

INTRODUCTION

Family is important for many reasons: family members can motivate people to work, and can help them understand why work is important. Families can also have a big influence on self-determination and empowerment, helping people develop a real understanding of themselves and their place in the workplace. Their involvement is important throughout a person's life.

The information for this Tools for Inclusion came from a research study in Massachusetts. We interviewed 16 people with intellectual disabilities and their families and employment staff to understand how they make decisions about work and how their family members help them make decisions. "Family" can mean: two parents, one parent, step-parents, older and younger siblings, or extended family members such as aunts, uncles or grandparents.

The purpose of this Tools for Inclusion is to share people's thoughts and feelings about how their families help them make decisions throughout their lives. We also include tips so that families can be more involved in helping people find and keep jobs. Findings and ideas for families are offered for each of the four phases:

Phase One: The Early Years

Phase Two: Planning for Work

Phase Three: The Job Search

Phase Four: Making the Decision to Accept a Job

What is Self-Determination?

Self-determination is the ability for people to:

- Control their lives
- Reach set goals
- Take part fully in the world around them

The right to self-determination includes individuals with all types of disabilities.

Source: Center on Self-Determination, Oregon Institute on Disability & Development. www.ohsu.edu/oidd/CSD/aboutcsd.cfm

Phase One: The Early Years

The first part of the employment path is called "the early years" or during childhood. People's family was the most important influence at this time in his/her life. Families were influential because they role-modeled employment, and set up the expectation that adults should work.

Role-modeling employment. One person's family set the expectation that he should work hard, just like the other adults in his family. His mother and sister talked to him about their first jobs. Another individual watched his two older brothers go to work, and then move out on their own. He wanted to do the same.

Family members talked about work as a way to make money and then become more independent. They also role-modeled employment, showing by their own example why it's important to work.

One parent said:

"He [my son] knew I've always worked. He grew up knowing that I was at work every day. Never missed

work. Always had to do it. And I always told him I have to work so I can support you. I have to work so you have a roof over your head. I said, 'You're going to have to do the same.' And it's just how I brought him up."

His son said:

"...my father always said to me that I could have a good life if I try and get a job and I could have money to spend, like my own money to spend..."

Setting the expectation that adults should work.

Through years of watching their family members work, expectations about work became deeply rooted. One family member said: "[Working] is what he sees around him, and he thinks that's the normal way to grow up."

Tips for families during the early years:

- ▶ Encourage simple tasks at home (for example, helping to clean up after dinner). With each year, increase responsibilities for family chores.
- ▶ Read books and view videos about different types of jobs. Exploring websites such as www.kidsnewsroom.com or www.kids.gov can encourage young learners to investigate different careers.
- ▶ Participate in "Take your Child to Work" day so early on s/he is exposed to what it's like to go to work.
- ▶ Talk about what your family member might want to do for work and begin to document the steps it will take to achieve this goal.

Phase 2: Planning for Work

Planning for work begins when an individual is deciding what type of job to look for. It is sometimes referred to as "career planning." During this phase,

families in our study ranged from being very involved to being less involved. Those that were less involved talked about: not wanting to be thought of as a hovering parent, receiving limited communication from employment staff, and being concerned that employment staff are the "experts" and not wanting to get in the way. One parent talked about how she felt that the employment staff person knew more than she did:

"I liked the fact that [the job coach] prepared her and taught her how to interview, because she respected what they said a lot more than what we said because, of course, we're Mom and Dad... These people are trained. They know better; you don't."

Family members have considerable insight about the job seeker, and can contribute a great deal to the process of planning for work without getting in the way. They should see themselves as an important resource during the career development process.

Tips for families when planning for work:

- ▶ Stay connected to employment staff and share what you know about your family member and what he or she likes to do.
- ▶ Talk regularly about what your family member likes and doesn't like about their experiences at work, their goals, and their dream job. Every new experience teaches more about what makes a good job match.
- ▶ Talk to families of people who are working in the community to understand what was important to them when planning for their job.
- ▶ Encourage your family member to participate in community-building opportunities like volunteering. This will help him or her meet more people and be exposed to different types of jobs.

Phase 3: The Job Search

Many family members in the study had opinions about good job matches. However, at times family members acknowledged needing help raising their expectations:

“Well, she’s been asking for a particular job since she was in school, and we really didn’t think that was going to be a reality because most people who work in that field need accreditation of some kind. They need training; they need to pass a couple of courses at college...[But the employment staff] actually had kept feelers out looking for her and kept trying to find something in her field.”

Some parents tried to protect their family members from negative experiences. They were aware of their family members’ strengths, but also talked about how they were afraid for them to fail. One parent watched her son get fired from his first job because the right supports were not in place. She did not want this one experience to shape his expectations:

“He was just put in a place and no one really worked with him...It was his first job, and I didn’t want him to come away with, ‘I worked at a place three days and I got fired.’”

So what can families do to better support individuals and their employment staff as they look for jobs?

Tips for families during the job search:

- ▶ Stay involved in the job search through communication with the job developer. Although job developers are professionally trained, families also have valuable resources to offer.
- ▶ Share your personal or professional networks with job developers so that there is a wider net available to help your family member find job leads. Provide introductions to friends or acquaintances and see what opportunities may develop.

- ▶ Don’t get stuck on what your family member can’t do. Focus on what s/he can and/or wants to do, and what supports will be needed to make this happen.
- ▶ Help your family member become skilled at job interviewing. Talk about practice interview questions, how to dress, and how to make a good first impression on a potential employer.

Phase 4: Making the Decision to Accept a Job

This phase seemed to be the time when family members were least involved. Family members were influential in whether or not the individual chose to work, but less involved in the job search and helping a person decide whether to take a particular job. During Phase 4, family may be able to help make a job possible by supporting transportation, or helping the person make sure that a potential job would be a good fit.

Tips for families when supporting individuals to make a decision to accept a job:

Accepting a job is a choice. Help your family member make a list of the pros and cons for accepting a position s/he is considering. Some questions to think about:

- ▶ What about this job will make you happy?
- ▶ Is this job a good fit for your skills and your interests?
- ▶ What might be difficult about this job?
- ▶ How easy is it to get to? How will you get there?
- ▶ What other opportunities might this job lead you to?

Sometimes choosing to not take a job offer is the right thing. Be careful to keep all job options open.

Conclusion

Having family members involved is important throughout a person's life. In the early years, parents can introduce the idea of work, be role models, and set the expectation of work for the future. While a person is searching for a job, families can help them explore their options, extend their networks, and make informed decisions about jobs. This should be done together with employment staff. Acknowledging everyone's expertise and building relationships between the family, individual, and employment staff will help individuals to use all of the resources available to them to find meaningful and fulfilling jobs.



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