:

Use things the autistic individual enjoys to spark her interests. If she likes music and hums to herself, use music as an introduction to relating to other people. It is a falsehood that autistics do not relate. Rather, they relate in their own ways.⁴

Rather than downplaying your child's special interests, exploit them to build skills for the transition into adulthood.

V. Let your child choose what adulthood looks like for him or her.

Remember that your child does not need to be like you to be happy. Being an adult means making decisions for yourself. A year ago, I was reminded of this truth by a young adult with autism. This young adult sent me the following message on Facebook:

My mom read your books and articles. After reading your writings, she began hounding me to be like you. She would say, "Ron's autistic and has a family, so why can't you also get married and make me a grandmother?" I don't want to have children or get married. With my sensory issues related to sound, a loud child would drive me insane and make me miserable! P.S. Could you please write my mom and let her know how I feel, and that being a father would not be a good thing for me?

I talked with this young man on the phone and emailed his mother. I let her know that her son is a mature young man, and that she needs to treat him like an adult and let him make choices for himself. Kelly Williams Brown, author of *Adulthood: How to Become a Grown-up in 535 Easy(ish) Steps*, said the following:

Adult isn't a noun; it's a verb. It's the act of making correctly those small decisions that fill our day. It is something that you can practice and that can be done in concrete steps.⁵

As you give your child opportunities to make choices and mistakes, he or she will gain wisdom and transition into adulthood with confidence. For a successful transition, you need to teach your child to set goals and develop skills for independence and employment. The key to my success was self-efficacy: the confidence to try new things and to not be afraid to fail.

Empowering Children with Autism & Learning Challenges to Thrive Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGp7MPgNnHM>

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