

# **Great Expectations:**

## **Preparing Your Child with Developmental Disabilities for Employment Success**



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According the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000, et seq., Developmental Disability is defined as a severe, chronic disability of an individual that—

- (i) is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or combination of mental and physical impairments;
- (ii) is manifested before the individual attains age 22;
- (iii) is likely to continue indefinitely;
- (iv) results in substantial functional limitations in 3 or more of the following areas of major life activity:
  - (I) Self-care.
  - (II) Receptive and expressive language.
  - (III) Learning.
  - (IV) Mobility.
  - (V) Self-direction.
  - (VI) Capacity for independent living.
  - (VII) Economic self-sufficiency; and
- (v) reflects the individual's need for a combination and sequence of special, interdisciplinary, or generic services, individualized supports, or other forms of assistance that are of lifelong or extended duration and are individually planned and coordinated.

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“I cannot do everything, but still I can do something;  
and because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do something that I can do.”

“Only through experience of trial and suffering  
can the soul be strengthened,  
ambition inspired and success achieved.”

—*Helen Keller was an author, activist and lecturer.  
She was the first blind and deaf person to graduate from college.*



“Most importantly, embrace your son/daughter for the ‘typical’ child they are before you view them as your son/daughter with a disability. Make no doubt about it, there are more commonalities of concern for your capable son/daughter as there are for your disabled child.”

*—Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*

## I. Facing the Challenge

As the parent of a child with developmental disabilities, you face unique challenges. This handbook is intended to help provide the inspiration, tools and understanding you need to help your child prepare for a fulfilling and constructive role in the workforce.

As you might already believe in your heart, there will be opportunities for your child, as long as he (or she) is afforded the appropriate education, training and supports. Labor market trends, changing skill demands, governmental programs, protective laws and employers looking to diversify will lead to more workplace opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Understanding the workplace trends, the intrinsic value of work, and the programs and supports available to your child are vital in helping him reach his highest potential. Learning from the experiences of other parents who have already faced these challenges also will help you set the stage for success.

Recognize the most valuable gift you can offer your child: Optimism. Help her envision the possibilities that lie ahead. Offer the encouragement, support and experiences that will prepare her to tackle the employment world and achieve an enriching and productive life in the community.





## **II. Setting the Bar High: Why Should Parents Have High Expectations for their Child with Disabilities?**

It is critical for parents to maintain high expectations for their child with disabilities. Children often see their own potential through the vision created by their parents. Research has demonstrated that family support is a vital component of a person's ability to achieve personal, academic and employment success.

Of greatest importance, studies have demonstrated that when parents have high academic and employment expectations for their children with disabilities, the children experience greater success in those critical areas. Simply increasing parents' awareness of their children's potential employability and the importance of work are likely to influence positive employment outcomes.

If you find yourself doubting your child's potential, you should remind yourself of the importance of retaining an optimistic and positive attitude and of maintaining high expectations.

### **Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities Will Increase**

Demographic trends are making it inevitable that employers will expand their hiring of individuals with disabilities. The workforce is aging, disability rates are rising and the traditional labor pool is not growing. In order to fill their ranks, businesses will have to increase the number of opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Numerous other factors make the hiring of individuals with disabilities a wise business decision. There are significant financial benefits and tax incentives that encourage businesses to employ workers with disabilities. Diversity is an increasingly important corporate

workforce policy. Additionally, businesses derive substantial benefits through improved public relations and community perception by hiring individuals with disabilities.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers are prohibited from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, as long as the person is qualified to do the job they are seeking.

As long as a person with disabilities can perform all the essential functions of a job and meet the educational and experience requirements set forth by the employer, an employer must consider providing a "reasonable accommodation" – a modification or adjustment to a job or work environment that will enable the applicant to do the job. Such accommodations might include: modifying work schedules, modifying equipment, or making facilities used by employees readily accessible to individuals with a disability.

Technology has played a vital role in opening the employment door for individuals with disabilities. Technological advances allow workers with disabilities to perform job functions that they might not have been able to perform before and increase their ability to be more productive workers.

Telecommuting and the decentralization of business processes allow many workers with disabilities to perform their job duties from home or from locations other than a central office. These more flexible work options allow some workers to communicate more effectively, especially workers with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other types of social challenges.



“What is doable is based on each individual situation. Try to stay actively involved with the ‘system’ in which your son/daughter is seeking services and supports. Whether it is the educational, employment, housing or adult service system, do your homework and know the answer before you ask the question.”

### III. What are the Trends?

While the percentage of individuals with disabilities who are employed remains below the general population, it is greater than many would anticipate. Nearly 13 percent or more than 22 million working age adults in the United States have a disability, according to 2006 statistics. Nearly 38 percent of working age adults with a disability were employed, compared to nearly 80 percent of individuals without disabilities. Looking at full-time employment, the rates are nearly 22 percent and 57 percent, respectively.

