

# Parent Guide

Beginning the  
**work experience journey**  
with your teen with autism

Version 1.0

## ***Acknowledgements***

*This Parent Guide has been developed by Worktopia. It is intended to be shared as an open resource to support individuals and families living with autism as they prepare and plan for employment.*

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[www.worktopia.ca](http://www.worktopia.ca)

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# Introduction

Young people with autism are capable of amazing things, including work and establishing a career. Developing potential career possibilities and finding first work experiences needs to begin early, while your teen is in high school, because work-based learning during school can help your son or daughter get a job later in life.

## ***Benefits of work experience include opportunities to:***

- Explore job preferences and potential career pathways
- Build confidence
- Learn job skills
- Practice 'soft skills' in a work environment
- Gain experiences that can be included in a portfolio and on a resume
- Develop job contacts

During senior high school, youth begin to explore what working would mean for them (e.g. greater independence, opportunities to meet new friends, better understanding of their post-secondary interests and needs). This is when they start identifying their existing strengths that can positively influence their search for meaningful work experiences or a first job. Finding supports within existing networks and accessing relevant resources are key to both starting to build a plan around seeking work opportunities and engaging in those experiences.

The purpose of this guide is to support you and your teen as you begin to explore their pathways to employment. Working together, this guide can be used to create a ***Work Experience Plan*** that helps identify potential work experiences and prepares your teen to participate in work life in the future.

# Using this Guide

## How this Parent Guide Works

Through every step of the guide, there are questions for both parents and teens to reflect on the outlined concepts. **Parent Share** questions are conversation starters to begin talking about what some work journeys look like, while **Consider** questions are for parents and teens to answer together. These are both key to building an effective **Work Experience Plan (WEP)**.

As you and your teen work through each section and their activities, use the **Work Experience Plan** questions to fill in the worksheet on page 15, which can be used for any and all future employment experiences.

You can also find additional information and external resources related to youth employment planning throughout the guide using the **Find** icon.



Use the **Find** icon to explore more online employment tools.



Use the **Parent Share** questions to spark a conversation with your teen about your own work experiences. Sharing your experiences likely exemplifies how a variety of work experiences influenced your ultimate career or job and helps your teen understand that finding a job or a career is a journey.



Use the **Consider** questions to think about your teen's current job readiness and how you might shape a work experience opportunity based on their strengths and preferences.



The **Work Experience Plan (WEP)** will help you to create and track a thoughtful work experience strategy for your teen. The template is located on page 15.

## What are the Steps Required to Create a Work Experience Plan?

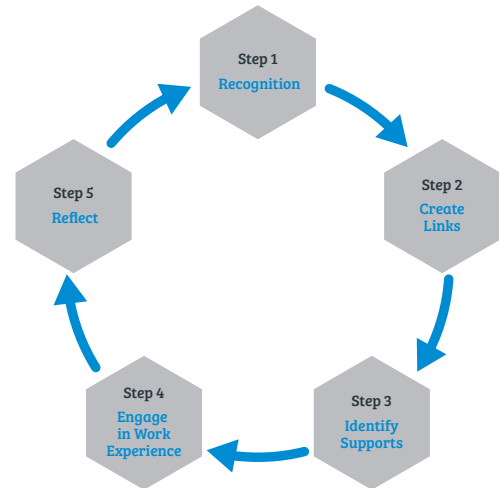
**Step 1:** Recognition - identify your teen's strengths and preferences

**Step 2:** Link your teen's strengths and preferences to potential work-related activities and work experiences

**Step 3:** Identify supports to enhance their learning

**Step 4:** Engage in a work experience

**Step 5:** Reflect on the experience's successes and opportunities



Creating additional Work Experience Plans as your teen moves from one work experience to the next will help you capture your teen's changing interests, skills, work options and the levels of support they may require. These will become the foundation for your teen's employment portfolio and can be used to develop their resume.

