

Parent Guide[©]

Beginning the
work experience journey
with your Autistic teen

V3.0

Acknowledgments



Version 3.0

The Sinneave Family Foundation (Sinneave) developed the Parent Guide© to support individuals and families in preparing and planning for employment. This guide is intended to be shared as an open resource.

Sinneave would like to acknowledge Wendy Mitchell, Ph.D., R.SLP, former Worktopia National Program Development Manager, Chandra Lebenhagen, Autism Specialist with the Calgary Board of Education, and the parents who contributed to the original development of the guide.

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Introduction



Finding first work experiences and exploring career possibilities are crucial during adolescence, ideally starting early in high school. Here, teens begin to understand what working means for them – gaining independence, making new connections, and clarifying their post-high school interests and needs, identifying strengths that can guide their search for meaningful work experiences and a first job. Building a support network and accessing relevant resources are essential steps in developing a plan to seek and engage in work opportunities.

This guide aims to assist both you and your teen as you navigate pathways to employment. Together, you can use this guide to create a **Work Experience Plan** that identifies potential opportunities and prepares your teen for future participation in the workforce.

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 to include in a portfolio and on a resume.
- Develop job contacts.

Using this Guide

How the Parent Guide[®] Works

Throughout the guide, questions and prompts for parents and teens encourage reflection on the outlined concepts.



Parent Share

Questions to discuss your work experiences with your teen. Sharing can show how various work experiences influenced your current career and helps your teen understand that finding a career is a journey.



Consider

Questions for parents and teens to answer together, crucial to build an effective Work Experience Plan. They prompt reflection on job readiness and shaping opportunities based on your teen's strengths and preferences.



The Work Experience Plan

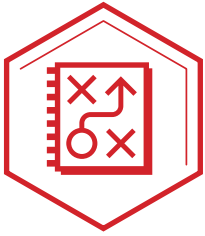
This will help you create and track a thoughtful work experience strategy for your teen. The template is on page 19, where you can use these questions to complete the worksheet for all future employment experiences.



Find

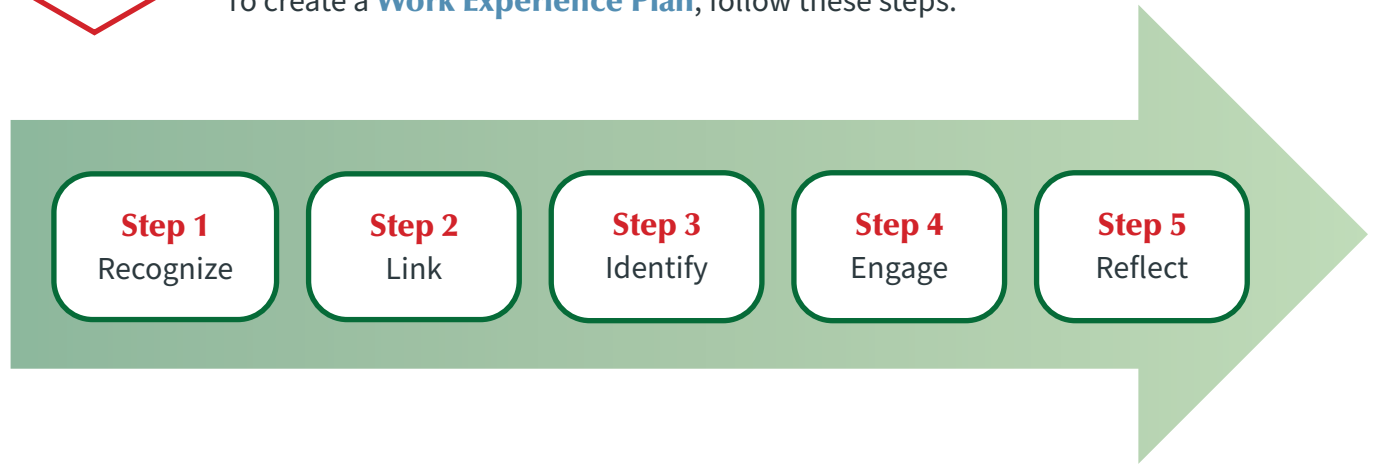
Additional information and resources related to youth employment planning.

The Steps



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

To create a **Work Experience Plan**, follow these steps:



Step 1: **Recognize** your teen's strengths and preferences.

Step 2: **Link** strengths and preferences to potential work-related activities.

Step 3: **Identify** supports for success.

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

Step 5: **Reflect** on successes and opportunities.

Creating multiple **Work Experience Plans** as your teen progresses through different work experiences allows you capture evolving interests, skills, and support needs. These plans form the basis of your teen's employment portfolio and can be used to develop their resume.

