Working in the Community: A Guide for Employers of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Supported Employment & Supported Volunteerism Training Manual

ALPINE LEARNING GROUP
Meeting the Challenge

DJF® The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation
Granting a Future to Those with Autism®

Written and produced by the Alpine Learning Group with support from The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation

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Purpose of this Manual

Congratulations! You have recently hired an employee with autism or are hosting a volunteer with autism. This manual will introduce you to the characteristics of autism, certain practices that will enrich the experience of your employee or volunteer, and practical strategies that will promote positive interactions with your new employee or volunteer. Thank you for investing in the future of adults with autism!

When Using This Manual

This manual was designed to provide a general overview of the characteristics of autism and general procedures to enhance the volunteer or job experiences of individuals with autism. The authors recognize that each person with autism has his or her own strengths and unique personality. Therefore, you should view each person with autism individually. Some of the descriptions and procedures outlined may not apply to the person you are employing or hosting.

Support staff will help you in determining which practices and strategies will be most effective and productive in each situation, and with each individual worker.

Throughout this manual, the word "employee" will be used to refer to the individual with autism in a supported employment position. However, the same ideas discussed apply whether the individual is paid or volunteering.

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Supported Employment and Supported Volunteerism

Individuals with autism can be valuable members of the work force. Like any hard working person, they can be dependable, productive and efficient. Nevertheless, due to the nature of their disability, certain supports are necessary to help them perform their jobs.

Supported employment is competitive employment in a community setting that involves ongoing support services for individuals with more significant disabilities. It matches the employee's strengths and interests with jobs in the community. Due to the challenges associated with the disability, a person with autism may require certain types of support or assistance to learn a job and may require ongoing support to continue to complete the job successfully. Support is typically provided by a Job Coach.

Justin with his Job Coach, Karissa, receiving his first paycheck!

At times, the individual with autism may be able to fulfill all responsibilities of a job. Other times, "job carving" may be necessary. Job carving entails tailoring a job specifically for an employee with autism. To do this, employers may reassign other workers' smaller tasks to create a specific job for the person with autism. The employer may find this economical because he or she can take simpler tasks (e.g., photocopying, filing, scanning) that were being performed by workers who have other more complex responsibilities and designate those tasks for the employee with autism. Thus, the other workers can devote more time to the more complex components of their jobs.

Supported volunteerism is similar to supported employment, except the individual with autism is not employed by the worksite. The purpose is to provide job training opportunities in the form of volunteer experiences in various community settings. Examples of volunteer jobs include sorting mail at a community hospital, collecting recycling at the local YMCA, and feeding and caring for animals at a local animal shelter. Typically, young adults with autism volunteer not only to provide a community service, but also to gain valuable job training experiences.

"All of the volunteers have been very kind and sweet with giving of their time. Despite their special needs, the joy of giving is evident to their actions. We always look forward to their smiles!"

- Maria Salerno, Coordinator of Valley Home Care and Hospice

The Role of the Job Coach

Matt's Job Coach shadows him as he completes a volunteer job at a local church.

The employee is supported by a specialized staff person, usually referred to as a Job Coach or Life Coach. The role of the Job Coach is to help the employee learn the job, perform the job successfully, and to integrate into the employment setting. The Job Coach may assist the employee in performing components of the job and may shadow the employee at the job to ensure it is completed successfully. They also help identify teaching strategies to use in the setting.

Job Coaches are also available to provide relevant information to the employment site that will enrich the experiences of the employee. For, example, the Job Coach may suggest ways for coworkers to interact with the employee or recommend helping strategies to promote job success. It is recommended that you get to know the individual's Job Coach and ask them questions should they arise.

Overview of Autism

Description of Autism

Cory uses an electronic communication system to communicate to his Job Coach that he is done with his work task.

While individuals with autism have different skills and abilities, they typically experience challenges in four main areas:

1. **Challenges communicating with others:**
   - ☐ Some individuals with autism may not speak at all and may use pictures or electronic devices to communicate.
   - ☐ Some persons with autism may speak using only one- to two-word phrases.
   - ☐ Others may be able to engage in conversation, but may have difficulty talking about a range of topics.
2. **Difficulty understanding language:**
   - ☐ A person with autism may have difficulty understanding seemingly simple directions such as, "Can you go to the kitchen and get me some forks?" or "I need six copies."