## The Workplace of Today

Most of Canada's youth today will likely experience:

- An average of 17 employment transitions in their working lifetime
- A variety of occupations in up to five different sectors of the economy
- A variety of concurrent work roles (multi-tasking)
- Planned and unplanned gaps in employment

Source: Guiding Youth Finding a Career Path and Connecting to Work workshop

# Step 1: Recognition

## Strengths

Work opportunities that capitalize on a person's strengths are more enjoyable and motivating, which is why the first step in creating a Work Experience Plan is identifying what strengths your teen already has. Every teen's strengths are unique to them, and all youth with autism have skills and characteristics that are valuable in the workplace. Some common ones are listed below.

### STRENGTHS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM AT WORK

- Honesty
- Dependability
- Attention to detail
- Strong memory for facts and figures connected to their interests
- Vast knowledge of specialized fields
- Ability to match, collate, design, and use computers
- Accurate visual perception
- Strong visual memory
- Unique talents
- Thoroughness and desire to see projects through to completion
- Strong focus on specific tasks for extended periods of time
- Unique perspective

Source: Columbia Regional Program ASD Transition Toolkit



On the following page, there is a comprehensive list of strengths that may further help you and your teen identify their unique strengths. There is also a link to an online tool to further explore these concepts together.



**Parent Share:** Describe to your teen how your strengths have fit with your various work experiences.



**Consider:** How do the strengths you see in your teen match with what they think are their greatest strengths?



**Work Experience Plan:** List your teen's strengths on the Work Experience Plan.



# Step 1: Recognition

## List of Strengths

Highlight the strengths you see in your teen on the list below, then have your teen identify the strengths they see in themselves using a different colour.

Forceful	Practical	Humorous	Open
Enthusiastic	Considerate	Friendly	Accurate
Spontaneous	Self-assured	Determined	Independent
Trustworthy	Inspiring	Patient	Intelligent
Respectful	Adventurous	Orderly	Tactful
Tolerant	Lively	Disciplined	Creative
Observant	Persuasive	Ambitious	Honest
Optimistic	Serious	Dedicated	Straightforward
Caring	Idealistic	Flexible	Appreciative
Generous	Warm	Logical	Versatile

## Other Tools



Together with your teen, you can also use:

- The Happiness Institute's, "The VIA Classification of Character Strengths" (see Appendix 1 on page 18) to highlight those characteristics that reflect your teen's strengths
- the following online tool:  
<http://www.literacynet.org/mi/assessment/findyourstrengths.html>

# Step 2: Links

## Preferences

Knowing your teen’s preferences can help to generate ideas about possible work opportunities. Consider these examples that link personal preferences to activities and possible work sites:

PREFERENCE	POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES	POSSIBLE WORK SITE
Being outdoors	Gardening	Nursery
Moving things	Landscaping	Dock
Loves motion	Boat rides	Farm
	Horseback riding	
Water	Swimming	Hotel
Baths	Laundry	Restaurant
Smells	Dish washing	Candle store
Vibrations	Baking/cooking	Hotel restaurant
	Vacuuming	Bike store
	Bike riding	Theme park
	Amusement rides	
Moving things	Shopping	Mail
Pushing things	Cleaning	Grocery store
People	Delivering things	Day care
	Pushing a stroller	Post office
	Rowing machine	

Source: Virginia Department of Education (2010). Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Transition to Adulthood.

The following tools can help your teen identify their preferences and interests:



- <http://do2learn.com/JobTIPS/DeterminingInterests/InterestsQuiz/Quiz.php>
- <https://www.123test.com/career-test/>
- <http://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip>



**Parent Share:** How did your early work experiences fit with your preferences? Describe to your teen a job of yours that felt like a good fit to you, then one that didn’t match your preferences as well. How were both of these experiences beneficial to your growth and employment-related learning?



**Consider:** Brainstorm how your teen’s strengths and preferences can be harnessed in different working roles.



**Work Experience Plan:** List your teen’s preferences on the Work Experience Plan and link them to possible work activities and job sites.

# Step 2: Links

## Features of the Workplace and the Position

It's important to consider the work environment and how it may fit with your teen's sensory profile. It is also important to consider your teen's sensory triggers, because a work opportunity that minimizes them makes the experience more engaging and enjoyable for your teen.



