

# STRATEGIES TO PREPARE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT

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*As parents of children with disabilities, we worry about a lot of things, and as our child approaches the teen years, those worries expand to include what our child's vocation will be, and how they can support themselves.*

**T**hese concerns are understandable. According to 2021 statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, the employment rate for individuals with disabilities is 19.1% compared to a 63.7% employment rate for individuals without a disability. While this differential is

sobering, employment rates for individuals with disabilities have made positive gains. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped many employers see the value of remote work for some positions, opening up many possibilities to the disabilities community.

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**GETTING TO WORK:** Using the practical framework of developing and building a Career Portfolio can help you and your child begin the process with a clear and shared goal.



**E**mployment provides an individual with financial independence, a sense of being valued, being part of a team, and can improve an individual's overall quality of life. As parents, there is much we can do to advocate for our child, and help them prepare for employment. And your child's school will be working toward that goal, as well.

The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) of 2014 mandates that transition planning must occur for every child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) by the time the child turns 16, and in some states, it begins at age 14. Transition goals are generally established in three areas: post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living. Age appropriate, measurable post-school goals are based upon transition assessments that your child's school will conduct related to training, education, employment, and independent living skills. It's important to think of transition planning not as a one-time assessment, but rather as an ongoing process, that evolves with your child as they try different activities and deter-

mine what might be suitable for them. You'll want to find out the age at which transition planning begins in your state to be prepared for the process.

Thinking about your child's eventual independence can be overwhelming, and it's difficult to know where to start. In our experience, having a framework to approach this process can be very helpful. You can start by preparing a notebook or binder (paper or electronic) that will serve as your child's Career Portfolio. Eventually your child's Career Portfolio will include:

- 1) *Transition plan - IEP with Transition goals*
- 2) *Your child's personal information*
- 3) *Your child's identification documents*
- 4) *Classwork samples*
- 5) *Resume*
- 6) *Log of work-related, job-shadowing and/or volunteer activities completed*
  - a) Job applications
  - b) Volunteer applications

## WORKING KNOWLEDGE: EIGHT STRATEGIES TO PREPARE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT

Parents of children with disabilities worry about what their child's vocation will be and how they can support themselves. Using the Career Portfolio framework, you can work with your child's multi-disciplinary team to identify area(s) where your child would benefit from additional skill-building. You can also integrate this planning and exploration process into your family's routine and help your child to think about what kind of employment might be right for them.

### 1. ASK YOUR CHILD PROBING QUESTIONS

For example, as you visit a store, note with your child the different jobs that are taking place there. Point out employees stocking shelves, working in the check-out line, or working in the bakery. Ask them which of these activities they might want to explore. This will help you and your child have context as you discuss work activities that could be included in your child's transition plan.



([www.thewatsoninstitute.org/watson-life-resources/situation/school-community-based-instruction](http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/watson-life-resources/situation/school-community-based-instruction)) on maximizing the home and your child's school for developing work skills. You can view a video on school-based jobs

at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC3jf5qja5c&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC3jf5qja5c&t=4s)

### 3. FOSTER YOUR CHILD'S INTERESTS TO EXPLORE RELATED WORK

Does your child like to cook or bake? Spend some time in the kitchen with your child to learn their particular interests.

Visit a restaurant, grocery store or bakery to

show the layout and talk about what one might do there. Help continue the learning by taking an online cooking class - and as a bonus, you could participate together. Does your child enjoy video games or working on the computer?

Research online classes to build their computer skills. Keep a copy of the completion certificate for their Career



Portfolio.

Does your child like to create things? Many museums and libraries have Makerspaces where you can take your child to explore this interest. Your community may have an artist market where these products are sold. Visit one with your child to see what interests them.

### 4. PRACTICE INDEPENDENCE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

You and your child can practice using public transportation together, as well as going to the library and checking out books. Involve your child in meal-planning, preparing a shopping list, clipping coupons and grocery shopping.

Give your child money to pay for the groceries to learn about money-handling.

These activities require social interaction with others and will build your child's confidence - and independence. You can check out other free resources to teach independence to your child with disabilities

([www.thewatsoninstitute.org/watson-life-resources/topic/independence](http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/watson-life-resources/topic/independence))

### 2. THINK OF YOUR HOME AND SCHOOL AS A JOB SITE

Think about work opportunities in your child's school and your home, such as shredding documents, collecting the garbage and/or recycling, watering plants, wiping counters, setting the table and putting away groceries. These opportunities can teach your child valuable on-the-job soft skills, such as interacting with others, following a schedule, taking direction, and how to sequence a task. You can check out this resource

- 7) Notes on Transition goal progress
- 8) Letters of recommendation
- 9) Certificates for any webinars, trainings or classes completed
- 10) Communications with Your Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services Representative

**A**pproaching the transition to adulthood and employment can be an intimidating, stressful time for both the parent and child. Using the practical framework of developing and building a Career Portfolio can help you and your child begin the process with a clear and shared goal. Also, having this structure can remove the uncertainty from the process, while helping you approach the process with enthusiasm, as you explore your child's future opportunities - together! •

The Watson Institute helps children with special needs achieve their fullest potential in all aspects of their lives.

<https://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/functional-behavior-assessment>

<https://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/behavior-intervention-plan>

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

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**5. ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO VOLUNTEER**

Volunteering is a terrific pre-employment activity to foster your child's interests while building work-adjacent skills. For example, does your child love animals? They could volunteer at an animal shelter. Through this activity, your child will learn to follow a schedule, dress appropriately for volunteering, determine how to get to and from the volunteer assignment, and interact with a supervisor. Help your child to track the volunteer hours and any feedback received for the Career Portfolio. Ask about their day – what your child liked and didn't like. Using the insights about likes and dislikes, you can help your child to consider other volunteering opportunities. Be sure to retain copies of volunteering documentation for their Career Portfolio.



then organize the items and deliver them to the shelter. This is a flexible way to approach a volunteer activity.

Record your child's efforts in their Career Portfolio!

And as an added bonus, many high schools have a community service requirement. Your child can most likely use these volunteer hours to meet that graduation requirement.

**6. TAKE YOUR CHILD TO WORK (AND OTHER'S WORK)**

If your workplace participates in Take Your Kids to Work Day – do so – even if it's a portion of the day. This will help your child to experience what you do each day and is a job-shadowing



opportunity. Do you have friends

and family members who work in fields that are of potential interest to your child?

Ask friends and family members if your child can shadow them for a partial day or full day, as well. And remember to document these activities for your child's Career

Portfolio.

**7. INTERVIEWS**

Do you have a family gathering coming up? Ask family members if they will participate in an interview in which your child asks them about their work. Assist your child in developing a list of questions, such as:

- 1)Where do you work?
- 2)How do you travel to and from work each day?
- 3)How do you spend your day at work?
- 4)What's your favorite thing about your work?
- 5) What do you like the least about your work?

Take time to talk with your child about the responses received, and anything learned that may spark their interest in exploring a particular kind of work.

**8. WORK ELIGIBILITY DOCUMENTATION**

In the United States, your child will need documentation to prove eligibility to work, for example; The Employment Eligibility Verification (Form I-9) ([www.uscis.gov/i-9](http://www.uscis.gov/i-9)). Similar documentation will be needed if your child chooses to enroll in an Adult Training Facility (ATF) or other community program. Review this form and have that information ready in your child's Career Portfolio.

