

Helping Youth Build Work Skills for Job Success: Tips for Parents and Families

This InfoBrief addresses the need for youth to acquire work skills and offers strategies parents and families can use to work with their youth to develop skills that lead to success on the job. This InfoBrief also includes information on how to incorporate work skill development into school documents, such as the Individualized Education Program and the Summary of Performance.

Employment is a crucial aspect of a youth's journey towards adulthood. Families of youth, including youth with disabilities, play a vital role in helping youth explore careers that match their strengths and interests and in helping youth understand the importance of building basic work skills so they are prepared for employment. The term "work skills" may seem vague, but it simply refers to basic abilities and habits employers are looking for in their employees. Work skills are a combination of "hard skills," the foundational skills that employers desire like reading, writing, and math, and "soft skills," the common-sense, everyday skills, like getting along with others, that help youth succeed in all aspects of life.

Many work skills have benefits that extend beyond the work place. Learning work skills can contribute to a youth's ability to function independently in the community, have positive experiences in postsecondary education, and thrive in social situations. There are several strategies available to families to help their youth develop work skills.

Which Skills are Needed to Succeed?

In the 1990s, several initiatives attempted to classify the types of skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Among these efforts were the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and the National Institute for Literacy's (NIFL) Equipped for the Future Framework (EFF). The NIFL effort is holistic because it addresses some key foundational "hard skills," specifically reading, writing, and math skills, along with the important "soft skills" that help people succeed in the workplace, and as members of families and society.

Ten of the 16 EFF-defined work readiness skills fall within the following four categories and are recognized as important for developing entry level skills needed across all industry sectors. The EFF skills include:

- **Communication Skills:** Read with Understanding; Convey Ideas in Writing; Speak so Others Can Understand; Listen Actively; and, Observe Critically.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** Guide Others; Resolve Conflict and Negotiate; Advocate and Influence; and, Cooperate with Others.



- **Decision Making Skills:** Use Math to Solve Problems and Communicate; Solve Problems and Make Decisions; and, Plan.
- **Lifelong Learning Skills:** Take Responsibility for Learning; Reflect and Evaluate; Learn Through Research; and, Use Information and Communications Technology.

Below is a breakdown of what can be considered work skills and soft skills under the EFF Framework. Please note that the EFF Framework does not formally break up its 16 skills areas in this way.

Work Skills

Observe Critically
Convey Ideas in Writing
Read with Understanding
Use Math to Solve Problems and Communicate
Solve Problems and Make Decisions
Plan
Advocate and Influence
Guide Others
Use Information and Communications Technology
Learn Through Research

Soft Skills

Listen Actively
Speak So Others Can Understand
Cooperate with Others
Resolve Conflict and Negotiate
Take Responsibility for Learning
Reflect and Evaluate

These are the critical skills for employment. Youth who have these skills are more likely to be hired and less likely to be fired, giving them an important advantage in today's job market. Families play a significant role in helping youth learn these skills.

Why is This Important?

Every employer seeks employees who have the skills needed to do a given job. While employers understand that many youth lack technical skills that come with education, training, or previous work experience they do expect youth to possess work skills and soft skills needed for job success. These include being able to solve problems and communicate effectively with others, and assuming personal responsibility for learning and attendance. Regrettably, employers report that many youth are coming to work without these skills. Families who understand what these skills are and help their youth develop these skills give their youth a real advantage in the job search.

Becoming prepared to enter the world of work is a process, and nothing promotes that process better than gaining real work experiences. Sadly, many youth lack opportunities for work experiences. This is especially true for youth with disabilities and other at-risk and disconnected youth. So where are youth going to learn the work skills needed to be a success on the job? Families might assume that



this is the school's responsibility, but schools often do not address the variety of work skills youth need. Often, it is families who take the lead.

For youth with disabilities, the role of family in building work skills is especially critical. Some youth may have disabilities that impact their ability to read, do math, or complete complex tasks. These youth may need extra help in mastering work skills and identifying effective accommodations that can be used on the job to increase efficiency and improve job performance.

How Families Can Build These Skills at Home

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Is your youth able to gather, process, and use information by observing his or her environment?

