



Work: Making a Contribution

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A common fear for parents as their child with disabilities grows up is that he or she will sit at home all day after graduation and do nothing. They wonder, how do I assist my child to have a full, meaningful day? A primary answer for these concerns is WORK!

From *A Good Life*, by Al Etmanski, comes the idea that everyone must work, no matter the disability. Work in this book is defined as making a contribution, and everyone deserves the opportunity to make a contribution to his or her community, to use his talents and follow her passion. Work has many benefits as well: work gives meaning to our lives, provides a routine, a schedule, a reason to get up and get going every day, connects us with people, makes us feel useful, and possibly earns money!

These beliefs about work mean that we must consider our children's gifts and then find a place where they can use those gifts. This perspective leads to a new way of thinking about our children: instead of seeing disabilities, we must now look for abilities. Focusing on their abilities and interests will be the first step in building work opportunities for our children.

Another important key is expanding our view of work. We usually think of work as the 8-5 job we've been doing for years, but that model may not work for your child. We will expand the concept of work to include volunteering, working part-time, and entrepreneurship or self-employment; a person's work might be 40 hours a week or 1 hour a week, or somewhere in between. Remember, our definition of work is making a contribution, and all of these forms of work fit that definition.

I hope that so far, I've convinced you to consider work as an important part of your child's life as he or she grows up. But how do you get started? What can help your child learn about work and find the right path? To get started we must give them work experience and call on all our resources, at home and school, to create work opportunities.

Encourage your child to gain work experience at home and in the neighborhood.

Look for tasks around the house and neighborhood your child might be able to do and encourage him or her to do them regularly, tasks such as yard work, pet care, picking up mail and papers while the neighbors are out of town, watering plants, babysitting, running errands, anything that promotes your child's sense that work is important and gives him work experience. It's important to keep a log—see what your child can do, what help is needed, what makes him or her happy and engaged.

What services can your child provide that are in demand? Look around at your elder neighbors-

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-they may need someone to watch TV with or teach them how to use their electronic gadgets, run errands or cook some meals for them. Likewise your busiest neighbors may be eager to pay someone to walk the dog, water the plants, run to the grocery store, and so on.

Use school to gain work skills and experience.

Push your child's school to help with the "everyone can work" project. Some of the ways that school can help your child gain work skills and experience are:

- Classes to develop work skills, resume writing, good work habits, etc
- Internships to gain work experience (usually un-paid), first on campus and then off campus (Community-Based Vocational Instruction or CBVI)
- Off-campus paid work in the last year or so of school. A school VAC (Vocational Adjustment Counselor) or a supported employment coach can help your child find a job and provide job coaching as your child learns to do a job.

Ask school staff to sit down with you and your child (not at an ARD!) to brain-storm about work options for your child. Some of the ideas might be translated into IEP goals. Here are some questions to ask at a brain-storming meeting:

- What are your child's talents, strengths and abilities?
- What does she love to do? What are his likes and dislikes? What motivates her? What does he get excited about?
- Does your child like quiet or noise, inside or outside? Consider what kind of environment will work best for your child.
- What supports does she need to work?
- What work opportunities are available near home or on a bus line? Remember, you may be providing the transportation later!

Find a supportive work environment.

- Look for a place for your child to gain work experience or to find a job where people care for others and have heart for their work. Consider schools, churches, a seminary, or a non-profit or agency that supports people with disabilities,
- Look for a place that is already diverse. Notice the grocery stores, hardware stores, pharmacies where people with disabilities already work. Their presence shows a willingness to hire and to adapt the work-place to suit the person. Sometimes, instead of a small caring place, you might find opportunities at a state agency or a big company that has a hiring requirement or policy to promote work for people with disabilities.
- Consider self-employment. Self-employment can be more flexible and creative and truly promote work geared to your child's energy level, interests and abilities.

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Develop a group to help with the job search.

- One way to keep the job search effort going is to create an employment network or support group to help carry out your child's job quest. It could be made up of school staff, friends, family, neighbors, and people whose job is to assist your child.
- Do you know other parents who would like to team up to create a work collaborative? Perhaps a group could advertise together to provide yard work, computer repair, errand running, set up for parties or church events. The group might make it easier on each parent and also provide supports and companionship for the group of workers.
- Who in the brain-storming group has community connections that can help your child get started with a job or pursue an interest? Who can help build a website to advertize your child's business, help with business cards, etc.?

Find long-term supports to keep your child working.

Once your child has established a job, whether self-employed or at a work site, he or she may need short-term job coaching or long-term supports. The first place to turn after graduation is DARS (Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services) for assistance with finding a job, providing on-site job coaching and paying for equipment and learning opportunities related to getting and keeping a job. DARS services will be fairly short-term but can be accessed again if your child loses his or her job. To learn more about DARS services, ask your child's school staff or check the website: <http://www.dars.state.tx.us/drs/vr.shtml>

Medicaid Waiver Programs and services for Intellectual Disabilities may provide job development and job coaching services. Ask your service provider about assistance to find and keep a job. See <http://www.dads.state.tx.us/services/listofservices.html#physical>

If your child is working and getting paid yet wants to maintain eligibility for public funding (SSI, Medicaid, etc), PASS plans can be set up to allow your child to save money for a work-related one time expense, for example post-secondary education, equipment or a van, or long-term supports. (see <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/ssi/spotlights/spot-plans-self-support.htm>)

It may sound overwhelming to plan for work opportunities for your child, but keep in mind that work is the one thing after graduation that will make a difference every day. It can give your child focus, relationships, a positive way to spend the day, a sense of achievement, a purpose. It can encourage growth and learning after school ends. It opens doors and provides a way for your child to express himself, follow her passion, make a contribution. What could be more important?

A Good Life, by Al Etanski, comes out of a Vancouver parent organization, PLAN; their website is www.plan.ca. You can find this book at <https://plan-31.myshopify.com/collections/books> or check at amazon.com to see if you can find a cheaper, used copy.

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