



Down Syndrome
Australia



Right to
work

Supplementary resource for parents / carers

**Supporting our family member
with Down syndrome to find
meaningful employment**

Why is employment so important for people with Down syndrome?

Employment for people with Down syndrome is such an important part of life, just like for anyone else. It allows individuals to:



Be independent



Earn an income



Be busy and productive



Learn new skills



Be proud of what they do



Have a sense of purpose



Develop relationships and connections









Have an identity







Be a contributing member of the community

But often for parents, there can be mixed feelings about considering employment options for their family member with Down syndrome, particularly in those final years of school.

Some of the thoughts that go through their minds could be:

-  What would employment look like for the person?
-  Does the person have the skills to work?
-  How do I go about supporting the person to find a job?
-  Will the person be able to get a job that they enjoy and matches their skill ability?
-  How much support will the person need in their workplace? And where will they get this support from?
-  What if something goes wrong at work? Who will support the person?

Some of the other concerns that parents may have when considering whether their family member can work may include:

-  Feeling worried about letting the person go out into the big world...
-  Feeling worried that the person may be bullied or discriminated against...
-  The person doesn't have the skills to work...
-  The person requires a high level of support...

There are many worries and concerns that can play on parent's minds, especially as they get older and if there are going to be changes from the person's current and comfortable routine.

Parents work very hard to ensure that their loved ones are going to be safe and live a happy life – But what does a safe and happy life look like? How does the person continue to achieve this when their parents are no longer their primary supports?

Allowing the person with Down syndrome to live a fulfilling life which involves being as independent as they can be and also having a job, can act as protective factors for the individual – Having financial and personal independence, connections with the community, confidence in being an adult and an individual, can enable the person to feel empowered and build a strong network of supporters.

How can parents/carers best support the person to be ready for employment?

One of the best ways to circumvent some of the concerns that parents have is to start early in building the foundations of being independent during the person's childhood years – Parents can do this by giving daily opportunities for the person to help out in the home by: setting up the dining table for meal times, preparing and cooking meals, doing the laundry, cleaning around the house, walking the dog, planning meals for the week, and helping out with some of the grocery shopping.

Some of the tasks that are given to the person may be difficult at first, as with anything new – But with the right support, encouragement, and by clearly communicating expectations, two very important skills can be gained from this learning process – Allowing the person to problem-solve for themselves in the first instance, but then asking for help when they get really stuck. Providing plenty of opportunities for the person with Down syndrome to help with household chores and progressively being able to carry out these tasks independently with minimal support, will allow them to feel more confident about themselves and identify what they are good at. And most times, these learnings can be the important bridge between the home and their future workplace.

When the person is in high school, support them to explore other ways that they can start building on their vocational skills – Parents can work in collaboration with the school and the person's support network to look at opportunities for the person to upskill by doing work experience, short courses, volunteering, etc. Many of these opportunities can teach the person with Down syndrome about work ethic, responsibility and about being proud of something they can do, and will allow them to feel more confident about going into paid employment.

Parent's expectations can contribute to successful employment outcomes!

The expectations that family members have on the person with Down syndrome can influence their outcomes in employment. Research suggests that a person with a disability will be more likely to be successful in their future employment, if the family members expect the person to get a job after school. The best way that we can really start to focus on preparing the young person for work during those final years of high school, would be to support the person to think about and have discussions in the following four areas:



Skills

Things that the person is good at



Interests

What the person likes



Goals

What the person wants to achieve



Values

What is important to the person

This process, also known as discovery, can assist the person to identify the areas of work that they are interested in and what they need to be working on to get the job that they want.

Discover Activity – See Example:

Person with Down syndrome – Ask someone (i.e. not a parent/carer) to support the person with Down syndrome to complete the activity by listing a few things in the four areas of skills, interests, goals and values. The person can utilise photos, pictures, clippings from magazines, drawings, words, etc – They can choose anything that will allow them to best express their thoughts.

Parent/Carer – On a separate worksheet, complete the activity from the perspective of a parent/carer and list the things that you think may be important to the person. Then compare the two worksheets. It may surprise you how different the answers may be! But use this as an opportunity to discuss what is important to the person and how you can be involved in assisting them to achieve THEIR goals, not YOURS.



What can parents be doing to support the person with their employment goals?

Once we have identified what the person's skills, interests, goals and values are, we can support the person to explore ways in which they can start to form an action plan towards their employment goal.



1. Determine how the person's skills, interests, goals and values can formulate the type of job that they might want to pursue. Ask questions such as "Why do you want to be a.....?"



2. Start with small steps! – Sometimes taking the first steps on the person's employment goal can feel overwhelming, both to the person with Down syndrome and their parents/carers. It can be hard to know where to start or what needs to be done. It can be really helpful to break the action plan down into small steps so that it feels more achievable, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it!