A person receives and processes information from a multitude of sources thousands of times each day. Most pieces of information are filtered out because they are not applicable to what a person is doing at the time. Youth need opportunities to practice critical observation and using relevant sources to gather information. This is an important skill in the workplace because it allows an employee to gather needed information and consider how that information impacts the job at hand.

How You Can Help:

- Help your youth identify his or her learning style. Does your youth learn best by: looking, watching, and observing (a visual learner); by listening to people or audio recordings (an auditory learner); by using their hands and whole body to learn (a kinesthetic learner); or from reading (a print-oriented learner)? Work with your youth's teacher or with your IEP team to ensure that your student has opportunities to learn content the way that is most effective for him or her and to build on this self-awareness.
- Plan family activities that help youth develop their powers of observation, such as nature walks or indoor games that encourage gathering, processing, and describing information. Examples of these types of games include "Twenty Questions" or "Clue." This helps youth practice applying information gathered in a structured and productive way.
- During a long car or bus trip, ask your youth to find and write down a few road signs and billboards. Ask your youth if he or she can identify what the purpose of each sign and billboard was, and if the sign was important for the driver to help them arrive safely to the destination. Point out that some signs are useful, while others are only distractions.
- If your child has a visual impairment, help him or her become familiar with common accessibility strategies, such as large print or screen reader programs. Doing this will prepare youth to request work materials in accessible formats.

Does your youth convey ideas using written language or through other technologies?

Talking may still be the most common and effective form of communication, but many job tasks also require an employee to exchange information and express ideas through writing. The expanded role



of technology means that your youth will need to learn how to use written communication tools such as e-mail and written work reports (incident reports, inventory, etc.) effectively.

How You Can Help:

- Is texting shaping the writing style of your youth? Keep an eye on your youth's writing style and make sure that he or she understands that it is important to use correct punctuation, complete sentences, and accurate spelling in other forms of written communication.
- Have your youth practice sending thank you notes for appropriate occasions. Sending thank you notes is more than good manners, it also provides youth with a perfect opportunity to practice proper grammar and give careful consideration to exactly what they want to say.
- Have your youth practice clear handwriting and proficient keyboarding skills. Ask your youth to write a paragraph each day about what he or she did in school or would like to do on vacation. Have your youth write the paragraph using pen and paper as well as a computer-based word processing program. Youth who have disabilities that impact their ability to write should focus on computer skills or programming an augmentative communication device.
- Bring a job application home or find one online and have your youth fill it out. This will be an opportunity to see if your son or daughter needs help understanding written instructions in addition to seeing how your son or daughter talks about his or her skills and experiences.
- Help your son or daughter create an e-resume using PowerPoint, pictures, and video. Have your child depict their interests, hobbies, school experience, and work goals. When appropriate, use the e-resume when applying for jobs in the community or during IEP meetings.

Does your family member understand what he or she reads?

The ability to read and understand what is read is often a necessary skill in the workplace. It's important to note that the majority of youth who qualify for special education under the "learning disability" criteria do so because of reading difficulties (Busch, 2011). Families who recognize the vital importance of reading can help their youth build lifelong skills.

How You Can Help:

- Discuss the importance of reading with your child, and encourage him or her to find materials to read for pleasure. If necessary, create a system that rewards your youth for a certain amount read or time spent reading.
- Ask your family member to read a passage from a book or newspaper article, and have him or her answer questions you ask about what is read. Ask if your youth found the task difficult and find ways to make the task easier. This exercise can help with reading comprehension and lead to identifying reading accommodations in school and at work.
- If applicable, advocate that your child's IEP address skill building in functional reading. If reading is difficult, advocate for the identification of strategies your child can use to gather information from written materials.



- If your youth has difficulty reading, but has not been diagnosed with a reading disability, seek an evaluation from your child's school (if your child is still in school) or from your medical provider.
- Investigate job accommodations that might address reading difficulty in the workplace. Families can visit the Job Accommodation Network (www.askjan.org) or consult with a counselor from Vocational Rehabilitation.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Is your youth able to show others how to do a task?

Employers often rely on employees to guide customers or fellow staff through doing a task. Examples of this may include leading a customer through using a self-service check out or teaching a new co-worker how to fill out time cards. Helping youth to be confident in their ability to break down tasks and teach others will give them a vital skill employers look for.