Step 1: Recognition

Strengths

Character strengths are the positive aspects of a person's personality that affect their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Work opportunities that align with these strengths are more fulfilling and motivating. Therefore, the first step in creating a Work Experience Plan is identifying your teen's strengths. Each teen has unique strengths, and all Autistic youth bring valuable skills to the workplace.

Strengths are things that:

- Come naturally to your teen.
- Your teen knows and does well.
- Your teen is known for being good at.



Find

On the next page, you will find a list of strengths to help you and your teen identify their unique strengths. There is also a link to an online tool for further exploration.



Parent Share

Describe to your teen how your strengths have matched your various work experiences.



Consider

How do the strengths you see in your teen align with what they believe are their greatest strengths?



Work Experience Plan

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

Step 1: Recognition

Discover Your Strengths

The VIA Institute on Character identifies several core strengths across different categories. On the next page, highlight the strengths you observe in your teen on the table. Then, ask your teen to identify the strengths they see in themselves using a different colour.

Identifying your own strengths isn't always easy, so consider having your teen complete the Free VIA Survey at www.viacharacter.org.

Once you've taken their survey, list your top strengths:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

If your teen has other strengths not on the list, list them on this table:

Step 1: Recognition

The VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

WISDOM				
Creativity Clever Original & Adaptive Problem Solver	Curiosity Interested Explores new things Open to new ideas	Judgment Critical thinker Thinks things through Open-minded	Love of Learning Masters new skills & topics Systematically adds to knowledge	Perspective Wise Provides wise counsel Takes the big picture view
COURAGE				
Bravery Shows valor Doesn't shrink from fear Speaks up for what's right	Perseverance Persistent Industrious Finishes what one starts	Honesty Authentic Trustworthy Sincere	Zest Enthusiastic Energetic Doesn't do things half-heartedly	
HUMANITY				
Love Warm and genuine Values close relationships	Kindness Generous Nurturing Caring Compassionate Altruistic		Social Intelligence Aware of the motives and feelings of self / others Knows what makes others tick	
JUSTICE				
Teamwork Team player Socially responsible Loyal	Fairness Just Doesn't let feelings bias decisions about others		Leadership Organizes group activities Encourages a group to get things done	
TEMPERANCE				
Forgiveness Merciful Accepts others' shortcomings Gives people a second chance	Humility Modest Lets one's accomplishments speak for themselves	Prudence Careful Cautious Doesn't take undue risk	Self-Regulation Self-controlled Disciplined Manages impulses and emotions	
TRANSCENDENCE				
Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence Feels awe & wonder in beauty Inspired by goodness of others	Gratitude Thankful for the good Expresses thanks Feels blessed	Hope Optimistic Future-minded Future Orientated	Humor Playful Brings smiles to others Lighthearted	Spirituality Searches for meaning Feels a sense of purpose Senses a relationship with the sacred

Step 2: Links

Preferences

Knowing your teen's preferences can help you brainstorm work opportunities. Here are examples linking strengths to preferences and potential jobs:

Strengths	Preference	Possible Work Engagement
Organized, independent	Work from home, likes computers	Data entry, research assistant, call center, document digitization
Respectful, considerate	Caring for people or animals	Summer camp, daycare, groomer, dog walking, senior care, customer service,
Determined, organized	Quiet, independent work environment	Stock clerk, housekeeping, order picker/packer, delivery driver



Find

The EmploymentWorks program can help your teen identify their preferences and interests.



Parent Share

How did your early work experiences align with your preferences? Describe to your teen a job that was a good fit and one that was not. Explain how both experiences benefited your growth and employment.



Consider

Brainstorm how different working roles can harness your teen's strengths and preferences.



Work Experience Plan

List your teen's preferences on the Work Experience Plan, linking them to possible work experience activities and job sites.

Step 2: Links

Features of the Workplace and the Position

Consider how the workplace environment matches your teen’s sensory preferences and triggers. Choosing work opportunities that minimize these triggers will make the experience more enjoyable and engaging for them.



Consider

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

On the following pages, identify your teens’ support needs and explore accommodations or personal strategies for them to thrive in different work environments. Here are some common workplace adjustments for accessibility:

Work Environment:

- A quiet workspace with minimal distractions.
- Access to focus tools like noise-cancelling headphones, fidget devices, or flexible seating.
- Ability to control temperature and lighting for their workspace.

Management:

- Has engaged in inclusive, equitable, accessible, and diverse training and development.
- Gives clear feedback.
- Asks and respects communication preferences.
- Provides advance notice and explanation of changes.
- Supports flexible social engagement at work.

Source: Inclusive Workplace Employer Quick Guide (Worktopia, 2024)



Parent Share

Describe to your teen any work environments that you found challenging. How did you manage those environments?



