

Transition to Work

Tips for Individuals with Autism/Asperger's and their Parents, Teachers, and Employers

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Foreward

Most individuals with autism have difficulty finding employment. One large national study reported that only 10% of adults with autism are employed, and another large national study reported similar percentages for those with Asperger's, half of whom had college degrees.

The purpose of this article is to provide some basic advice for individuals with autism and their parents, teachers, and employers, along with references for more information. Our hope is that this information will help individuals with autism find meaningful employment and begin the path of self sufficiency.

"Everyone with autism can lead a successful life" – Jerry Newport, author and adult with autism

Middle School

Middle school (or earlier) can be a great time to learn job skills at home by doing household chores. Simple chores can include washing dishes, setting the table, and emptying the garbage. More complex chores could involve cleaning a floor or doing laundry. Very complex tasks could involve shopping for food, cooking food, and cleaning up after cooking.

One option is to create a visual checklist for these chores, so that the person knows what is expected of them each day. They can check off the task when they complete it. At the end of each day or week they can total the points they received, and receive a prize such as tv or computer time or cash. A visual checklist provides clear expectations, so that individuals know clearly what is expected of them.

Initially each chore will need to be taught and supervised, but the goal is to slowly fade that supervision, so that eventually the person can do simple and then more complex chores independently. Eventually the checklist can replace the need for prompting to start or finish a task. When simple chores are mastered, then one can move on to more complex tasks.

These household chores can provide valuable practice of basic skills, including learning to follow directions, stay on task, complete a task, and interact appropriately with parents/supervisors. An occupational therapist (OT) may be able to help guide and support these basic skills.

High School

For individuals with autism/Asperger's who plan on starting work after high school, it is important to start transition to work planning and preparation early in high school (or before). Some high schools have "work programs" that may provide some pre-job training and placement in volunteer or even paid positions.

Families should also apply for Vocational/Rehabilitation services (see section below) at least 6-12 months prior to graduation, if they want assistance.

Rather than focus on a single job, it may be better to try exposure to several types of work opportunities, so that students have more knowledge about the types of career opportunities available to them, and can determine what they want to do.

It may be useful to start with simple jobs at the school. The goal is to learn some basic social and job skills that are needed for many jobs. These include:

- Following Directions (possibly with visual supports)
- Learning to ask for help if needed
- Staying on task
- Learning to tell their supervisor when work is done
- Appropriate interactions with supervisor and co-workers

After mastering the above job skills, it may be time to explore off-campus work, possibly with the support of vocational programs at the high-school.

The WRONG way to do a work program is to take someone to start a job without any idea of what is expected of them.

A BETTER way is to use a gradual approach to introduce people to the job. This may include:

- Job Shadowing: spending several hours “shadowing” workers, to learn what is involved in their job. This is also a good time to check for sensory sensitivities, and to consider if accommodations may be needed.
- Pre-training: After job shadowing to learn what work skills are needed, then practice the work skills at the school. For example, rather than starting to bag groceries in a grocery store, instead practice bagging at the school. The goal is for the individual to have the work skills needed to be successful when they start their job.
- Job Coach: When starting work, have a job coach present to provide guidance on how to do the job. Constant supervision may be needed initially, but the goal is to transition to less support. Visual cue checklists or other supports may help this transition to independence.
- Job Buddy: A “Job Buddy” is a co-worker who has been asked to provide limited mentoring for individuals with special needs. This might involve initially explaining the job to them, helping them if there is a problem, and introducing them to other employees. Whereas job coaches are limited in how much time they can spend on site, and they have only limited knowledge of the workplace and the workers, a current employee knows the work and the other workers, and can be immediately available if a problem arises. They can be a very cost-effective way to help people transition into a new job.

It may help to provide guidance on Social Thinking, to help people with autism better understand social issues. Social Stories may also help provide specific examples of social situations and how to understand and respond to them.

