

Making It! Successful Transition Competencies for Youth with Visual Disabilities

This article is based on a presentation given at the 1999 Texas AER conference. The presentation focused on the essential elements of successful programming for preparing children and youth with visual disabilities for life and adult responsibilities. There are numerous skills that all young people must master in order to leave school prepared to contribute to their communities and participate fully in life activities and a youngster with a visual disability who masters the skills outlined here will be ready to meet those demands. The transition competencies discussed in the article are listed below succinctly and detailed in the sections that follow.

Top Ten Transition Competencies

- An understanding of work based on real life experiences;
- Well developed socialization skills;
- Well developed problem solving skills;
- Application of self advocacy skills;
- Application of compensatory skills;
- Knowledge of career options and sources of information;
- An understanding of employers' concerns;
- Mastery of career counseling content areas;
- An understanding of levels of ability and impact with regard to placement; and
- Evidence of participation in work experience opportunities.

An understanding of work based on real life experiences begins with chores and expectations for performance at home. By participating in home-based activities (picking up toys, clothes, and materials; washing and drying dishes, setting the table, serving food; taking out the trash; mowing the yard; and so forth), children with visual disabilities learn that they are contributing members of a household and that their families expect them to perform household tasks that benefit the entire family. Once children are old enough to attend community and school activities, they will benefit from being given responsibilities in those settings. For example, at a church or synagogue function, children can help set up and then put away furniture or materials used in services or activities, hand out printed materials to attendees, or help entertain younger children. Likewise, participation in scouting activities or community group meetings with set responsibilities can help establish the need for individual work that benefits the group. Volunteer experiences with relatives or neighbors and in nearby neighborhood recreation or senior centers can also help children learn the importance of helping others while developing strong work habits and skills. Following productive efforts without remuneration at home, school, and in the community, it is important for children with visual disabilities to work for pay. Ideas for paid work experiences that young people can do include entry level jobs in restaurants, grocery stores, retail establishments, hospitals and nursing homes, recreation centers, and so forth, lawn maintenance, car detailing, and babysitting or pet sitting.

Social skills are critical for both life satisfaction and success in the work place. Included under the rubric of social skills are those skills necessary to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, an understanding of reciprocity, and mastery of effective communication skills, including the nuances of nonverbal communication. Most children learn socially appropriate behaviors through their observations of those around them: family members, neighbors, classmates, and so forth. This task is more difficult for children with visual disabilities because they either can't see what's happening in the environment or their observations are limited or skewed by their inability to see clearly. This is especially evident in terms of assimilating information about nonverbal cues such as winking, nodding, smiling, frowning, shrugging one's shoulders, and the like. Children with severe visual disabilities must be taught these nonverbal skills and positively reinforced to use them. Caring adults and older children can help in social skill development by giving youngsters without good eyesight verbal feedback about what works for them and what doesn't in everyday social interactions. They also need to know from those who can see well what is going on in the social milieu...what their peers are doing when out of their viewing/hearing range, what they are wearing, and with whom they are interacting. This verbal feedback and information sharing will facilitate the children's understanding about social options available to them. Children must learn that social competence is based on an appreciation of others and that reciprocity (giving and taking from others) is the hallmark of successful social relationships. By expecting children with disabilities to both give and take in social interactions, we set the stage for them to be integrated into the larger community more readily.

Throughout life, individuals handle problems and problem situations routinely—successful people learn the coping and strategizing mechanisms categorized as problem solving skills during childhood. The risk for young children with disabilities is that others (parents, teachers, peers, and people who are well intentioned but unaware of the damage they do in the development of this skill area) will do their problem solving for them without realizing that these skills are learned best by having the opportunity to figure out what to do when confronted with difficult situations or specific problems. Children with visual disabilities need to learn to identify and analyze problems. Children can identify problems by coming to recognize that when they feel out-of-sorts, angry, frustrated, or confused they likely are confronted by a problem...the key is to define what it is that is bothersome to them. The next step in problem solving is to analyze the problem by answering the following questions:

- How do I contribute to this problem?
- How do others contribute to this problem?
- How does the environment contribute to this problem?
- What has kept me from resolving this problem to date?