**Consider:** If your teen uses accommodations in school, how might these transition into a work environment?

Use the following page to identify potential sensory triggers and whether or not accommodations or personal strategies are available to support your teen in certain work conditions or environments.

### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A WORKPLACE OR JOB ROLES THAT TEND TO SUPPORT YOUNG ADULTS WITH AUTISM:

#### **Work Environment:**

- Quiet
- No excessive sensory stimulation
- Few distractions or interruptions

#### **Job Tasks:**

- Stable and predictable
- Consistent and repetitious with little variation from day to day
- Lower social demands/ limited contact with outsiders
- Strengths utilized (attention to detail, visual-spatial)
- Relatively lower time or productivity pressures
- Clearly defined work tasks

#### **Management:**

- Allows sensory retreats
- Explicit supervision from an informed, compassionate manager
- Explicit written rules and expectations about breaks, dress code, phone use etc.
- Unconventional behaviour and thinking is accepted or valued

Source: Columbia Regional Program ASD Transition ToolkitParent



**Parent Share:** Describe to your teen any work environments that you found challenging. How did you manage them?



**Work Experience Plan:** Based on your teen's sensitivities, are there features of a workplace or aspects of a job that should be sought out? Add these to their WEP.

# Step 2: Links (cont.)

## Sensory Profile Exercise

Check the box that best aligns with your teen’s sensitivities and note any present accommodations or strategies that are helpful.

	LEVEL OF SENSITIVITY					PRESENT STRATEGY OR ACCOMMODATION
	<i>Not At All</i>	<i>Slightly</i>	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Very</i>	<i>Extremely</i>	
<b>Sound:</b>						
Background noise						
Volume – too loud						
Volume – too quiet						
Sudden/irregular noises						
<b>Vision:</b>						
Bright lights						
Dim lights						
Florescent lights						
Distracting visuals						
<b>Smells:</b>						
Object (food/chemicals)						
Animal						
Person (perfume, soap, body)						
<b>Tactile:</b>						
Manage different textures (wet, sticky)						
Temperature: hot/cold						
Temperature: in/outdoor						
<b>Physical Demands:</b>						
Physically demanding (lifting, standing, moving)						
Sitting for extended time						
<b>Working Space:</b>						
Work Alone						
Work involves groups						
Work involves public						
Work involves children						

# Step 3: Supports

## Work Options and Levels of Support

One of the major factors in creating a positive work experience for your teen is ensuring that the style of employment matches their abilities and circumstances. Consider the different types of work experience and employment options available.



### **Volunteer**

Individuals freely donate their time to an organization or business. Emphasis is on gaining experiences in a flexible amount of time with or without personalized supports.



### **Supported**

Individuals work regularly and receive the minimum wage. Ongoing supports are required and may be provided by job coaches, co-workers and/or supervisors.



### **Custom**

Individuals are matched to part of a job, based on their unique skills and abilities, and receive minimum wage. This arrangement offers flexibility to both the individual and the employer.



### **Paid**

Employment is full or part time in an integrated setting. Individuals receive at or above minimum wage and may work independently or receive minimal supports.



### **Self-employed**

Individuals start their own business. While this may be an exciting opportunity to explore unique interests and skills, it is important to research other companies started by individuals with disabilities.



**Consider:** Right now, which work option or level of support would be best for your teen?



**Parent Share:** Describe to your teen your experiences with different work options. Do you have memories of volunteer experiences? Entrepreneurial ventures?



**Work Experience Plan:** Enter your teen's Level of Support and/or Type of Work into their Work Experience Plan.

# Step 3: Supports (cont.)

## Community Allies

### WORK OPPORTUNITIES

Start by exploring possibilities with family and friends. The relationships family and friends have with your teen can boost your teen's confidence about venturing into the world of work. Your teen's school, local community and municipal associations are also great resources to explore homegrown work opportunities. Local and provincial employment programs often have resources to support career planning and links to job banks, but are typically less tailored to individuals with autism.