And while there is an earnings gap, it is not as wide as might be expected. Across the nation, median labor earnings of working age people with disabilities who worked full-time in 2006 were \$30,000, while the median earnings for the non-disabled were \$37,000. In New Jersey, with its higher than average salaries, those earnings would be higher.

A large portion of that difference can be attributed to the completion of a higher education. On average, employees above the age of 25 who have not obtained a

college degree earn only about 60 percent of the amount earned by those individuals with a Bachelor's degree. In New Jersey, the percentage of working age residents without a disability who have a Bachelor's degree (nearly 38 percent) is more than double the percentage of those with a disability (almost 18 percent). Clearly, a major factor holding down the incomes of individuals with disabilities is the lack of a college degree.

Traditionally, there have been numerous barriers to the employability of individuals with disabilities, leading to this disparity in jobs, salary and education. While a number of those barriers have begun to disappear, one of the most significant barriers can still act as a stumbling block. Too often, individuals with disabilities fear they may be unable to succeed in the workforce and do not establish the high expectations of themselves that are needed to take on the tough challenges. It is imperative for parents to join in the fight to eliminate those negative perceptions, starting at an early age.





## IV. Why Should Your Child Work? Benefits of Working Versus Public Assistance

Why should your child confront the challenges of finding and maintaining employment? Cutting-edge research indicates that accumulating assets can empower your child and promote independence and self-sufficiency. Financial success can be a crucial force in helping individuals feel better about themselves, feel secure, become involved in their community and have an optimistic attitude about the future.

Financial power for people with disabilities can enable them to buy homes, attend college, seek additional skills training to help with employment, and purchase assistive technology to further their success on the job. On the other hand, lack of assets and income limits an individual's ability to find stable housing and pursue higher education – keys to stopping the cycle of poverty among individuals with disabilities.

Saving money, building assets and being connected to mainstream banks are important because they:

1. Produce choices for people with disabilities that directly affect their current and future quality of life,
2. Lead to greater financial security,
3. Produce greater community participation, and
4. Change expectations and status with other community stakeholders.

Many parents are concerned that encouraging their children to work and earn an income will affect their children's eligibility for needed public benefits, such as Social Security and

Medicaid. In New Jersey, a person with a disability is eligible to receive full Medicaid health coverage **and** earn an income through a program called NJ WorkAbility. The criteria for WorkAbility are the following:

- Be between the ages of 16 and 64
- Work part-time, full-time or be self-employed and have proof of employment
- Have a permanent disability determined by the Social Security Administration (SSA), or the Disability Review Team at the Division of Medical Assistance and Health Services (DMAHS)
- Have an earned income no more than \$52,788 per year for eligible individuals, or no more than \$70,788 per year for eligible couples (both with permanent disabilities and both working; Social Security Disability Insurance is not counted as income)
- Have an unearned income (child support, interest, etc.) up to \$867 per month for eligible individuals, or up to \$1,167 for eligible couples
- Have less than \$20,000 in liquid assets as an individual, or less than \$30,000 as a couple (401K plans and the value of a home or a car are disregarded assets).

For more information on NJ WorkAbility, parents should refer to: <http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/dds/njworkability.html>



## V. Where Will the Jobs Be?

An important way to help your child find and keep a job is by knowing which industries and jobs will be growing and expanding in New Jersey in the near future and helping him acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success.

According to the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Center for Occupational Employment Information and Labor Market and Demographic Research, there are 10 high growth industry sectors in New Jersey (2008):

- Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources
- Arts, A/V Technology and Communications
- Business Management and Administration
- Finance
- Health Science
- Hospitality and Tourism
- Information Technology
- Advanced Manufacturing
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
- Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics

High growth industries are those that are critical to the state's economic vitality and development, industries that significantly affect the growth of other important industries, are a new or emerging industry, and those that are transformed by technology that requires significant changes in the workforce skill sets.

Education, energy, environmental, health care and security are among the industries that are expected to survive this current economic downturn and to grow in the coming years.

In the education and energy fields, many retirements are anticipated in the next 10 years, leading to abundant hiring. With the new "green" consciousness and awareness of global warming, eco-friendly jobs are expected to thrive. Security is a rising concern for employers and they expect to continue to add jobs in the coming years. Meanwhile, health care is still booming with half of the 30 fastest growing jobs found in health services.





“Try to work backwards. First, ask yourself, ‘Where do I see my son/daughter with regard to employment?’ Then roll back to where you are now, making sure all the necessary steps in between are covered. Are you securing all the necessary goals and objectives with a focus on the projected outcome? If he/she transitioned out without a well-executed plan in place, what does he/she now need (supports and services) to get to the appropriate ending place? As much as the ages 0 to 21 may seem like an eternity, pace yourself. Recognize that 21 and beyond is much longer lasting, so focus on the **long-term plan!**”

*—Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*

## VI. What Do Employers Need?

The key to success for your child is understanding what the employer needs. What function does the employer need someone to perform? What skill sets are employers really looking for?