Children who are too young to answer these questions independently may need the caring adults in their lives to help them process this information in a meaningful way; however, the adults will want to model for them the process of addressing the four areas of concern listed above as an appropriate strategy for analyzing problem situations. Once the problem has been defined, children can be encouraged to consider possible solutions or goals (what it would be like without the problem). At this juncture, adults and friends can help the person doing the problem solving generate a list of action possibilities—things to do to resolve the problem and achieve the solution. All ideas generated by the individual with the problem and those helping or brainstorming solutions with the person need to be written down for reflection by the person

doing the problem solving. It is critical that the problem solver processes his or her choices to determine what to do independently. Unless the situation is life threatening, children should be allowed to choose a course of action and act upon it. If their plans prove effective and they are making good progress toward resolving a problem, they need to receive positive reinforcement from family, friends, and service providers. If their plans prove ineffective or are never implemented, they need to be confronted (using an empathetic approach) by those who care about them and encouraged to reconsider their plans.

Self-advocacy involves being able to describe one's disability in functional terms and being able to discuss any needs for accommodations or modifications in an assertive manner. Throughout their lives people with disabilities are asked about their differences—sometimes in rather rude or inconsiderate ways. Even if other people (prospective employers, teachers, friends, and others) do not ask about their disabilities, they will be curious about how people with such disabling conditions can work, play, study, and live normal lives. Children who are prepared to handle these inquiries from others and who feel comfortable with the task are more likely to put others at ease and present themselves well. As early as appropriate, children need to learn that their vision differs from the vision of other people, but that it doesn't define who they are—it's just an attribute. They need to respond to questions, but shouldn't feel obligated to provide all the details of their medical histories. A youngster who is unable to see due to Retinoblastoma or Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP) doesn't need to provide information about the medical condition but rather needs to explain his or her functional limitations and may want to add some information about how he or she does things differently. For example, the child might say to a prospective teacher "I am unable to see to read print, but I love to read and I read both braille and audio books." By focusing on the functional limitation and providing insights into how a specific task is performed, the child helps the teacher understand that the disability is not overwhelming.

Blind and visually impaired children must learn compensatory skills such as reading and writing with braille or with print using optical devices, orientation and mobility skills, technology skills, activities of daily living, career education content, and the like, in order to fully participate in life activities. Braille and print are the primary mediums for children engaged in literacy activities that involve reading and writing. For children without functional vision or those with severely impaired vision, braille is the medium of choice. In order to be competitive in adult environments, children need to learn to read at speeds commensurate with those of their fully sighted peers. Reading speeds of less than 50 words a minute will inhibit the ability of a person to enter the labor force successfully. Both children with low vision and blind children need to use this benchmark to determine if the medium they are using is appropriate for them to be competitive when they leave school and attempt to secure work. Likewise, orientation and mobility (O&M) skills are critical to successful inclusion in the larger society. Without the ability to drive to and from work, shopping centers, doctor's offices, and so forth, people with visual disabilities must rely on alternative forms of transportation. Students who learn early in their lives how to get around on foot, by bus, or using other modalities (trains, subways, taxis, paratransit, etc.), hired drivers, family, and friends are more likely to be successful on their own following childhood. In addition to instruction in alternative literacy media and O&M, students with visual disabilities need instruction in technology skills—both generic computer skills and disability-specific skills, including the use of screen enlargement programs, speech and braille output devices, braille embossers, reading machines, talking calculators, electronic notetakers,

and so forth. Finally children must learn to manage their home and personal needs through instruction in activities of daily living. (Career education content competencies are discussed in the following sections.)

