



Planning for Life After School:

How to Support Someone at Work



Often times when a person with an intellectual disability is beginning any new activity, whether it is work or recreational, they will need different kinds of supports to transition them into the activity.

What is a support staff?

A support staff is someone who accompanies the person to their activity of choice to assist with areas such as; motivation, getting to and from an activity, safety and security concerns, breakdown of tasks and task accomplishment. In a co-op setting, employment training program, or employment program support staff are often referred to as Job Coaches. The role of the job coach is to act as a support at the workplace by coaching the person through their job requirements and the etiquette of the workplace. For example, if the person works at a grocery store stocking shelves, the job coach would instruct and coach the person on how to stock the shelves according to the procedural norms of the store, how long breaks are, how

to tell when break time begins and ends, how to handle customer inquiries appropriately and how to fill out time sheets to name just a few areas of their role.

How long should there be a support staff?

It is often joked that the goal of the support staff or job coach is to work themselves out of a job. It is by no means literal but is regularly referred to because it is in the best interest of the person receiving the support to gain as much independence at their activity as possible. Once initial training has been provided and the individual is taking on some of the tasks by themselves (which can be after three months or one year) it is customary for the support staff

to begin to phase out. This simply means that when the person is showing confidence that they can take on a task or parts of a task by themselves, the support will begin to step back and not give the hands on direction that they

were once providing. It is always important to recognize when to step back when supporting a person with an intellectual disability, for some helpful hints see, "Ways to Step Back"

Ways to "Step Back"

Adapted from: the American Foundation for the Blind

1. You're stepping back so that individuals can step forward and become independent.
2. Sit on your hands for a whole task while you practice giving verbal instead of physical or gestural prompts.
3. Let individuals make mistakes and deal with the consequences. It's part of the human experience.
4. Step back before you "intervene" when you think an individual may have an "inappropriate" interaction with someone in the community. Your intervention may do more harm than good to the individuals dignity, credibility, perceived competence, etc.
5. Even though helping can feel right, be aware that too much assistance is short-sighted. Sometimes less is more, less is better. Please don't contribute to an individuals learned helplessness.
6. Catch yourself before you correct an individual's work. This is about their skills ...not yours. Things may not fall apart as much as you had expected or the individual may self-correct. Give the individual time to work it out alone.
7. "What am I supposed to do next?" "When is lunch?" Have the individual solve and/or ask a peer instead of you.
8. Teach individuals to decline assistance, "Thanks, but please let me try Myself."
9. Develop natural supports within the workplace.
10. Whenever you add prompts, include a plan to phase them out.
11. Let employers know that you need to step back so that individuals can be more independent. You're not shirking your responsibilities!
Collaborate with co-workers, employers, etc. to develop a plan to encourage independence. Agree to remind each other to step back.
12. Step back to give individuals a chance to ask themselves, "did I do that right?" and the dignity to grow on their own and the pride to feel their own successes.

Remember when you step back you create the ultimate objective - The opportunity to empower individuals.

What is a natural support?

A natural support is someone who is an employee or a regular volunteer at the site the person works or volunteers for. Establishing natural supports and building a level of comfort

with them is very important when trying to have the job coach phase out of an activity. This is because it creates an environment where the person can still ask questions and seek help when needed without having a support staff beside them. Having natural supports as opposed to

a job coach or support staff hovering over the person also instills a great sense of pride and independence in the person. To an employer it means that the person is capable of completing the tasks that are assigned and is becoming one with the team they work with.

How to support your family member?

If you are not connected with an agency, it is recommended that you try and hire a professional support worker to work with the person at their chosen activity. Unfortunately, it is not always a good idea for family members to support the person at a work or volunteer opportunity for numerous reasons. First, it does not do anything for a person's sense of dignity and independence. I am sure we can all agree that we did not want our mothers or fathers standing beside us as we worked at our first job. Secondly, the person may not take your instructions as well or as seriously as they would from a professional. Thirdly, it is difficult to fulfill the roles of both family member and support staff at the same time. Creating boundaries around where the support staff role begins and where the role of the family member ends is hard to keep up and if it is not followed correctly it could turn into an explosive situation. Finally, professional support staff know how and when to advocate for people appropriately which is ultimately the most important role a support staff has.

If you are connected with an agency, support staff and job coaches may be provided by the

agency. This means that you can focus on your role as the family member and let all of the small details of the activity be left in the hands of the support staff and case coordinators (if applicable.) Listening to the person's stories about their day at work, volunteer placement or recreational activity will prove to be much more rewarding and meaningful than worrying about supporting them at a retail outlet, animal shelter or art class.

There is never one way to support a person with an intellectual disability. The amount of time support is needed and the ways in which phasing out can be implemented will be depend on the person. The main goal with any activity however, is to create as much independence as possible. By doing so you will be assisting in making the person's dreams come true.

For more information:

Check out these other tip sheets

- [Looking at Needs and Overcoming Obstacles](#)
- [Exploring Funding Sources](#)