- They may also not understand questions such as, “Do you have the time?” or “Can you tell me where the men’s room is?”
- They may also have difficulty understanding jokes and common gestures.

3. Challenges socializing and developing friendships:

- Some individuals with autism may not readily respond to your greetings, make eye contact, or initiate interactions with you.
- They may also have difficulty following the general rules of social interactions, such as how far to stand from someone when speaking to her.
- While on a break from work, a person with autism may choose to sit alone rather than to socialize with others.

4. Challenging behavior:

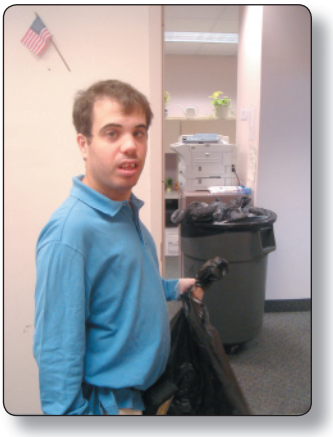
- Due to difficulties understanding language and communicating, an individual with autism may become frustrated or upset. Challenging behavior is sometimes a way for the person to communicate that something is too difficult, that they need a break, or that they want something.
- Persons with autism may also have a narrow range of interests, such as talking about the same topic over and over again, or moving their body in a repetitive motion.
- Some individuals may become upset when there are changes in their routine or changes in the environment, even when those changes seem trivial.

Despite these challenges individuals with autism are capable of learning a variety of jobs. With proper training and support, many can become valued coworkers. These challenges however require the incorporation of specific techniques to help the employee learn the job, and to manage his own behavior.

Jonathan files paperwork at a doctor’s office.

Jason is employed by a senior residence, where he sorts and delivers mail.

Important Facts about Autism



Andrew works as part of the maintenance department at a nursing home.

While no one knows what causes autism, there are some general facts that are known about autism.

- Autism is considered a spectrum disorder. This means that some individuals will display significant learning and behavioral challenges, while others may only be mildly affected by the disability.
- Autism is diagnosed during the first three years of life, based on a child's behavior and skills. Currently, there is no genetic marker for autism.
- Autism is 4 times more common in males than females.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders is 1 in every 150-166 children.
- Autism is found throughout the world, in families of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The cause of autism is not known. However, research suggests that it is a neurobiologically-based developmental disability, and that there is more than one factor contributing to autism.
- There are no environmental or psychological factors linked to the cause of autism.
- About one third of all individuals with autism develop seizures in adolescence.
- Individuals with autism live a normal life span.
- Autism tends to run in families. If a family already has a child with autism, they have a 3-5% chance of having another child with autism.
- Individuals with autism can learn. Early intervention combined with intensive educationally-based interventions based on applied behavior analysis are most effective for treating autism.

Greg cleans shelves at an office supply store.

How Individuals with Autism Learn Best

Research in the area of autism education has identified specific techniques that help people with autism learn. In general, they learn best when:

- ☐ The task is clearly presented.
- ☐ Assistance (if necessary) is provided to complete the task.
- ☐ A reinforcer (reward) is provided for successful completion of the task.
- ☐ There are many opportunities to practice the task.

In fact, a person with autism learns the way most people learn, except that the skill will often need to be broken down into small component steps, and the individual may need more practice to learn the skill. In addition, special rewards may need to be used to help the person with autism master the response. For example, a person with autism may need extra practice to learn how to greet his supervisor, or may periodically need a reward, such as praise.

Tim cleans a chiropractor's office.

Learning Theory

To understand how a person with autism learns best, think of the learning process as having three parts. Theses are:

A = Antecedents
B = Behavior
C = Consequences

These events occur in an "ABC sequence:" antecedent is presented, behavior occurs, and then a consequence is provided.

Cory works in a hospital storeroom preparing supplies for the nurses' stations.

Justin polishes silverware at a golf club.