Young Adult Transitional Training Program

DDD offers the Young Adult Transition Training Program for consumers 14 through 22 who are Arizona Long Term Care (ALTCS) eligible and still in school. This teaches many of the skills

students will need to get and keep a job in their community. DDD has developed a set of 21 modules to be used by qualified DDD provider agencies. The Division is looking forward to expanding the number of agencies offering this service to eligible students and young adults.

Post-Secondary Education: Vocational Training and College

The major challenge with vocational training and college is usually not the coursework. Rather, the major challenge is developing the social skills so that after graduation they can be employed. Individuals with autism/Asperger's may have the academic skills to be successful, but often have trouble making friends and developing extra-curricular activities. When they graduate and look for a job, it is often the "soft" social skills that make a large difference in the ability to find a job and to keep it.

One option is to encourage post-secondary schools to develop peer friendship programs, like the Best Buddy programs that exist in many high schools (and a few colleges). The goal of these programs is to pair an individual with developmental disabilities with a typically-developing student for one academic year or longer. The idea is for the pairs to do some social activities together, and to also participate in Best Buddy group activities that involve multiple pairs, such as dances or parties. These individual and group activities can help individuals with autism/Asperger's learn social skills and social understanding, and also help them develop meaningful friendships with their Buddy and with other peers.

Work Options

As mentioned in the high school section, it is important to learn what type of work the individual wants to do. This may require exploring more possible jobs, including job shadowing. Pre-training of skills needed for a particular position may be needed.

After finishing high school or post-secondary education, there are several types of employment options, including Center-Based, Group-Supported, Volunteer Work, and Supported Employment (see Vocational Rehabilitation in the next section). The Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) provides funding for some of these options.

Center-Based Employment Options: Individuals with limited abilities and limited job experience may want to start with supported employment positions in a Center-based environment. These are work environments that are heavily supervised, and where basic job skills and social skills will be taught. There may be little or no salary, but the goal is to provide meaningful work in a positive and supportive environment. It is hoped that some individuals who start in these areas may eventually learn enough job skills and social skills to allow them to transition to other employment opportunities.

In the Phoenix area, some examples include:

Gompers – Based in Glendale, Gompers Vocational Program offers a range of work opportunities and training for people with disabilities– see full description below.

The Center for Habilitation (TCH) in Tempe - <http://www.tch-az.com/>

Marc Center in Mesa- www.marccenter.com/

Michael's Garden in Phoenix – www.michaelsgarden.org (this group is actually a day training agency providing experiences with arts/crafts)
Southwest Autism Research and Resource Centre – www.autismcenter.org

Group Supported Employment: Group Supported Employment in the Community is often more beneficial to consumers. It gives them the opportunity to do real work in the real world, with real workers serving as role models. Several of the agencies listed above also offer Group Supported Employment.

Community service (volunteer) sites are a great place to learn and practice soft skills needed for employment without some of the stress and demands of paid employment. It is also a valuable way to experience different fields and build a network of references.

Another avenue is employment with small startups. Often startup companies can offer flexibility in ways that traditional employers cannot. The small and intimate nature of startup companies also means that there is less red tape associated with HR and more of a focus on skills during interviews.

Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services are available to adults, but high school students can also apply. Each state has its own vocational rehabilitation services, whose goal is to provide training, support, and help in finding a job. Because they are designed to serve the general population, the case workers may have little or no understanding of autism/Asperger's. However, they sometimes subcontract their services to agencies that specialize in different areas.

In the greater Phoenix area, one agency that specializes in VR services for people with autism/Asperger's is SARRC.

The following is a description of VR services from a VR support coordinator in Arizona. Note that VR can be very flexible with their funding if it will support job placement.

