



Helping Youth Develop Soft Skills for Job Success

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Tips for Parents and Families

Many parents of youth approaching adulthood worry about their child's future. Whether youth have disabilities or not, parents want to know what they can do to help their sons and daughters decide on a career, support their job hunting, and succeed in the workplace. One way family members can help is by working with and encouraging youth to develop soft skills. Even though parents may not know this term, they will discover that they are familiar with these every day, common sense skills that are important in all aspects of life. Soft skills help youth succeed in life no matter what they are doing. By improving these skills, a youth can enhance his or her social life, do better in postsecondary studies, and be more successful at finding and maintaining employment. Families can use several strategies to help develop soft 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 and adult life. Included among these efforts were the 1991 Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and the Equipped for the Future Framework (EFF), which was the result of a 10-year initiative by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). The NIFL effort is the most holistic in that it addresses some key foundational "hard skills," specifically reading, writing, and math skills along with the important soft skills needed not only in the workplace but as members of families and society. From these 16 skills, 10 have been further validated for the purpose of 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
- Observe Critically

Interpersonal Skills

- Guide Others
- Resolve Conflict and Negotiate
- Advocate and Influence
- Cooperate with Others

Decision Making Skills

- Use Math to Solve Problems and Communicate
- Solve Problems and Make Decisions
- Plan

Lifelong Learning Skills

- Take Responsibility for Learning
- Reflect and Evaluate
- Learn Through Research
- Use Information and Communications Technology

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.

Why is This Important?

Learning soft skills is a process. Soft skills are necessary for youth to succeed in education, job training, independent living, community participation, and, ultimately, in the workplace. However, because educators and others have assumed that children learn soft skills at home, or through observing others, youth are seldom taught such skills in school. Unfortunately, this approach means that some youth, whether they have disabilities or not, will not have developed these important skills by the time they leave high school.

Many youth experience difficulties as they transition from classroom to the workplace. For youth with disabilities, who face higher unemployment rates than their peers without disabilities, soft skills are especially important and may need more focused attention to master. Some youth have specific disabilities that make it hard for them to control impulses. Other youth may have limited insight into themselves or difficulty getting along with others. Youth have varying amounts of exposure to the working world. Some young people need to learn the importance of being at work on time, calling in when they are ill, and getting along with co-workers. For these reasons, it's vital that families help youth with disabilities develop soft skills.

Families Can Help Build Soft Skills

Families of youth with and without disabilities play a key role in helping their children learn expected behaviors, understand the unspoken rules of the workplace, and deal with personality conflicts. Parents are also aware of their child's strengths and can build upon those assets in the process of developing soft skills. In addition to promoting soft skills at home, families of youth with disabilities can make sure that the development of soft skills is adequately addressed at school through their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) during the transition planning process of high school. If your family member does not have an IEP, soft skills development can also be addressed through other formal and informal goal setting plans. Another effective way for parents to help their family member develop basic employment skills, including soft skills, is to ensure that youth access, learn, and understand their career interest assessments, and engage in career exploration and real work experiences during the high school years.

Research shows that work experience during high school, paid or unpaid, helps youth get jobs at higher wages after they graduate—this is true even for youth with significant disabilities. Parents and family members can use this information to advocate for work-based learning programs at school or help their son or daughter find summer jobs or volunteer opportunities in the community. When considering transition programs or community rehabilitation providers during and after high school, remember that real work experiences linked to classroom instruction is a much more effective approach than classroom instruction alone. In the following articles we will talk about communication skills, interpersonal skills, and lifelong learning skills in detail and give you some ideas.

Addressing Soft Skills in the IEP

Families of special education students can make sure that goals to build soft skills are incorporated into a student's IEP during the middle and high school years. Some youth may already have many of these skills and only need to work on one or two.

Including Soft Skills in the "Summary of Performance"

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 requires schools to provide special education (IDEA) of 2004 requires 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. 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 soft skills he has mastered in high school along with academic and technical skills. Students with disabilities who qualify for services from the state's vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency can share this information with his VR counselor, as it would be helpful in the development of the Individualized Plan for Employment after he leaves high school. Such a list will make the SOP more helpful for service providers who work with employers and for the student himself or herself to refer to when he is filling out a job application or creating a resume. You can find more information on the SOP here:<http://www.nsttac.org/indicator13/sop.aspx>

Summary & Resources

Both at home and at school, families and other caring adults play a vital role in helping young people with and without disabilities build work skills that will help them be successful in employment. Families who are aware of the expectations of employers, understand that they are partners in helping youth prepare for and maintain employment, and use everyday activities in the home to build work skills give their youth a much better chance of succeeding in the job search and in the workplace.

For detailed information and ideas about strategies to teach soft job skills go to UPC Website at <http://www.utahparentcenter.org/publications/infosheets/> look under "Transition to Adult Life."

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