Antecedent: Something that comes before a response or a behavior, such as:

- An instruction from a supervisor to complete a task
- A greeting from a supervisor
- A question from a coworker
- A new work sample to complete

Behavior: Any action performed by someone. Some examples of behavior are:

- Following a direction
- Answering a question
- Completing a work task
- Asking for assistance

Consequence: Something that follows a behavior. Most consequences related to learning are pleasurable:

- A break from work
- A compliment from a supervisor
- A paycheck
- A snack

David collects recycling at a YMCA.

Most learning occurs through positive reinforcement. This involves presenting something fun or pleasing following a response or a behavior.

For example, when John stays on-task at his job for one hour, he is allowed to choose a preferred snack from the vending machine. He is more likely to stay on task for a whole hour the next day because a special snack was offered for working for so long.

Examples of the A-B-C Sequence at work

1. **Antecedent:** A coworker says, "Good morning" to Karen.
   Behavior: Karen says, "Good morning" in return.
   Consequence: Karen's Job Coach gives her a compliment for returning the greeting (e.g., "Nice job, I like the way you greeted your coworker").

In this example, Karen is more likely to reciprocate, "Good morning" to her coworker the next time her coworker greets her, because her response was "reinforced" by her Job Coach.

2. **Antecedent:** Ed runs out of materials to complete his work task.
   Behavior: Ed approaches his Job Coach and asks for materials.
   Consequence: Ed's Job Coach praises him for seeking assistance and helps him locate the items.

In this example, Ed is more likely to seek assistance the next time supplies run out because his Job Coach complimented him and helped him to find the items.

3. **Sometimes, by mistake, we can teach the wrong behavior** or something we do not want an individual to do. For example:

   Antecedent: Charles has been working for an hour and would like to take a break.
   Behavior: He begins to tantrum and yell.
   Consequence: His Job Coach tells him he can take a break and lets him sit down for 15 minutes.

In this example, the next time Charles wants a break from work, he is likely to tantrum and yell because his Job Coach has provided a pleasurable activity (a break from work) for tantruming and yelling.

The important point to remember is that learning occurs as a result of what happens before and after a behavior. It is important, therefore, to consider these events when trying to teach a new skill or understand why a challenging behavior occurs.

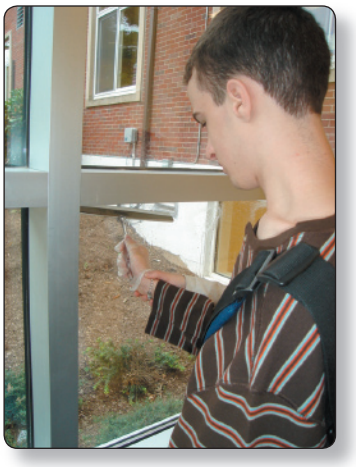
Prompting

To teach an employee how to do a particular job, the Job Coach may use prompts (or assistance) to help him know how to perform the job accurately. Prompts are any kind of assistance that is provided to help the employee know what she needs to do in order to be successful on the job. There are many different types of prompts that can help the employee learn a job. For example, if the person does not know where the cleaning supplies are, his Job Coach may use one of the following prompts:

Matt hangs clothes for a clothing store.

"All of the students were dedicated, did a great job, and were well-supervised."

-Bill Comery, Director of Parks, Paramus, NJ



In this example, the Job Coach is guiding Ryan's hand to clean the window with the squeegee.

Jonathan washes windows at a senior residence.

- **Verbal:** The Job Coach may tell the employee where he can locate the supplies (e.g., "Get the cleaning fluid, it's in the cabinet").
- **Physical:** The Job Coach may physically guide the employee by directing him by the shoulders or elbows in the direction of the cabinet.
- **Gestural:** The Job Coach may point in the direction of the cabinet.
- **Modeling:** The Job Coach may demonstrate for the employee by getting the cleaning supplies himself.
- **Photo or text prompts:** The Job Coach may provide the employee with a series of photos or text that will direct him where to get the supplies.

