

Developing Job Skills 2

Developing Job-Readiness Skills in Youth with ASD through Volunteering: Moving Into the Community (Part 2 of a 2 part series)

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Once household chores and money rules have been firmly established, it is time to look outside the home for work (volunteer) opportunities. While you're seeking out those opportunities, you can try this little strategy I call "guerilla volunteering". While in the community, look for small pieces of helpful but casual work your child can do: restoring order to the spice display, making sure all the soup cans face out, ensuring the library's videos are in alphabetical order. In the very early days you might want to secretly create a small amount of disorder that your child can correct quickly and easily, so the job doesn't become overwhelming and then gradually have them deal with larger tasks.

Be sure your child's teacher knows about your child's growing capabilities. Ask for work-type responsibilities to be given at school, whether that's taking attendance to the office or setting up/cleaning up for a specific activity.

What to Look for in a Volunteer Opportunity

When looking for more formal volunteering opportunities, look for ones that:

- Your child can do (in full or in part): this might mean developing skills beyond those of household chores: see the resource suggestion at the end of this article.
- Align with your child's interests: e.g. would they rather work with food items or hardware items?
- Align with your child's strengths: e.g. are they able to perform fine motor tasks

or are they better at ones that require less precision?

- Take place in a setting your child can tolerate: e.g. are they able to tolerate noise or prefer quiet environments? Are they more comfortable working outdoors or indoors?
- Take place in a setting your child is familiar with. This ensures that a new task isn't made more complicated by requiring it to be done in an unfamiliar setting. This is particularly important for the first volunteer job.
- Require a degree of inter-personal interaction your child is comfortable with: e.g. can they give directions to strangers, are they better face-to-face or on the phone, do they need to communicate non-verbally?
- Can provide the accommodations your child needs: e.g. wearing headphones, having labels added to environment, having the workplace organized differently.
- Ask your child's teachers, recreation supervisors, support workers, etc. to suggest types of volunteer work that might suit and engage your child.

Where to Look for a Volunteer Opportunity

Once you have some ideas about what your child would like to do, the hard work really begins: finding a place for them to do it. Start with companies and organizations with which you have a connection, such as:

- Local stores or businesses, particularly those that have local ownership or management.
- Local services (community newspapers, recreation centers, social service providers).
- Any place your family or friends work.
- Any place offering services your family or friends use (recreation center, seniors' center, church, day care, sports club, school, yoga studio, gym). To avoid confusion around roles, avoid places with which your child is currently engaged as a participant.

As with chores, try to choose work that is repeated, rather than a one-time event: it's generally better to deliver the community paper every two weeks than to deliver flyers for an annual fundraising event. Also, as with chores, look for work that aligns with your child's interests and that can be accomplished relatively easily, to increase comfort and confidence.

Decide how your child will be compensated for their work. We pay more for work done outside the home than for chores, and sometimes pair a reward with the location of the work (e.g. a visit to a store or restaurant near to the "work" place).

Charity Village and/or your local volunteer banks often post volunteer positions online. Although these postings may frequently be for jobs beyond your child's abilities, and often are for one-time events, it's still worth pursuing them. For example, a volunteer job distributing flyers for a community agency's annual celebration led to them calling on my son whenever they need flyers distributed for other events. In another case, 90 minutes of volunteer work one Christmas has led to a coop job opportunity that will be supported through my son's school: an opportunity we would have never found if we hadn't pursued that first volunteer posting.

Watch for opportunities wherever you go – your instincts will usually tell you when you've encountered a suitable environment and, even more importantly, people with the compassion, interest, and attitude to make a job work for your child.

It's Not Just Your Child Who Needs Training

If possible, have someone other than the parent accompany the child to his or her volunteer work: that will make the separation of work from home clearer. A respite worker is a good option, as is another caregiver, a responsible friend, or even a sibling.

Take the time to educate whomever your child will be working with about ASD in general, your child in particular, and the strategies and supports they need. Don't be afraid to ask for what needs to be adjusted, and set expectations appropriately: it is better that the "employer" be pleasantly surprised than disappointed. Watch out for the well-meaning supervisor who takes pity on your child and steps in to take over the work or accepts minimal performance: that attitude will not be helpful for your child in the long run.

Check Out These Excellent Resources

The books "Tasks Galore" and "Tasks Galore at Work" are visual, creative guides to setting up in-home training that can help develop and practice job skills (e.g. assembling, filing, and sorting). See <http://www.tasksgalore.com/> for details or these volumes might be available from your school or local service provider.

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