Structured instruction in career education can provide students with essential knowledge of the array of career options available to them. Many youngsters with visual disabilities have difficulty accessing information about the broad range of job choices available to them because they cannot casually and serendipitously observe adults performing different jobs. Compounding this problem is the fact that sighted people who do share information with youngsters about jobs available have a tendency to “filter” information into what they think the youngster can do without regard for what the youngster might want to do or be interested in finding out about to investigate further. Without good vision it is difficult not only to determine what job choices are available in the community, it is also very difficult to learn about the nuances of jobs: what people wear to work, what kinds of tools they use to perform their jobs, where they work, and how they behave on the job. Sources of general information about jobs and the labor market have traditionally only been available in print, further exacerbating the problem of capturing information for young people with significant visual difficulties. Students need to be taught how to use research techniques that they can apply to this problem: how to use the Internet, how to use recorded materials from the regional libraries for the blind and physically handicapped, and how to perform information interviews. There are a number of materials written in accessible formats that can be introduced to students such as *Career Perspectives* (Attmore, 1990), *Jobs To Be Proud Of* (Kendrick, 1993), and the *Transition Tote* (Wolffe & Johnson, 1997) that provide good information about job and career research techniques. In addition, resources like *O*Net* and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (DOL, 2000) that are available on the Department of Labor website (www.dol.gov) are accessible on-line. An important resource for information, people with visual disabilities who are currently employed in jobs like those in which students are interested can be accessed through the American Foundation for the Blind’s Careers & Technology Information Bank, either on-line at www.afb.org or via telephone (800/232-5463) or by contacting local chapter members of consumer organizations such as the American Council of the Blind or the National Federation of the Blind. By using techniques like informational interviewing and job shadowing, students with visual disabilities can learn first-hand about jobs being performed that they might be interested in pursuing.

In addition to knowing about job choices, students need to gain an understanding of employers’ concerns with regard to hiring people with visual disabilities. There are four major areas of concern voiced by many employers: safety, access to print, transportation, and the ability of workers with disabilities to meet quality and quantity quotas. Young people with disabilities need to be prepared to address these concerns. They will need to explain to employers how they have performed previous jobs or work-related tasks safely using adaptive techniques or modified equipment. They will want to explain how they access and generate printed information and be prepared to demonstrate any assistive technology that they use to do so. They will have to explain to prospective employers how they will get to and from work consistently and on time without driving. And, they will have to be prepared to demonstrate their ability to perform tasks well and in a timely fashion for employers’ concerns to be allayed. Finally, students need to understand how employers’ expectations change over time. That is, they may need to be taught that an employer expects to see evidence of good work habits and rudimentary work skills

initially—he or she expects to teach a new hire many of the nuances of the job. New employees are typically oriented to the work site, introduced to their fellow workers and taught how they will be expected to perform their jobs. After the first few months, the employer expects to see improvement—he or she assumes that a new employee will need less and less help on a daily basis. Employees who have been with a firm for six months to a year are expected to be performing at or near peak performance. Once employees have achieved peak work performance, employers begin to look for a willingness to teach these learned skills to others, a willingness to learn new job tasks and assume greater responsibility, and an interest in career advancement.