How You Can Help:

- Speak to your youth about the importance of being able to teach others how to do a task. Point out that doing so is important if he or she is working as part of a team. Does your youth feel confident or apprehensive about doing this? Discuss why your youth might be apprehensive and stress that teaching others is expected in many jobs.
- Explain that your child must know how to do a task before he or she can teach others how to do it. Tell your youth that it is better to tell someone if he or she doesn't know the task well enough to train others.
- Help your family member understand that the easiest way to guide somebody through a task is to break that task into manageable segments. For example, the process of changing the oil in a lawn mower entails checking the existing oil level, buying the appropriate oil for the mower, finding a suitable container for the old oil, draining the old oil, filling the mower to the right level with new oil, and disposing of the old oil properly. Often, many easy steps make up one complex task.
- Ask your youth to identify a task with multiple steps and guide you through it. Make sure it's something your youth already knows how to do, such as downloading music onto a computer or doing laundry. Have your youth explain each step of the identified activity as you do the task.
- Discuss the concept of positive reinforcement with your family member. Explain that people can often become frustrated while learning a new task and that the teacher must be patient and give positive feedback and reinforcement often. Talk about a situation where your family member became frustrated when learning a new task and ask what would have made that situation easier.

Is your youth effective in advocating for what he or she thinks should be done and influencing others towards their point of view?

Employees are often faced with having to make a decision where there is no clear right answer. This may include giving input on how a service is delivered or deciding how many of a certain item should be stocked on a shelf. Employers seek employees who can make these decisions, and give solid



reasons why that decision was made. This is a skill families can easily work on using a variety of activities.

How You Can Help:

- Encourage your youth to participate in school or community-based activities that promote leadership. These might include student government or environmental club, Boys/Girls State, or serving on a youth board of a local non-profit organization. These could also include becoming involved in team sports or other group activities.
- Ask your child to identify something their school or community needs, such as a new playground, public swimming pool, or teen center. Then instruct your child to write down all the reasons it is needed, what resources are required to fill that need, and what the actual chances are of this happening. This helps your child practice identifying a need and building a case for addressing the need.
- Have your child present the case for this need to an impartial person, such as a relative or teacher. Make sure your child clearly states what the current situation is, and how it would change if the new teen center (for example) was built. Ask your child if he or she would incorporate different pieces of information or present it differently to different audiences, such as a peer or a classmate, or the mayor.
- Give your family member constructive feedback on the proposal, and ask him or her to modify the proposal based on the feedback you give. Explain that employees often have to take into account the ideas and concerns of many people.
- Have a discussion with your youth about the various ways people can rally support for their ideas and what to do if met with opposition. Stress that even though your youth thinks it's an excellent idea, others might not. However, one person opposing an idea is not a reason to abandon the whole effort.

Does your child use their creativity?

According to a 2006 report done by a consortium of human resources stakeholders, creativity and innovation are emerging as skills that employees in the 21st Century workforce need to have. Helping youth practice applying creative and innovative thinking to problem solving can help them find success on the job.

How You Can Help:

- Plan a family garage sale and ask your son or daughter to be in charge of promotion. Ask your child to create signs, determine the best place to put them in the neighborhood, and to think about other things that could be done to make the sale a success. Promise your child a certain percentage of the profits if goals, such as 30 people attending, are met.
- Encourage your family member to enjoy age appropriate brain teasers and other puzzles that promote creative problem solving. Tell your youth that the brain is just like a muscle in that it needs exercise to stay sharp.



- Create a made-up situation, such as “the Nature Club needs money for a field trip to the National Forest,” and have your youth brainstorm possible solutions. Brainstorming is often a helpful strategy to identify multiple solutions to a problem.
- Encourage your youth to enter a piece of art, creative writing, or homemade film into a local contest or to take a class in an area of interest. Many people express themselves creatively through the arts.
- Explain to your child about when they can use creativity in the workplace. Many jobs may have formal processes in place to do a task because that’s the way the employer wants it done, or doing something in a certain way is the safest way to do it. When in doubt, tell your child it’s always best to ask if you are allowed to find another way of doing things.

