

Career Planning and Preparation For Families and Students

It is never too early or too late to start career planning. A critical time for career planning for students with disabilities is leading into high school, ages 14-22. No matter where an individual is on their journey, it all starts with an open and honest conversation where students are encouraged to share their employment goals. All students benefit from exploring what they want to be when they grow up by learning from their parents/caregivers, teachers, and other individuals in their lives, as well as having various work-related experiences along the way. For students with disabilities, the career exploration experience should be tailored to their unique interests and needs.

Careers vs Jobs

A career is a long-term path of continuous professional development that includes education, work participation, and other life experiences. It is different from a job, which is a role or position of employment. A career is a combination of roles and experiences that build over time. Preparing for competitive integrated employment and a career is a lifelong process, beginning at an early age. A key component of planning is to identify one's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs. The journey for students to discover themselves and their values starts early and continues throughout their lives.

Preparing for Careers

Preparing for careers and success in the workplace is especially important for students with disabilities because of the persistent and high unemployment rate of adults with disabilities. The following action items were taken from the [*Career Planning Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Supporting Youth with Disabilities Through the Career Planning Process*](#), developed by the Center on Transition at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Build Self-determination Skills and Self-Awareness

- Self-determination involves taking control of your life, making your own decisions, and advocating for what you want and need. These skills are essential for career and life planning.
- Another key component of planning is to identify one's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs (SPIN). The process for students to get to know themselves and

what is important in their lives should begin early and continue throughout their lives. The goal is to choose careers that align with students' SPIN.

- Children learn responsibility and begin to develop self-advocacy and self-determination skills by participating in daily routines at home, at school, and in their community. For example, young people should be involved in chores at home, such as making their bed, setting the table for meals, or completing cleaning tasks. In school, students can be assigned classroom jobs and should be responsible for their supplies and materials, cleaning up after themselves, and making age-appropriate choices and decisions.
- Expectations for students must be kept high, with a focus on abilities.

Research Careers and Gain Work-based Learning Opportunities

- The process for increasing student awareness of career options and identifying those that are a good fit involves researching career clusters of interest to students (e.g., agriculture and food, architecture and construction, education and training, and human services), and routes to pursue them. Students can gather information from a variety of sources, including career fairs, websites, videos, and by discussing the careers of various adults in their lives.
- Most students learn best through firsthand experience. Exploring careers must involve work-based learning opportunities. These may include:
 - Informational interviews
 - Workplace tours
 - Job shadowing and job tryouts
 - Internships
 - Part-time jobs

Explore Career Pathways, Create Meaningful Goals, and Plan Action Steps

- As students get older, it is important to expand and increase their age-appropriate experiences and responsibilities at home, in school, and in their community. For example, they might earn an allowance for chores at home, volunteering in their community, or doing errands for others.
- Exploring career pathways helps students to narrow down their career options and select pathways that are the best match for them. They should understand the various education and training options required for their chosen occupation, such as:
 - High school diploma and on-the-job training
 - Apprenticeships

- Career and Technical Programs
 - Community College
 - College or University
 - Military
- Part of the Transition Individualized Education Process (IEP) is setting meaningful goals and the action plan to achieve them. Postsecondary goals, coordinated activities, transition services, and annual goals should all reflect the student's specific career goal(s).
- Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) are designed to support career exploration for individuals aged 14-22 with a documented disability. The student and their team should include career planning processes in every IEP. Pre-ETS services include:
 - Job exploration and counseling
 - Work-based learning experiences
 - Counseling and postsecondary opportunities
 - Workplace readiness training
 - Instruction in self-advocacy
- VR can also assist with career planning.
- VR uses a process known as Discovery when exploring career pathways. Information obtained from students during Pre-ETS services is shared with VR.
- Career exploration experiences also help young people to develop critical "soft" skills, including communication and social interaction skills, a strong work ethic, adaptability, problem-solving, money management, and time management skills.

Prepare for Career Success

- Preparing for career success involves taking action and identifying support networks.
 - Students need to learn and communicate their rights or accommodation needs.
 - They may want to open a bank account or visit a local college.
 - Students should research service providers in their area and apply for accessible transportation, if needed.
 - Both students and families should meet with a benefits counselor to discuss how working will impact benefits and plan accordingly.

Building Support and a Portfolio

The action steps above are critical to successful outcomes. Identifying support networks involves tapping into personal connections (e.g., family, friends, teachers, other professionals) to build a circle of support and identify community support partners (e.g., agencies and organizations). Ensuring adequate support is in place as soon as possible, ideally before the transition from school to adult life, is key to employment success. Experiences, support needs, and skills developed from the above phases of career exploration and planning can be compiled in a clear, concise portfolio. Review the [National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative \(NTACT:C\) T-Folio](#). In this way, the student can share their career development with employers, service providers, and relevant others. The goal of career planning is competitive integrated employment or entry into post-secondary education oriented to a student's career goal. The ultimate assessment of its effectiveness is what they achieve upon exit from high school and their quality of life in adulthood.

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