COMMUNITY ALLIES	POSSIBILITIES
Family and friends	May be a supportive source for volunteer and independent work experience/ employment opportunity
School	May be a source for volunteer opportunities within the school and have connections with employers for supported and independent work experience that may also be counted for school credit.
Community Associations (Autism Specific, Volunteer Organizations)	May be a source for volunteer opportunities and have connections with agencies that offer autism specific employment supports.
Local and Provincial Government Programs	May be a source for information, programs, and services.
Agencies and Employers	Ready Willing and Able may be able to help you find an employment opportunity and connect you with employment agencies. <a href="http://readywillingable.ca/job-seekers/">http://readywillingable.ca/job-seekers/</a>

## Who Can Help?

Anybody who works with or knows your teen well can be a support in identifying and potentially supporting them during a work experience.

### Key Supports:

- Parents and supportive family members
- School teachers (class teachers, guidance office staff, or transition specialists)
- Service providers (Speech Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, Psychologist, Behaviour Specialist, Support Worker)
- Friends or community supports

# Step 4: Engagement

For young people, gaining work experience is more than finding a job. It's about developing their understanding of activities they prefer and enjoy, learning about the skills that are valued in the workplace, and having opportunities to practice these skills in a supportive environment.

All work experience provides an opportunity to gain job-specific 'hard' skills and general 'soft' social skills.

Job specific skills are the particular work skills needed for a job. Some individuals with autism have unique abilities that can be applied in a job. For example, if someone is good at math or at data entry, a job operating a cash register or computer programming may be a good fit. Job-specific skills can also be learned and acquired through education, experience, and training.

Soft skills are the interpersonal skills that all employers want employees to have, no matter the job. Important soft skills for the workplace include:

## **Social Communication:**

- Follows instructions
- Accepts correction
- Asks appropriate questions
- Seeks assistance
- Adheres to workplace rules
- Shares belongings
- Shares workspace
- Works with others
- Waits
- Talks with respect

## **Self Determination:**

- Advocates for self
- Sets goals for self
- Discloses disability
- Requests accommodations

## **Organization:**

- Arrives and leaves on time
- Follows schedule
- Follows steps of a task
- Works neatly
- Cleans up workspace

## **Independent Living:**

- Tells time
- Uses money
- Dresses appropriately
- Grooms self appropriately
- Follows safety standards

## **Self-regulation:**

- Stays on task
- Works without disrupting others
- Tolerates interruptions
- Manages own sensory state

## **Miscellaneous:**

- Performs job responsibilities
- Works at a good pace
- Completes work correctly

Source: Columbia Regional Program ASD Transition Toolkit

## Step 4: Engagement (cont.)

These are not new skills. Your teen has likely been working on these at home and school, and now it's time to transfer them to the workplace. Practicing these skills in work environments builds confidence as the learnings from one experience transfer to the next. Practice is important, since mistakes using soft skills are the most frequent reason young adults with autism lose their jobs.



**Consider:** What soft skills has your teen established?



**Parent Share:** What were your first work experiences? Explain to your teen how you developed or transferred soft skills from one work experience to the next.

Now that you have developed a personalized Work Experience Plan for your teen, it's time for them to engage in a work opportunity.

Your teen's work experience may be supporting a neighbour by shovelling their snow or volunteering in the community. They might be ready to participate in work experiences at their high school or could be prepared to seek a paid position. No matter the type or duration of the opportunity, valuable experiences will be gained. Be sure to capture your teen's progress using the **Work Experience Reflection** form provided on the following page.



# Step 5: Reflection

## Work Experience Reflection Form

The following worksheet can be used to reflect on any work-related experience.

**Date:**

**Name of Work Site:**

**Time Commitment:**

**Describe Job Task(s):**

	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A lot</i>
This job matched my interests	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I learned new work skill(s)	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I used my strengths to perform my work skill(s)	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
I could see myself working at a work site like this	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
	<i>One of the worst</i>	<i>Below average</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Above average</i>	<i>One of the best</i>
My rating of this work site	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
My goal at this work opportunity was to:					
	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A lot</i>
I made progress toward achieving this goal	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Describe why:					

# *Employment Portfolio*

## ***The Beginnings of an Employment Portfolio***

You can include your Work Experience Plan and Reflection Form in your teen's portfolio. The portfolio will be a collection of documents that showcase your teen's strengths and interests as an individual and as a future employee. It is a place to keep a record of achievements, career path surveys, and information about all work experience opportunities. Reviewing your teen's employment portfolio provides opportunities to reflect on your teen's work experience, the skills and lessons they have learned as you consider new work opportunities that interest them.