Prompt Fading

The goal with prompts is to remove them over time, so that the employee is able to do the job independently, without any prompts from his Job Coach. To accomplish this, the Job Coach will provide less assistance over time, and will ensure rewards are provided for increased independence. For example, when a new employee starts a job, his Job Coach may initially provide lots of assistance and prompts. Eventually, the Job Coach will not prompt as readily to see how much the employee can do on his own. When the employee performs a component without assistance, the Job Coach will provide a compliment to the person for working independently.

Some employees may always require some level of assistance to be able to complete some components of a job successfully. In this case, the goal would be to use a prompt that requires less direct assistance from the Job Coach, such as picture prompts or prompts from coworkers. For example, if an employee is not able to use a key to unlock a cabinet, he may be taught to ask for assistance from a coworker. Or, if an employee is unable to remember all the steps involved in cleaning an area, pictures of each step may be used to help her follow the correct steps.

Task Analysis

Some tasks at job sites involve a sequence of complicated steps. For example, one cleans a kitchen in a sequence of steps. When a task

involves a long sequence of steps, the Job Coach typically breaks the task down into smaller steps, and then teaches them to the employee step-by-step.

When a Job Coach conducts a task analysis, she typically walks through the task herself to identify each component step. She then writes out each step in the order in which she will teach them. For example, if the employee's job is to wash windows, the Job Coach would complete the task herself, identifying the following steps:

1. Sign in at the front desk
2. Greet supervisor
3. Get key to open supply cabinet
5. Get squeegee, Windex and paper towels
6. Walk to front lobby
7. Spray center window with Windex five times
8. Run squeegee from top to bottom moving from left to right
9. Wipe bottom of window and squeegee with paper towel

And so on...

Greg and Matt work in the linen department of a hospital.

Common Strategies

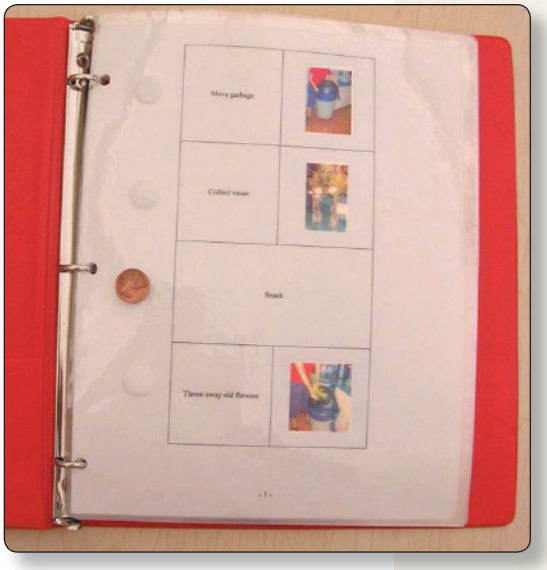
You may observe the Job Coach using specific items or techniques to help or support the employee on the job. If you ever observe something you are unsure of, or are simply curious about, you can always ask the Job Coach. Below are some common practices that may be part of the employee's job training experience.

Photographic and Text Schedules

Sometimes photos or text (words) are used as cues to remind the employee how to complete each step in a job task. When photos are used, each step in the sequence of the task is depicted in a photo. The sequence of photos is placed in a book or binder and the individual is guided by the Job Coach to:

- ☐ Point to the picture
- ☐ Complete the step shown in the picture
- ☐ Return to schedule book

This is an example of a text schedule depicting each step of cleaning the aisles at a retail store.



This is an example of a text and photo schedule used to guide someone through each step of a flower arranging job. The employee moves the penny down the list as he completes the steps.

Eventually, the Job Coach's guidance will become unnecessary. The schedule itself prompts the employee to follow the steps to complete the task.

If the employee can read, sentences or words are sometimes used to depict each step. For example, if an individual is learning to wash windows, each step of the sequence can be included in a list of words or simple sentences directing the person to complete each step. This list can be printed out on a page, or saved within a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), such as a Palm Pilot.

When possible, the photos or text are gradually removed so that the person performs the job without the schedule.

Use of Rewards/Reinforcement Systems

Like all of us, employees with autism need frequent feedback about their performance on the job. The most common reward for our hard work is a paycheck. For a person with autism, however, a paycheck initially may have little meaning to them. The delay between the work they perform and the paycheck they receive may be too long for the individual to connect the two. Therefore, sometimes more immediate rewards are used. Just like our rewards are based on our own interests, so are the rewards used for the employee. For example, a reward for one employee may be playing a video game while on a break from work. For another, the reward may be buying a favorite snack at the end of his work shift.

