

## 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.





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





### *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