Documents to include in an employment portfolio:

- Showcase of special skills/interests
- Copies of employer evaluations
- Examples of practicing employability skills at home and school
- Examples of respecting diversity at school and in the community
- Resumes
- Cover letters
- Reference letters
- Other relevant documents or notes (e.g. reflections on past work experiences, skill mapping worksheets, copies of online career tools)

# Work Experience Plan



## **Work Experience Plan**

Fill out this worksheet as you work through the Guide.

**Date:**

CREATING THE PLAN		
Page 4	Strengths	
Page 6	Preferences	
	Link to Work Experience Activities	
	Link to possible Work Experience Sites	
Page 7	Consider Features of the Workplace and Aspects of Job Duties	
Page 9	Level of Support or Type of Work	
	Target Work Experience Site	

# Additional Resources



## **Employment**

If you want to explore employment in more depth you may be interested in the following resources:

***Autism Speaks: A Guide to Employment for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders.***

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/employment-tool-kit>

***Alberta ALIS website for career, learning and employment information.***

The website contains a number of printable resources and videos related to career planning, education, jobs and the workplace.

<https://alis.alberta.ca/>

***Do2Learn JobTIPS Student.***

This website provides a variety of activities your son/ daughter can do at home to explore job preferences and interests. Paid access with free trial.

[www.do2learn.com/JobTIPS/index.html](http://www.do2learn.com/JobTIPS/index.html)

***Employment Readiness for Teens with Autism***

<https://centreforautism.ab.ca/age/employment-readiness-teens-13-17/>

***Guide to Employment for Teens and Adults with Autism in B.C.***

<https://www.actcommunity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/PM-ch12.pdf>

***Ready, Willing & Able. Employment agency partners across Canada.***

<http://readywillingable.ca/about/employment-agency-partners/>

# Additional Resources



## ***Transition to Adulthood***

If you want to explore the transition to adulthood in more depth you may be interested in the following resources:

### ***Autism Speaks: Transition Toolkit.***

The toolkit covers a variety of topics including Self-Advocacy, Developing Independent Living Skills, Planning for Transition, Legal Matters to Consider, Community Living, Employment and Other Options, Postsecondary Educational Opportunities, Housing and Residential Supports, Health and Technology.  
<https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/transition-tool-kit>

### ***Columbia Regional Program ASD Transition Toolkit.***

This tool provides a wealth of information to prepare youth for a successful transition from school to adulthood.

<https://www.crporegon.org/Page/175>

### ***Launch Online.***

Launch Online encourages you to think about what success looks like for you in five life domains: Health & Well-Being, Education & Employment, Communication & Social Relationships, Independent Living Skills & Self-Advocacy, and Legal & Financial Issues  
<https://launch.sinneavefoundation.org>

### ***Transition to Postsecondary Pathways for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)***

A guide that addresses the transition needs of youth with autism.  
[http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesSpecEd/SchoolLeader/ASD/TransitiontoPostsecondaryPathwaysforStudentswithASD\\_TranslatingResearchintoPractice.pdf](http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesSpecEd/SchoolLeader/ASD/TransitiontoPostsecondaryPathwaysforStudentswithASD_TranslatingResearchintoPractice.pdf)