This is an example of a tally counter worn by an employee. The employee is prompted to provide himself points intermittently for good work performance. The points are then exchanged for a reward at a later time (e.g., ten points may equal a snack from the vending machine).

Sometimes, visual displays or counting devices are used to signal to the employee that he is getting closer to earning a reward. For example, a Job Coach may have the employee wear a tally counter and may instruct her to give herself a point after completing part of a task correctly. Points are later turned in for a reward.

Other employees may have a small board with coins on it called a token board. It is used in much the same way as the tally counter. When the employee earns all of the coins on the board, she turns them in for a reward.

Practicing Offsite

Sometimes components of a job require more practice than can be provided at the actual job site. As a result, the employee may be provided practice opportunities at his adult day program, school program, or at home. For example, if the employee is having trouble unlocking the supply closet, the Job Coach may recommend that his parents practice this skill with him at home.

This is an example of a token board. When all of the Velcro dots are filled up, the employee has earned a reward.

Natural Supports

Natural supports refer to supports located within the work environment. These can include directions or cues offered by coworkers or the arrangement of the environment to support the employee. For example, Ed is able to sort mail at a retirement home, but a coworker has to write the names of new residents on the mail list each time a new resident arrives. This information can more naturally be provided by Ed's coworker than by his Job Coach. This requires a little extra work on the coworker's part but allows support from the Job Coach to be faded.

This is an example of a reinforcement system where the individual with autism earns points for good behavior. Once the individual accumulates all of his points, he earns the use of his iPod.

Data Collection

Job Coaches may record data on the work performance of the employee. This allows the Job Coach to determine how well the employee is performing her job, and to determine if specific teaching strategies are improving performance. With permission from worksites and coworkers, data may also be collected on how well or how quickly coworkers perform a job. For example, at a packaging company, the Job Coach may see how many items a typical coworker packages in an hour, and from there, establish work goals for the employee. The goal may be to come close to or match the work productivity of the coworker.

Here the Job Coach is carefully monitoring Zachary by recording data on his performance. The Job Coach provides necessary assistance but also backs away to give Zachary an opportunity to work independently.

Mike scans documents at a community college.

Jobs Well-Suited for Individuals with Autism

Employees with autism have their own unique strengths and preferences for certain types of jobs. Employment opportunities, therefore, should be matched to a person's skills and preferences. However, there are certain job characteristics that may be generally better suited to a person with autism. When identifying potential employment or volunteer experiences for a person with autism, consider:

- ☐ Jobs that provide a good deal of repetition. A job of sorting mail, for example, provides ample repetition and practice.
- ☐ Jobs that do not require elaborate social skills. Due to some of their social challenges, jobs that require complicated social interactions – such as in sales – may not be the best fit for a person with autism.
- ☐ Jobs that are consistent day to day. Jobs that are completed daily such as mail delivery, paper recycling, and cleaning will provide consistency and repetition with little variation from day to day.
- ☐ Jobs that involve visual tasks. Some employees with autism are very good at completing visually-based tasks such as sorting, matching, and collating.
- ☐ Jobs that can be learned without a great deal of verbal description or explanation. Due to challenges in understanding language, jobs that require a great deal of verbal explanation, may not be a good match.

Getting Practical

How do I give directions to the employee?

One way to know how to interact with the employee is to observe how the Job Coach interacts with him. For example, does the Job Coach use simple directions when instructing the employee, and does she provide a gesture along with the direction? Generally, when providing directions, provide simple instructions along with some cues. For example, you may say, "Please put this away for me," and point in the direction of where the item should go. This will be easier for the employee to follow than an instruction such as, "Hey Joe, can you do me a favor and put this back where it goes."

Zachary shelves books at a library with assistance from his Job Coach.

What do I do if I don't get a response from the employee?