As a parent, you know best the unique strengths your child possesses. Focus on those strengths and talents and help her develop skills based on those strengths. The more advanced and fine-tuned your child can develop those skills, the greater opportunity she will have for success in the workplace and

the more valuable she is to an employer. Think creatively about how your child's strengths can make her an asset for an employer.

It is also crucial to help your child to develop the "soft skills" that employers are consistently saying are lacking in the general workforce. Such skills include: timeliness, responsibility, appropriate dress, strong basic skills, willingness to learn new things and commitment to the job. If your child can demonstrate strength in these skills, he will have an advantage in obtaining and retaining employment.





## VII. How Can You Help?

Once your child reaches high school age, or preferably sooner, it becomes very important for the parent and the school to work together to devise an individual education plan (IEP) that outlays the best course of action for your child regarding his education and employment opportunities. The most important thing to remember is to base much of the plan on the unique strengths, abilities and talents of your child and always maintain the goal at its highest level.

If work is the best option for your child, ensure that she has as many work experiences as possible with exposure to many different job settings. Parents should also be closely connected with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) at the New Jersey Department of Labor. For more

information on DVRS, parents should refer to: <http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/dvrs/DVRIndex.html>

There are some postsecondary institutions in New Jersey that provide specialized services for students with developmental disabilities. One New Jersey postsecondary program is the DREAM program at Mercer County Community College, a transition and postsecondary program for students with Down Syndrome and other intellectual disabilities. The DREAM Program, which is designed around each student's abilities, goals and needs, provides academic, career-related, independent living and socialization experiences. For more information on the DREAM program, parents can go to: [http://www.mccc.edu/student\\_services\\_needs\\_dream.shtml#1](http://www.mccc.edu/student_services_needs_dream.shtml#1)





“How can I, as a parent, collaborate with the direct service professionals to ensure the best possible outcome for my son/daughter? Collaboration that began in educational entitlement **must** continue throughout the young adult/adult journey... perhaps to a lesser degree, but continuance must occur.”

*—Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*

## VIII. Who Can Offer Advice? Words of Wisdom from Parents

Other parents with children with developmental disabilities have the best understanding of the challenges you will face and the possibilities that lie ahead. They offer the following advice:

1. Keep all levels of employment in mind.
2. Focus on self-sufficiency and teach your child to be independent.
3. Pre-employment skills should start before the age of 14. Children should participate in paid and unpaid employment to learn a variety of skills, such as computer skills and cooperating with others.
4. You have to motivate your child with a "can do" attitude.
5. Provide many opportunities to contribute and learn skills in many different settings.
6. Help your child to understand that life is trial and error and failing is part of life. Even if he tries a job and doesn't succeed, there are lessons to take to another job.
7. There is a progression: school, volunteering, internship, supported employment, part-time employment, full-time employment.
8. Do not depend on one agency and do not look to school to provide everything.
9. Start at home to develop your child's strengths and work ethic.
10. Accept that your plan might not work; it's OK if it doesn't work. Still keep going.
11. Recognize that there are always choices, always alternatives. Do not accept dead ends.
12. Parents need to strike a balance. Decide when to be involved and when to step back.





## IX. Is it Really Possible? On the Road to Success

Twenty-one year old Robert, who has a developmental disability, is finding success in the workforce. At a young age, Robert demonstrated that education held promise for him and that he had the ability to work. Early on, Robert's mother began coordinating with the school to define his job skills.

Robert spent six years in high school getting ready for work. In addition to job skill development, he practiced filling out job applications, learning a work ethic, and proper appearance on the job. He visited more than 52 work sites. These experiences prepared Robert to attain a fulfilling position and to succeed in his part-time position.

His mother saw an awakening in the education system, whereby teachers have established a higher bar of expectation of children with developmental disabilities. And educators now also expect parents to be accountable by reinforcing the important messages of the value of higher education, self-sufficiency and preparation for employment.

The process starts at home, with parents teaching their child that he is a valued household member.

Every parent faces different challenges in preparing their child for adulthood. As the parent of a child with developmental disabilities, your path will present unique obstacles that may stress your resolve. But with the appropriate knowledge, support and attitude, you can serve as a vital ally for your child and become the catalyst for her success. While this handbook provides some suggestions and links for supports and service, do not hesitate to turn to other parents who have already faced these challenges to gain from their wisdom and experience.

“There are **many more** reasons to celebrate the positive experience(s) than there are to dwell on the difficult journey. Childhood...the teenage years...and young adulthood are a **blink** of the eye. Try not to miss the joy of parenting.”

*—Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*



For more information on parent advocacy and support groups, or to learn more about where to go for employment assistance in New Jersey, please refer to the following websites:

New Jersey Department of Human Services,  
Division of Developmental Disabilities  
<http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/ddd/>

New Jersey Department of Human Services,  
Division of Disability Services  
<http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/dds/>

New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities  
<http://www.njddc.org/>

New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development,  
Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services  
<http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/dvrs/DVRIndex.html>

New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development,  
Career Development Services  
[http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/wfprep/wfprep\\_index.html](http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/wfprep/wfprep_index.html)



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