An introduction to career counseling content in self awareness, vocational selection, job seeking, job maintenance, and job search skills can facilitate a student's understanding of how to make good decisions about employment potential, how to prepare and look for work, and how to maintain a job once secured. A thorough knowledge of values, interests, abilities, and liabilities, as well as the knowledge of how one appears to others and relates to others indicate self-awareness. Individuals who are self aware demonstrate the ability to set goals—daily detail goals, achievement goals, and personality goals; as well as the ability to plan, organize, and discipline themselves in order to achieve their goals. Vocational selection is indicated by knowledge of jobs available in the job seeker's home community which appeal to the job seeker based on his or her values, abilities, and interests, as well as those which meet his or her fiscal and personal needs. Also included in vocational selection is the knowledge of how a job seeker's qualifications match a job description; an understanding of how a selected type of work relates to short-term and long-term goals; and finally, the ability to identify places that hire people doing a job like the one he or she has chosen and alternative job choices related to and hopefully leading toward career goals a job seeker has already set. Job seeking skills are indicated by a job seeker's ability to produce well-written applications, a resume or qualifications brief; set and keep appointments (includes arranging transportation to the interview); and interview successfully. Job maintenance skills are indicated by a job seeker's knowledge of how to keep a job, including an understanding of employer and co-worker expectations and how their expectations change over time. Also included in job maintenance is the ability to discipline oneself; the ability to distinguish between work habits and work skills; the ability to evaluate personal issues which may result in job maintenance problems; and an understanding of job benefits and payroll deductions. Finally, job search skills are indicated by a job seeker's knowledge of where jobs are advertised; the ability to find job leads or get assistance in finding job leads; the ability to identify appropriate job openings; demonstrable job seeking skills; and the ability to organize job search time, follow up on job interviews, and keep a record of all job contacts.

In order to find jobs and solicit only the amount of help truly needed by external sources requires that students and their teachers understand that a person's level of ability drives the amount of assistance that will be required from others in a job search. The three levels of intervention identified for participants are informational, instructional, and advocacy. Informational people are good readers and observers. They can be given involved verbal directions and be expected to follow though with directives received. These individuals cope fairly well with the traditional content approach to teaching. A teacher can lecture or lead discussions in topical areas and informational students can apply what they have heard and seen. These students learn by trying out new concepts in the environment and modifying them to suit their needs. Instructional level

people are average performers. They can read and learn through observation, but demonstration is helpful. They can follow directions, but prefer to be shown and told how to perform. These students respond best to process teaching; i.e., by doing things with the instructor. The facilitator teaches—shows students how to perform instead of assuming they will be able to apply what's been talked about or read outside of the classroom. Once a skill has been mastered, however, the student continues to refine and apply what's been learned in the community. With training and practice, it is anticipated that the majority of these students will live independently and work competitively. Advocacy level people function well below average in most areas of academics and daily living skills. These students require intensive instruction, frequently one-to-one. Combinations of teaching methods will be necessary to get concepts across to such students. Instructions may need to be spoken, signed, written, pictorial, combined, or conveyed through other innovative approaches. Demonstration and co-active instruction may prove effective. Process learning is a must. Many clients at this level will be able to live and work in the community with supports, like attendant care, communication specialists, job coaches, supervised living arrangements, special transit. The overriding impact of ability with regard to placement is that students who are functioning at the informational or instructional level can anticipate that they will be able to ultimately find and maintain their own jobs in the future whereas those who are functioning at the advocacy level will require external placement support.

In closing, it is the opportunities to gain work experience (through summer work programs, weekend school-to-work programs, internships and practica, on-the-job training experiences, and employment activities in one's home and community) that seem to have the greatest impact on future success in the transition process. For this reason, it is critical that families and service providers provide as many work opportunities as possible to young people with visual disabilities. Teachers, counselors, and parents must constantly ask themselves if they would be willing to hire the young people with whom they work. If not, they must consider how to help remediate or correct the behaviors or skills that they perceive to be deficient. If they consider the children with whom they work to be job ready, they need to help determine what jobs they could be doing and move them into positions of responsibility. It is not enough to believe in the process—service providers and parents must believe in the product! The way to manifest this belief in the product—the competent, job ready student—is to hire blind and visually impaired youngsters. Employers must have evidence that young people with disabilities can work and there is no better evidence than a work history!

Source:

- *Attmore, M. (1990). Career Perspectives. New York: American Foundation for the Blind.*
- *Kendrick, D. (1993). Jobs To Be Proud Of. New York: American Foundation for the Blind.*
- *United States Department of Labor (2000). Occupational Outlook Handbook. Washington, DC: author.*
- *Wolffe, K., & Johnson, D. (1997). The Transition Tote. New York: American Foundation for the Blind.*

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