Sometimes an employee may not respond to your greeting, direction or social interaction. There could be a number of reasons for this. It may be the employee did not understand your direction or the interaction was too complicated. If you don't get a response, you may want to repeat your direction again, simplify the direction, or wait a few seconds to see if he responds. You can also let the Job Coach know that the employee did not respond to your interaction and he will likely ask you to repeat the interaction so that he can provide the necessary prompts.

What do I do if the employee makes an error or doesn't complete a component of his job?

Sometimes errors and mistakes can be easily corrected by pointing them out to the employee. For example, if the employee makes the wrong number of copies, simply point out the correct amount (e.g., "Oh, look. It says you need 10 copies"). If repeated errors occur, or the employee seems unable to follow your correction, please inform the Job Coach.

Lauren replenishes kitchen supplies at a school.

What do I do if the employee does something unusual?

Due to the behavioral challenges associated with autism, you may observe behavior that is unusual or different. The best thing to do is to simply ignore the behavior and, if necessary, advise the Job Coach about behavior that concerns you. Chances are, the Job Coach will be available to help the employee manage his own behavior and provide necessary redirection and support.

Andrew's supervisor greets him when he arrives.

How do I socialize with the employee? Even though the employee may have difficulty negotiating social interactions, it's important to greet him and make him feel welcomed at the job site. Just because the employee doesn't initiate to you doesn't mean you can't initiate to him. In fact, this will provide him with opportunities to practice his social skills.

Generally, when greeting or giving directions to the employee, be direct and state his name so he knows you are talking to him. For example, directly approach him and say, "Good morning, Ed," and wait for a response. Chances are if the employee doesn't respond, his Job Coach will provide a prompt for him to reciprocate the greeting.

As you get to know the person with autism, you will be more comfortable interacting in a way that is mutually enjoyable. Some employees may be able to engage in simple conversations about their weekend and future activities, while others may only be able to respond to greetings. Either way, initiating interactions and observing how the Job Coach interacts with the employee will help you learn how best to interact with him.

How do I provide praise and encouragement? The employee with autism will no doubt enjoy praise and acknowledgement. Provide compliments such as "Justin, you're doing a great job polishing the silverware!" or "Lauren, you brought me all the supplies so quickly!"

Sometimes a person with autism may find loud noises or physical interaction unpleasant. As a result, you should tailor your praise and encouragement based on the employee's personality and preferences.

"My husband Scott and I love having Greg here with us every Thursday... he is a very respectful and courteous young man. Even our customers like when he is here."

-Melissa Gowe, UPS Store, Oradell, NJ

How You Can Help

The employee will be working as part of a team within your organization, and while she will be accompanied by a trained Job Coach, there are many things you can do to help. Here are few examples:

- ☐ View the employee as part of the team.
- ☐ Let the Job Coach know if you have an idea about how to make the

employee fit in better.

- ☐ Notice progress and share the success of the employee within and outside of the agency.
- ☐ Check in with the Job Coach to see what he may need to make the employee's job performance more successful.
- ☐ Take the time to greet and interact with the employee.
- ☐ Remember that you are working alongside an adult, and to address and refer to him as such. Avoid referring to or treating the employee as a child.
- ☐ Show interest in the employee's progress and performance by asking the Job Coach how the employee is doing.
- ☐ Identify other meaningful jobs within your organization that may be a good match for the employee.
- ☐ Identify relevant goals (e.g., John should learn to use the time card system) that the Job Coach can work on with the employee.
- ☐ Take the time to learn about autism.
- ☐ Identify and be willing to provide "natural supports" so that assistance from the Job Coach can be slowly faded.
- ☐ Encourage your colleagues to take interest in the employee.

Matt makes copies in the accounting department of a hospital.

Mike performs outdoor maintenance at a park.

For additional training and information, contact:

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For additional information about how your company can benefit from hiring a person with a disability, contact:

U.S. Department of Labor: www.disabilityinfo.gov

Resources

Books

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Organization for AutismResearch (OAR)
www.autismresearch.org

Autism Speaks
www.autismspeaks.org

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation
www.djfiddlefoundation.org

NJ Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community (COSAC)
www.njcosac.org

New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities
www.state.nj.us/humanservices/ddd/

U.S. Department of Labor
www.disabilityinfo.gov

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