# Appendix 1

## THE HAPPINESS INSTITUTE

### The VIA Classification of Character Strengths

#### Wisdom and Knowledge

Signature Strength	What it means	Tick your strengths
Curiosity, Interest in the world	You're open to new experiences and like to take a flexible approach to most things. You don't just tolerate ambiguity; you're intrigued by it. Your curiosity involves a wide-eyed approach to the world and a desire to actively engage in novelty.	
Love of Learning	You love learning new things. You love being an expert and/or being in a position where your knowledge is valued by others.	
Judgement, Critical Thinking, Open Mindedness	It's important to you to think things through and to examine issues from all angles. You don't quickly jump to conclusions but instead, carefully weigh up evidence to make decisions. If the facts suggest you've been wrong in the past, you'll easily change your mind.	
Ingenuity, Originality, Practical Intelligence	You excel in finding new and different ways to approach problems and/or to achieve your goals. You rarely settle for simply doing things the conventional way more often looking to find better and more effective approaches.	
Social and Emotional Intelligence	You have a good understanding of yourself and of others. You are aware of your own moods and how to manage them. You're also very good at judging the moods of others and responding appropriately to their needs.	
Perspective	This strength is a form of wisdom. Others seek you out to draw on your ability to effectively solve problems and gain perspective. You have a way of looking at the world that makes sense and is helpful to yourself and to others.	

#### Courage

Signature Strength	What it means	Tick your strengths
Valour, Bravery	You're prepared to take on challenges and deal with difficult situations even if unpopular or dangerous. You have the courage to overcome fear as well as ability to take a moral stance under stressful circumstances.	
Perseverance, Diligence, Industry	You finish what you start. You're industrious and prepared to take on difficult projects (and you finish them). You do what you say and sometimes you even do more.	
Integrity, Honesty	You're honest, speaking the truth as well as living your life in a genuine and authentic way. You're down to earth and without pretense.	

#### Humanity and Love

Signature Strength	What it means	Tick your strengths
Kindness, Generosity	You're kind and generous to others, and never too busy to do a favour. You gain pleasure and joy from doing good deeds for others. In fact, your actions are often guided by other people's best interests. At the core of this particular strength is an acknowledgment of the worth of others.	
Loving, Being Loved	You place a high value on close and intimate relationships with others. More than just loving and caring for others, they feel the same way about you and you allow yourself to be loved.	

### Justice

Signature Strength	What it means	Tick your strengths
Citizenship, Loyalty, Teamwork	You're a great team player, excelling as a member of a group. You are loyal and dedicated to your colleagues, always contributing your share and working hard for the good and success of the group.	
Fairness, Equity	You do not allow your own personal feelings to bias your decisions about other people. Instead, you give everyone a fair go and are guided by your larger principles of morality.	
Leadership	You're a good organiser and you're good at making sure things happen. You ensure work is completed by you and also maintain good relationships among group members.	

### Temperance

Signature Strength	What it means	Tick your strengths
Self-Control	You can easily keep your desires, needs and impulses in check when necessary or appropriate. As well as knowing what's correct you're able to put this knowledge in to action.	
Discretion, Caution, Prudence	You're a careful person. You look before you leap. You rarely, if ever, say or do things you later regret. You typically wait until all options have been fully considered before embarking on any course of action. You look ahead and deliberate carefully, making sure long-term success takes precedence over shorter-term goals.	
Modesty, Humility	You don't seek or want the spotlight. You're happy for your accomplishments to speak for themselves but you don't ever seek to be the centre of attention. You don't necessarily see yourself as being special and others often comment on, and respect your modesty.	

### Transcendence

Signature Strength	What it means	Tick your strengths
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	You're one of those people who stops to smell the roses. You appreciate beauty, excellence and skill.	
Gratitude	You are highly aware of all the good things that happen to you and you never take them for granted. Further, you take time to express your thanks and you appreciate the goodness in others.	
Hope, Optimism	You expect the best for the future and you plan and work to achieve it. Your focus is on the future and on a positive future at that. You know that if you set goals and work hard good things will happen.	
Spirituality, Faith, Sense of purpose	You have strong and coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the world. You're also aware of your position in this world and in the larger scheme of things. This awareness shapes your beliefs which shape your daily actions; this is a strong source of comfort to you.	
Forgiveness, Mercy	If you're wronged you can forgive. You allow people a second chance. You're guided more by mercy than revenge.	
Playfulness, Humour	You like to laugh and to make others laugh and smile. You enjoy and are good at play. You easily see the light side of life.	
Passion, Enthusiasm	You're energetic, spirited and passionate. You wake up and look forward to most days. You throw yourself, body and soul, in to all activities you undertake.	

*Adapted from the work of Professor Martin Seligman*

**You might also like to visit <http://www.viacharacter.org> for more information about the history and development Character Strengths**