Work Experience Plan

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

Step 2: Links

Sensory Profile Exercise

Circle the number that best describes your teen’s sensitivities and indicate any current accommodations or strategies that are helpful.

In the table, support levels are categorized as:

1. I can manage this on my own, without any adjustments or strategies.
2. I can manage this on my own but will benefit from adjustments or strategies.
3. I will need 1:1 support to manage this.

Potential Sensory Sensitivity	Support Level			Current adjustment + strategy
Volume – too loud or quiet	1	2	3	
Sudden noises	1	2	3	
Lighting – too bright or dim	1	2	3	
Distracting visuals	1	2	3	
Object smells (food, etc.)	1	2	3	
Animal smells (fur, etc.)	1	2	3	
Person smells (perfume, etc.)	1	2	3	
Different textures	1	2	3	
Temperature – too cold or hot	1	2	3	
Sitting	1	2	3	
Standing	1	2	3	
Moving	1	2	3	
Lifting	1	2	3	
Location – inside or outside	1	2	3	
Work style (alone or in a group)	1	2	3	

Step 3: Supports

Work Options

To ensure a positive work experience for your teen, match their abilities and circumstances with suitable employment styles.



Volunteer

Individuals freely donate time to an organization or business, gaining experience flexibly with or without personalized supports.



Supported

Individuals work regularly, possibly earning minimum wage, with ongoing supports from job coaches, coworkers, and supervisors.



Custom

Individuals are matched to part of a job based on their unique skills, potentially earning minimum wage, offering flexibility to the individual and employer.



Paid

Full or part-time integrated employment, earning at or above minimum wage, independently or with minimal supports.



Self-Employed

Individuals start their own business, exploring unique interests and skills. It is important to research other companies started by disabled individuals.



Parent Share

Share your experiences with various work options with your teen.
Do you have memories of volunteer experiences?



Consider

Currently, which work option would best suit your teen?



Work Experience Plan

Enter your teen's preferred work option into their plan.

Step 3: Supports

Community Allies

Explore possibilities with family and friends to boost your teen’s workforce confidence. Schools, community, and municipal associations are great for exploring local opportunities. While local and provincial programs offer career planning and job banks, they may not be tailored to neurodivergent individuals.

Community Allies	Possibilities
Family and friends	Support for volunteer and independent work opportunities.
School	Volunteer opportunities and connections with employers for supported and independent work experiences, often for school credit.
Community Associations and Organizations	Volunteer opportunities and connections to agencies providing autism-specific employment supports.
Government Programs (Local, Provincial)	Information, programs, and services.
Agencies and Employers	EmploymentWorks, a national program available in-person and online, offers employment training and support.

Who Can Help?

Anyone familiar with your teen can assist in identifying and supporting them during work experiences, including:

- Parents and supportive family members
- School staff (class teachers, guidance office staff, transition specialists, etc.)
- Service providers (Occupational Therapists, Support Workers, etc.)
- Friends or community supports

Step 4: Engagement

For young people, gaining work experience involves more than just securing a job. It includes developing an understanding of preferred activities, learning valued workplace skills, and practicing these skills in a supportive environment.

All work experiences provide opportunities to gain job-related 'hard' skills and essential 'soft' skills. Job-specific skills are those required for particular roles, utilizing unique abilities like organization, categorization, and attention to detail. These skills can be acquired through education, experience, and training.

Soft skills are interpersonal qualities desired by employers across all jobs, such as:

- Reliability and timely task completion
- Dependability and punctuality
- Ability to follow instructions
- Positive attitude and willingness to learn
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Pride in work quality
- Effective communication with colleagues and supervisors
- Critical thinking and problem-solving abilities

Step 4: Engagement

These skills are not new to your teen, as they have likely been developing them at home and school. Transferring these skills to the workplace builds confidence and enhances their ability to apply learnings from one experience to the next.



Consider

What soft skills does your teen have?



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 with your teen, it's time for them to engage in a work opportunity.

Their work experience may involve:

- Supporting a neighbour by shoveling snow or volunteering in the community
- Participating in work experiences offered at their high school
- Trying a seasonal paid position
- Seeking a paid position in a part-time or full-time capacity

Regardless of the type or duration of the opportunity, each experience contributes to your teen's personal and professional growth. It is important to support them in reflecting on their experiences and tracking their progress using the Work Experience Reflection form provided on the following page.

Step 5: Reflection

This worksheet can be used for your teen to reflect on their work experience.

