

Asperger Syndrome | Put Those Kids To Work!

by Dan Coulter

[Coulter Video](#)

We'd do anything for our kids with Asperger Syndrome.

Is that always a good thing? Hmmmmmm. Hard to say. It's good if we can figure out what we need to do for our kids versus what they need to do for themselves. And that's not always easy. Maybe an outside view would be good. I talked with the director of a high school job placement program for special needs kids and she laid it on the line, "I think these kids are too often...well...babied. They need to do more for themselves."

You should know that this program director, Mary Beth Berry, cares passionately about her charges. She's amazingly persuasive at getting employers to give the kids in her program real work experience during part of their school day. She's an expert at job coaching and building confidence. I respect her opinion.

How many of us sometimes think of our kids as chicks with broken wings? How many sometimes have horrible visions of plummeting crashes if we push them out of the nest to do things on their own?

Let's think back on our lives. Didn't we learn some of our most important lessons from our failures? Are our kids really that fragile? Sure, there are thoughtless people in the world, but there are also great, helpful folks out there. And we're not going to be around forever. And our kids can't succeed until they try.

Another job expert I spoke with, Asperger Syndrome advocate Dr. Peter Gerhardt, talked about helping a young man learn to ride the train to work. They talked about it. They rode the train together. But finally the day came when the young man had to ride to work alone. Peter said that if he could have run next to the train all the way to the job, he would have. But it went fine. And that daily commute became a normal part of the young man's work life.

As Peter says, work is a defining characteristic of our lives. One of the first questions we're asked when we meet someone is, "What do you do for a living?" If people with Asperger Syndrome don't have the opportunity to work, they're cut off from a key part of life, not to mention a way to support themselves.

Okay, we're all sold on the importance of work. Now here's part two. And it's a biggie. We want our sons and daughters to work. They want to work. But how do they find and hold a job? Unemployment is distressingly high among people with AS. How do you beat the odds?

You start early.

Take the attitude that your child, at whatever skill level, is going to work. Talk about jobs and get him thinking about what he'd like to do. Does your son want to do something that sounds impossible? Be realistic, but aim high. He may not become an astronaut, but maybe he could work at NASA, or maybe at an airport. Of course, some people may be extremely happy filing reports for a living, and that's great, especially if organizing is your child's passion.

Our kids tend to have intense special interests and often have extraordinary abilities. If we can channel these qualities into a paying career, we've hit the motherlode. So wherever you go, encourage your daughter to look at people working and consider if she'd like those jobs. Encourage her to talk with people about their jobs. What are the job's responsibilities and duties? What education or training do you need? What are the good and bad things about the job?

Help your kids understand the job interview process and what an employer is looking for. Get a book or magazine about applying for a job and help your children learn the process. Help them learn to realistically understand their strengths and challenges and how to advocate for themselves.

Most of all, get them some work experience as soon as possible. Paid or unpaid. During school vacations, if just managing schoolwork is all-consuming. The best way to learn work skills is to work, whether your child is going directly from high school to a job, or plans on going to college or vocational training first. Remember, there's a lot more to working than specific job duties. A large part of a job can be arriving on time, following directions, staying on task, knowing safety procedures, getting along with co-workers and other "surround" issues.

Let's revisit the chick-from-the-nest analogy. The best crash avoidance we can offer is flight training. We can make sure that our kids' Individual Education Plans include transition planning beginning at age 14 as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. We can work with our kids' schools and with social service agencies to help our kids find part-time jobs during their high school years with understanding employers. Job coaches can help our kids learn a job until they're ready to go solo.

And we can train our kids to increasingly advocate for themselves so that when they look for a job on their own, they can present themselves as the kind of capable, hardworking employees businesses want to hire. And, if necessary, they can educate their employers about how AS affects them and negotiate any needed accommodations.

We won't go into detail here discussing the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodations and disclosure issues. Think of that as homework.

Today, let's just get determined to get our sons and daughters real work experience as early as possible.

When my son was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, my wife and I had a lot of questions, including: could he ever hold a job? Now, he's a veteran of two successful part-time jobs and is working toward a career in forensic science.

He's already accomplished more than we "in our worst moments" ever thought possible. Here's a lesson: don't let your worst fears limit your kids.

Let's give them some preparation, give them some safety nets, but get them out there -- and give them the chance to blast past our expectations.

Dan Coulter is the writer/producer of the videos, "ASPERGER SYNDROME: Transition to Work" and "ASPERGER SYNDROME: Transition to College and Work." There are more articles on Asperger Syndrome posted on his [website](#).

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