DECISION MAKING SKILLS

When given a task, is your youth able to plan a course of action?

Not every task a youth will be asked to do on the job will come with a clear set of instructions. An employer may give a vague directive, such as “rearrange the drink cooler,” or an employer may give multiple work tasks that need to be done during a shift. Families can help youth develop skills that allow them to plan independently how the tasks will be done.

How You Can Help:

- Consider purchasing a digital voice recorder so your youth can record directions or job tasks given by an employer. Help your youth practice what he or she will say to an employer. For example, “It would help me if you record what you want me to do today. That way I can be sure to get all the tasks done you need me to do.”
- Give your family member a vague task, such as “make dinner,” that requires steps to plan. Have him or her write out the steps needed to accomplish the task and describe to you what those steps are. Once finished, relate the planning process your family member used to planning that might have to be done on the job.
- Encourage your family member to ask questions about details of the tasks when vague directions are given and the next steps are unclear. When giving your family member a vague task like, “Prepare dinner tonight,” encourage your youth to ask questions such as, “What type of food would you like?” or “How many people are eating dinner?” to get more information about the task.

Does your family member need assistance in solving problems and making decisions?

Problem solving and the ability to make decisions based on learned protocol are traits that research routinely identifies as desired by employers. This may include using technology to solve problems, making decisions independently, or as part of a team.

How You Can Help:



- Watch a local news broadcast and ask your child to summarize the problem or conflict detailed in each story. This will help your child learn how to identify problems, which is the first step in problem solving.
- Have your youth offer a possible solution to the issues on the news. Problem solving often requires flexibility. Have a discussion with your family member about the realities of the workplace, specifically that problems can arise suddenly, and employees are expected to handle them. Have your family member talk about a time when he or she had to solve a problem in school.
- Schedule an informational interview with a worker from a job your youth is interested in. Have your youth ask the worker about what types of problems they encounter and what steps they are expected to take to solve them.
- Many places of work have formal procedures for reporting incidents or problems. Role-play a situation with your son or daughter where an issue arises at work that he or she will need to report on. Have your son or daughter practice describing what the situation was, who was involved, and what steps he or she took to remedy the situation.

Does your youth use math to solve problems and communicate?

Math is a skill that can be used many ways, depending on the job. An employee at a retail store may need to estimate a service bill or calculate tax on a transaction. Employees may also need to work computer programs to generate reports or to track inventory. Employers continue to view math as a sought-after skill. Families can help youth build these skills by advocating for rigorous academic programs and by practicing at home.

How You Can Help:

- Help your son or daughter become familiar with mathematic symbols, numbers, and phrases. Practice measurement conversions in the kitchen or explain the difference between the standard and metric measuring systems. This will help your youth think about math in practical ways that are not strictly academic.
- Use home improvement tasks as an avenue to work on math-related problem solving. For example, have your child assist you in calculating how much paint it would take to re-paint your child's bedroom, or how much sealant would be needed to resurface your driveway.
- Encourage your youth to re-check the calculations using a calculator or computer. This encourages precision, which is needed when solving math-related problems on the job.
- Keep your weekly grocery receipts and ask your family member to create a chart that shows what your grocery spending is for a two-month period. This will help your youth gather and use data to solve a problem.



LIFELONG LEARNING SKILLS

Does your child use technology, such as computers, with proficiency?

Computers and other technologies have assumed an important role in our daily lives, and in the workplace. There are very few jobs that don't require some type of proficiency with computers, cash registers, or other electronics. Many youth are interested in computers, and families can guide that interest to make sure youth are exposed to common work and communication software use in the workplace.

How You Can Help:

- Create a checklist of technologies and programs that are commonly used on the job. These might include word processing programs, PowerPoint, spreadsheets, e-mail, cash registers, video conferencing, and scanners. Use school resources, libraries, volunteer experiences, and technology you might have in the home to ensure your child is familiar with each. Make sure those experiences are listed on your youth's resume.
- Encourage your youth to take computer classes in school, at the library or through other community agencies. If your son or daughter has a disability, advocate for a strong focus on technology proficiency in the IEP or 504 Plan.
- Make sure your youth is aware of how to use computers and technology appropriately in the workplace. Discuss the fact that many employers have rules for appropriate use of the Internet and personal devices during work hours. Stress that misuse of computers is often grounds for termination.
- If your child has a disability, consider exploring what is available in the area of assistive technology. There are many pieces of software and assistive devices that can benefit a youth in school as well as the workplace. Visit <http://www.resnaprojects.org/nattap/at/stateprograms.html> for information on assistive technology resources in your state.