Date:		Name of Work Site:	
Time Commitment:			
Describe job task(s):		What was your goal at this work site?	
How much progress did you make toward achieving your goal? <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> A little <input type="checkbox"/> Some <input type="checkbox"/> A lot			
Which of your interests did this job match? Leave this space blank if none.	What new skills did you learn? Leave this space blank if none.	What existing strengths did you use? Leave this space blank if none.	
What 3 aspects of this workplace or work experience did you like the most?			
1.	2.	3.	
What 3 aspects of this workplace or work experience did you like the least?			
1.	2.	3.	
How would you rate this worksite?			
<input type="checkbox"/> ★ One of the worst	<input type="checkbox"/> ★★ Below Average	<input type="checkbox"/> ★★★ Average	<input type="checkbox"/> ★★★★ Above Average
<input type="checkbox"/> ★★★★★ One of the best			
Would you like to be employed at a work site like this? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			

Employment Portfolio

The Beginnings of an Employment Portfolio

You can include your Work Experience Plan in your teen's portfolio. The portfolio will showcase your teen's strengths and interests as an individual and future employee. It is a place to keep a record of achievements, career surveys, and details about work experiences. Reviewing the portfolio helps to reflect on your teen's work experience, skills acquired, and lessons learned, as you explore new work opportunities that interest them.

Documents to include in an employment portfolio:

- A showcase of passionate skills and interests
- Copies of employer evaluations
- Examples demonstrating employability skills practiced at home and school
- Examples demonstrating respect for 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 tool results)

Work Experience Plan



Work Experience Plan

Fill out this worksheet as you work through the Guide.

PAGE #	ACTIVITY	BRAINSTORM
Page 7	Strengths	
Page 10	Preferences	
	Link to possible work experience activities	
	Link to possible Work Experience Sites	
Page 11	Consider features of the workplace and aspects of job duties	
Page 13	Work option	

Additional Resources



ALIS Alberta Website

ALIS Alberta has a variety of resources to support lifelong careers, learning, and employment journeys. They have sections on their website dedicated to planning your career, exploring education and training, looking for work, succeeding at work, inspiring and motivating, and resources.

alis.alberta.ca



EmploymentWorks

EmploymentWorks is a program providing employment readiness training and support, including job sampling and hands-on or simulated work experiences for Autistic and disabled individuals. The program is available online and in-person at various locations across Canada.

employment-works.ca/



Worktopia

Worktopia, powered by The Sinneave Family Foundation, aims to promote neuroinclusive practices in the workplace by sharing knowledge, resources, and information about supportive services.

worktopia.ca

Identifying Your Work Values

Work values are the work-related qualities, principles and standards that really matter to you. Knowing your work values can help you plan a career, look for opportunities in your current work, or make a career change.

Complete this exercise to find out how important each of these work-related values is to you. For each value, note whether it is very important, important, or not important.

In my career, I am looking for:

VALUE	IMPORTANCE
Balance: Having the opportunity to focus on my work and life roles	
Recognition as an expert: Being known as someone who has special knowledge or skills in a particular field	
Belonging: Being a part of a recognized group	
Challenges: Doing work expanding my skills, knowledge or creativity	
Competition: Pitting my skills and abilities against others to succeed	
Contact with other people: Having daily contact with others	
Creativity: Thinking up new ideas or ways of doing things	
Decision-making rights: Being able to decide how things are done	
Flexibility: Being free to schedule my own work or to work in a variety of settings, such as working from home	
Chances to help others: Helping people, one-on-one or in groups	
Chances to help society: Doing something that is worthwhile or of benefit to society as a whole	

Appendix A

VALUE	IMPORTANCE
Independence: Working with minimal direction and contact with others	
Innovation: Using or developing leading-edge technology or approaches	
Intensity: Doing work that is fast-paced or has a high degree of excitement or pressure	
Lack of pressure: A relaxed work atmosphere, attitude, and workload	
Learning opportunities: Support for formal and informal learning	
Money: Earning a specific amount or having the potential to achieve it	
Power: Having the authority to direct and influence others	
Precision work: Doing work that requires exactness and accuracy	
Predictability: Having work responsibilities that follow a clear, stable and unchanging routine	
Promotion: Having chances for advancement or increased responsibilities and recognition	
Respect: Having employers, supervisors, co-workers and clients show respect for me and my work	
Satisfaction: Having a job that supports my self-respect and pride	
Security: Being assured of a job at a reasonable rate of pay	
Status: Having a higher standing or rank relative to others	
Teamwork: Interacting with, supporting and depending on others to meet goals and complete tasks	
Variety: Having work responsibilities that change often	

What are your results?

Which values did you identify as very important? If your work could reflect just 1 of those values, what would you choose? Try and organize your values by importance to get a clearer idea of what matters most to you, with #1 being most important.

1. _____

15. _____

2. _____

16. _____

3. _____

17. _____

4. _____

18. _____

5. _____

19. _____

6. _____

20. _____

7. _____

21. _____

8. _____

22. _____

9. _____

23. _____

10. _____

24. _____

11. _____

25. _____

12. _____

26. _____

13. _____

27. _____

14. _____



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