VR is a very plan-driven program, meaning services are put in place to help individuals achieve a specific vocational goal. Although services to implement a vocational plan (e.g., job development and coaching, educational assistance) generally begin after the student has graduated from high school, some services could benefit students with symptoms of autism/Asperger's while they are in high school. Two are Work Exploration, in which individuals explore different occupations with the help of a specialist hired by VR, and Work Adjustment Training (WAT), in which individuals work at a specific site in order to develop positive work habits.

As noted, a program of WAT is designed to help the individual develop "soft skills," e.g., showing up to work on time, attending to task, getting along with other employees. It is a service offered to VR consumers who have an Individualized Plan of Employment, that is, a vocational plan that specifies the individual's vocational goal and services to help her/him attain that goal. (Goals, it should be noted, are not set in stone; they can be amended.) Arranging a program of WAT for high school students will require the involvement and cooperation of the school, as the training

will take place during the day. Transportation is a consideration, as individuals are responsible for getting themselves to and from the WAT site.

The VR agency can also provide evaluative services while students are in high school, including, as needed, psychological evaluations, vocational evaluations, and functional capacity evaluations. The purpose of psychological evaluations is often two-fold: to provide insight into the individual's psychological functioning and to gauge her/his cognitive and academic abilities. Cognitive and achievement testing is done using an adult scale (e.g., the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale); testing with adult scales is generally required by colleges if accommodations are sought through their Disability Resources offices).

In terms of transition services for students who will participate in post-secondary training, VR will provide funds for tuition and books (families must meet certain economic criteria if funds are to be provided for books) if that training is required for achievement of the individual's vocational goal. The Agency also provides assistive technology services, to include evaluations and the recommended AT items. Another potentially valuable service for individuals who will be enrolling in college is Supportive Education, in which assistance can be rendered to the student in helping her/him navigate the campus and enroll in courses.

Summary

I believe that most individuals with autism/Asperger's, including those with substantial challenges, are able to work productively if they are given appropriate supports and training. By exploring different career options via job shadowing, and then trying different work environments with appropriate supports and accommodations, they can find a job that they enjoy, succeed at, and are proud of.

Appendix:

GOMPERS VOCATIONAL PROGRAM

Gompers Habilitation Center has a 21,000 square foot facility in Glendale, Az. We assist program participants looking to further their employability skills through the Vocational Training Center, Enclaves and Community Placement. Gompers offers individuals with a variety of disability levels the opportunity to explore their vocational interests in a supportive environment that encourages growth and mentorship all while being financially compensated for the work they complete.

The jobs learned at our facility include light assembly work making components for local business, packaging food and medical products, collating and assembling mailers, and running automatic wrapping lines for packaging purposes. Gompers facility is also able to ship most items directly to the end source. Gompers Vocational Center also operates a complete document imaging center. The imaging center offers a variety of employment opportunities and skill training levels. They range from learning how to prepare the documents for processing, training how to operate high speed scanning equipment and performing data entry tasks. A Safeway Training Center is scheduled to open in spring 2012. This partnership with Safeway allows us to train and prepare individuals to be courtesy clerks. By offering a wide array of jobs and job types, Gompers provides individuals the opportunity to develop a variety of skills.

Gompers has developed a Career Ramp, the accessible version of the professional Career Ladder. Depending on the strengths of the person served they can begin at any level. Each of these steps sets the stage for community placement. At each level Gompers offers individuals both skill-based training as well as paid work experience on a variety of jobs. The Job Club is an initial prevocational training that is usually two-four hours per week at the Vocational Center. The next step is Careers in Progress where individuals served at Gompers split 2-3 days at the Vocational Center and/or 2-3 days at the DTA. Next is Center Based Employment where the individual works five days per week at the Vocational Center. The next opportunity is Group Supported Employment that can be community based or center based depending on the level of skill. In many cases the supported position leads to community jobs. Individual Supported Employment is community based which is a community job with some staff support which is eventually faded as the individual successfully maintains their community job.

For more information about Gompers Vocational Program, please contact the Vocational Director, at (623) 215-0845, ext. 222.