Does your family member seek information from other sources when faced with a problem or task?

The ability to seek help or answers to questions on the job is a crucial work skill. In short, not knowing what to do next is not an excuse for not completing a task. Instead, not knowing what to do next can be an opportunity to learn new information and skills. Families can help youth recognize when to ask for assistance, and to become familiar with various sources of information.

How You Can Help:

- Discuss the importance of employees being able to gather information to solve problems. Point out that an employer will appreciate someone who is able to suggest multiple solutions to a given problem.
- Ask your youth to find a new dessert that your family can bring to a holiday gathering. Give your youth the job of finding one possibility from each of three different sources of information. If your



child has difficulty thinking of information sources, brainstorm possibilities. Ideas might include the Internet, a cookbook, a cooking show on television, or asking a local bakery.

- Have your son or daughter use an Internet search engine to research a topic of interest. Ask your child to find five facts about the topic that he or she did not know.
- Role-play with your family member a situation where they have to ask a co-worker or supervisor for help or advice. Situations could include finding the appropriate form to fill out for a vacation request or asking to be trained on a different task in a store. Reinforce that employers value employees who show initiative and who know when to ask for assistance.

Is your youth able to recognize and count money, and to make change if necessary?

Many entry level jobs commonly held by youth, such as cashier or park entrance attendant, require the ability to deal with money. Employers rely on employees who can take payments and count change accurately.

How You Can Help:

- Purchase a play money set that includes coins and have your youth practice identifying the currency and coins. Once this is mastered, take household items and assign them dollar values. Ask your youth to count out the play money to match the value of the items.
- Carry cash when shopping for small items and have your youth interact with the cashier and pay for the items. Discuss with your youth how the cashier took the money and counted out the change. Have your youth set a goal to count change quickly and accurately.
- Help your child find opportunities to practice working with money. This could include helping with a yard sale, working the concession stand at a high school ball game, or selling raffle tickets for a local charity.

Including Work Skills in the “Summary of Performance”

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA of 2004) requires public schools to provide special education students with a “Summary of Performance” (SOP). This summary of a student's academic achievement and functional performance should also include recommendations on how to assist the youth in meeting his or her postsecondary goals. The SOP is provided to special education students who are due to graduate with a regular diploma, or exceed the age eligibility for a free and appropriate public education (21 in most states). The SOP is most useful when linked with the IEP process and the student has the opportunity to actively participate in the development of this document.

Parents can make sure that their child's SOP lists the work skills he or she has mastered in high school along with academic and interpersonal (soft) skills. Students with disabilities who qualify for services from the state's vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency can share this information with his or her vocational rehabilitation counselor, as it would be helpful in the development of the Individualized Plan for Employment after leaving high school. Such a list will make the SOP more helpful for service providers who work with employers. The list is also helpful for the student to refer to when filling out a



job application or creating a resume. You can find more information on the SOP at <http://www.nsttac.org/content/summary-performance-resources>.

Many youth with disabilities may not be in special education, or may not have a 504 plan that provides accommodations in school. Still, more youth may have undiagnosed disabilities. Families are encouraged to document work skill and soft skill acquisition thoroughly on a youth's resume.

Addressing Work Skills in the IEP

Families of students receiving special education services can advocate for incorporating goals that relate to building work skills into their youth's IEP. Some work skills, such as reading with understanding and using technology, are lifelong skills, and it is never too early to begin helping youth address them. An increased focus on developing key work skills should begin during the middle school years, when the formal transition planning process begins for youth with disabilities.

Summary

Youth with and without disabilities can increase their chances of successful employment by acquiring the work skills that employers seek. Families need to be aware that youth develop these skills from a variety of sources, including through the influence of family life and activities. Families are partners in the effort to build work skills. By providing opportunities for youth to build and practice key work skills, families can set the stage for a lifetime of employment success and community participation.

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