

Helping youth develop “soft” skills for job success: tips for parents

Most parents of youth approaching adulthood want to know what they can do to help their sons and daughters succeed in the workplace. One way family members can help is by working with and encouraging youth to develop traits known as soft skills.

Even though many parents may be unfamiliar with this term, they will discover that they are actually very familiar with these everyday, common-sense skills that are important in all aspects of life. Soft skills can 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 education settings and be more successful at finding and maintaining employment.

For youth with disabilities, who face much higher unemployment rates than their peers without disabilities, soft skills are especially important. Families of youth with disabilities play a key role in helping their youth learn expected behaviors, understand the unspoken rules of the workplace and deal with personality conflicts.

In addition to promoting these skills at home, families can make sure that the development of soft skills is adequately addressed in their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) during the transition-planning process of high school.

What soft skills should parents focus on? Work readiness standards include communication skills, interpersonal skills and lifelong learning skills.

Youth who have these skills are more likely to be hired and less likely to be fired. Families can use several strategies to help their child develop soft skills.

What are Soft Skills?

“...being dependable, responsible, punctual, adaptable, honest, honorable, well-mannered, positive toward work, and appropriately dressed and groomed. Soft skills also refer to such attributes as the ability to get along with others, work in teams, attend to tasks, work independently, and provide excellent customer service, both within the company and externally.”

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A considerable amount of communication is nonverbal. However, some disabilities make it difficult for people to read the nonverbal communication of others, such as eye contact, facial expressions or gestures. Family members of youth with such disabilities can use a variety of techniques to help their youth learn to perceive and better understand nonverbal social cues.

How You Can Help

- When watching a movie or television show, point out facial expressions and body language used by the actors. Explain how actors use gestures to convey their emotions.
- Encourage your youth to ask questions when he or she doesn't understand what someone says. Asking questions shows people that your youth is listening carefully, even when not making eye contact.
- Help your youth look at a person's nose or cheek if looking in someone's eye is too distressing. It will appear as though he or she is making eye contact.
- Demonstrate an acceptable distance between two people who are not family members. Have your youth practice this. In Western culture, the acceptable amount of personal space between two

people is 1.5 to 4 feet, depending on how well you know the other person.

- Have your youth join a self-advocacy social group outside of school to improve communication and active listening skills. Such groups are often offered by centers for independent living, self-advocacy or other disability organizations.
- Enlist the help of other people in your youth's life to provide guidance in social standards. For instance, a teacher might need to tell your youth that he can shake her hand instead of hugging her.
- Discuss other potential strategies with your youth's IEP team. Include a related goal in your son or daughter's IEP.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Good personal hygiene and appearance promotes social interaction with others, while poor hygiene can give employers and co-workers a bad impression.

How You Can Help

- Discuss personal cleanliness with your son or daughter, stressing that most workplaces require employees to dress appropriately and to be clean.
- Require that your youth be dressed appropriately and have good hygiene

when attending school, family functions or places of religion.

Employers are also looking for employees with good people skills. While especially important in jobs where employees interact with customers, these skills can also help youth interact with their co-workers, avoid conflict and stand out from other job applicants or employees.

How You Can Help

- Teach youth phrases they can use on the phone: “May I please speak to Mr. Smith?” or in the workplace; “I’m Deborah. It’s nice to meet you.”
- Teach youth to allow others to finish speaking before beginning to talk.
- Have your youth answer the phone at home in a professional and courteous manner.
- Identify areas of social difficulty for your youth and role play how to handle new or unfamiliar situations. Role playing gives youth an opportunity to practice what they would say and do in various situations.
- Sign your youth up for social skills trainings at school, centers for independent living, disability groups or

self-advocacy organizations. These trainings provide youth with a structured opportunity to learn and practice social skills such as taking turns or giving compliments. Have them practice what they have learned with you at home.

LIFELONG LEARNING SKILLS

Personal responsibility, initiative, self-management and perseverance are other important qualities employers look for in a new hire.

How You Can Help

- Have youth take responsibility for waking up on time, setting an alarm clock and getting ready for school or work.
- Find opportunities for youth to take on a project from start to finish, such as planting a garden.
- Have youth visit a parent’s workplace if the job allows this. Youth can learn different tasks associated with the job or follow other employees to learn what is involved in their jobs.
- Enroll youth in a mentor program. Mentors can help youth on many levels: building self-esteem, learning

to stick with challenging activities, managing time and communicating with other adults.

- Ask youth to identify a simple, fun skill to learn. This could include cooking a certain recipe, working with a specific computer program or learning a new game. Have a young person research information on steps for learning the skill, and then help him or her follow and complete the steps.

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A PACER CD titled, “Top Secret Job Skills: Declassified,” is also helpful and can be ordered by calling 952-838-9000. View a clip online at: PACER.org/publications/transition.asp.

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