

Developing Job Skills I

Developing Job-Readiness Skills in Youth with ASD through Volunteering: Getting Started (Part I of a 2 part series)

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Like many other parents of a youth with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), I find thoughts of the future can be positively paralyzing. To overcome that paralysis, I decided to focus on helping my son prepare for some form of work when he leaves school. The focus is not on career development, but simply to increase the options that will be available for him to make a meaningful life for himself once he leaves school. This article provides some suggestions for other parents with similar goals, suggestions that I believe can be applied to individuals wherever they might be on the spectrum.

The First Job is in the Home

You don't have to look far to find a way to develop job skills in your child or youth: just take a look around your home. Household chores are not just a way to share the workload of family life; they're an invaluable way to help your child develop useful skills and a sense of responsibility.

Even the simplest household chore develops core skills. For example, emptying the dishwasher means your child must learn the appropriate storage location for each item, how to sort items by type (such as keeping all the spoons together), and how to handle items that are fragile vs. those that are sturdy. Good old fashioned hand-washing of the dishes is even better, since it requires things like running water at an appropriate temperature, applying the right amount of pressure for cleaning, and working in collaboration with others (for example, the person drying the dishes).

- Choose chores that are repeated frequently (cleaning or putting away dishes, sweeping floors, taking out garbage or

recycling, etc.) rather than done more rarely (cleaning out the basement, raking leaves, washing windows). This ensures the opportunity for lots of practice.

- Choose chores that can be done relatively quickly to sustain interest and ensure success.
- Choose chores that are clear-cut and visually obvious. Whether a floor is clean or not might differ based on your standards of cleanliness, but whether a dishwasher is empty or not is beyond argument. This allows your child to recognize when the work is done without being told.
- Avoid chores that have to be done within a short timeframe, require handling delicate objects, or must be done in a very precise way. These chores will add stress for both your child, who may struggle to meet the demands of the task, and you, who may find it difficult to be patient and to resist the urge to do the chore for the child (or re-do it when they are done).
- Build the chores into the child's schedule.
- Ideally, choose chores that have some built-in motivator for the child. For example, they might be more interested in putting their videos in order than in putting away the groceries, or they might more happily find the snack aisle than the vegetable aisle in the grocery store.
- Put in place whatever supports are needed to teach your child how to do the chore and meet with early success. This might mean backward chaining (e.g. requiring the child to

put away the silverware, which is the last step of the chore), adding visual supports (e.g. labelling cupboard doors to indicate their contents), or reducing the workload (e.g. starting with an almost empty dishwasher). Choose a good time to teach the chore (e.g. not half an hour before the grandparents are arriving for dinner or ten minutes before the school bus comes).

- Use the same strategies you would use for any new activity: lots of praise and reinforcement, fading prompts, and increasing demands.
- As your child gets comfortable with doing chores, add more responsibility, either more chores or more responsibility for an existing chore. Add some chores where your child has to identify that the work needs to be done at all (e.g. the garbage can in the kitchen is close to full), so they don't rely on always being told to start the work.

Money: Your New Primary Reinforcer

Paying your child for their household chores and, when they're ready, for their volunteer work, has many benefits. No math drill, computer math program, or worksheet can teach someone about the value of money better than having cash in the hand, and the opportunity to spend it.

Decide ahead of time how much money you will pay, whether you are paying based on time spent or chore completion (e.g. are you paying per minute of effort spent shredding or for shredding a specific volume of paper) and what constraints you will put on the use of the money. I would suggest you leave the concept of saving until the concept of purchasing, and value-for-money, is more firmly established. At the beginning, allow your child to spend what they earn as they wish and as soon as they wish (this might mean timing chores so there is time available for immediate shopping).

Allowing your child to spend freely works best if they want to acquire relatively small-cost items, and even better if their heart's desire comes in different sizes and variations. My son's passion for Coke and Pepsi led him very quickly to recognize that this amount of work meant he could buy a can, but that amount of work meant he could buy a bottle, and this much more work meant he could buy a bottle and candy. It also allowed us to begin introducing comparative costs, checking grocery store flyers and deciding whether he wanted to walk a little further for the cheaper bottle at the dollar store or pay for the convenience of the variety store. Because it was his money, it was his choice: as were the consequences of the occasional regretted purchase.

Once your child understands that work equals money, and that money equals purchasing power, you can introduce more subtle concepts such as saving for larger purchases (we use a scale to show him how close he's getting to his target, but one of those counting jars could also help). Having a savings goal also helps bring a little control to the purchasing process: a reminder of what the child wants to purchase in a week or a month can help them make a better decision about what to buy right now. Still later you can introduce concepts like saving for someone else (e.g. a birthday gift or a shared meal).

I also found it useful to have a backup chore that always needs to be done (in my case, shredding documents): when my son needed to earn more money immediately for a desired purchase, that backup chore was always a possibility.

Part 2 of this series deals with moving to volunteer work outside the home.

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