3. Link in with the right supports – There are the organisations out there that can help the person to pursue their employment goals, such as: DES Providers, Employment Coaches, Guidance Counselors, and Local Area Coordinators. You can also contact your local Down Syndrome Association for assistance.



4. Create a vocational profile and/or resume that accurately reflects the person and their skills. Resumes can now be created in various formats to meet the needs of the person, and enables them to demonstrate and highlight their skills and strengths.



5. Learn new skills – Does the person need to upskill or get some experience in a professional work setting? Work experience or volunteering can be great ways in which an individual can learn new skills or build confidence in a workplace. It's always good to start work experience early so they are building the skills that they need to be ready for when they transition out of school, and into employment.



6. Get out there! – Networking and getting to know your community can be a great way to build connections, which can lead to job opportunities. Being a regular to a particular place will allow community members (and employers) to get to know the person better, and see them as a potential employee when that time comes.



7. Be confident! – It is important that we support the person to get them ready and confident for employment - And that the motivation IS there! There is no point in pushing someone into getting a job if they do not understand the importance of it, or have the desire to work. We all have our personal reasons for what motivates us to work, and it is our role to support the person find what it is that would motivate them to find job.

Sometimes we may need to help the person be creative with their employment goals, but that can be fun in its own way.



Story of Sam

Sam loves Space and his dream job would be to become an Astronaut. Becoming an Astronaut would be tricky for many of us! But this would be a great opportunity to investigate with Sam what would be involved in becoming an Astronaut (many years of study, training and meeting certain eligibility criteria, particularly around health and fitness). It is good for Sam to be involved in this process, so he can understand the qualifications that are required for certain jobs.

We could then help Sam to reframe his employment goals and explore other jobs where he could still be involved in the things that he loves. We could ask questions such as: Why do you want to become an Astronaut Sam? What is it about Space that you love so much? This will enable you to get a better idea of what it is about this particular profession that Sam is interested in. Sometimes, the reasons the person may want to have this job could be completely unrelated to the interest itself (e.g. they may just want to wear an awesome uniform; or be able to work in a contained or isolated environment such as a vessel). In which case, a job may not necessarily have to be sought in the area of Space – Sam’s love for Space could continue as a personal hobby.

However, if his love for Space is the main motivator for Sam wanting to become an Astronaut, we can definitely support Sam to explore other jobs that he could do in his area of interest. It is also really important when we are assisting someone with their employment goal, to make sure the person’s skills match the job too – We wouldn’t pursue a role where Sam was working in a meet and greet role at a Space ride at a busy amusement park, if he doesn’t like to be in crowded places or talk to customers.

But maybe Sam would be more open to working in the souvenir shop at the amusement park where they sell space goods, stacking the shelves? Some other job suggestions for Sam could be: Working at a planetarium? Space Centre? A museum that has a space section? The possibilities can be endless – It's just a matter of thinking creatively, finding the right match, and exploring what is out there in the community.



Story of Hayley:

Hayley is in her final years of high school and is not sure what she wants to do when she finishes school. She is great with animals and meeting new people, but doesn't really like busy and noisy places. Her teachers have also observed that she is also really helpful when at school, and will always be the first one to step in and assist.

Hayley could be supported to have conversations with the people in her life that could help with these next steps (e.g. her school, DES provider, LAC, etc). Planning for post school needs to be individualised and the student needs to be given plenty of opportunities to discover a range of different pathways through work experience, volunteering, short courses, etc – Explore ways in which the student can build their independence, develop ongoing life skills and most importantly, be contributing as a valuable member of the community.

Other Useful Resources:

- DSA Resource: People with Down syndrome and employment – FAQ's
www.downsyndrome.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DSA-employment-for-people-with-down-syndrome-C03.pdf
- DSA Resource: Information for families of people with Down syndrome
www.downsyndrome.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DSA-employment-Information-for-Families-of-people-with-Down-syndrome-C03.pdf
- Inclusion Australia - What are the outcomes of open employment for people with intellectual disability? www.everyonecanwork.org.au/resources/evidence/1-what-are-the-outcomes-of-open-employment-for-people-with-intellectual-disability/#benefits-open-employment
- Inclusion Australia - The effect of parental expectations on employment of people with intellectual disability
www.everyonecanwork.org.au/resources/evidence/3-the-effect-of-parental-expectations-on-employment-of-people-with-intellectual-disability
- Inclusion Australia - Maintaining high expectations
www.everyonecanwork.org.au/thinking-about-work/the-role-of-families/high-expectations

Terms of Reference:

- **DES Providers** - Disability Employment Services (DES) is a service that is provided by the Australian Government to help people with a disability to prepare for, find and keep a job. DES can be delivered by a mix of large, medium and small for-profit and not-for-profit organisations. They are experienced in supporting people with disability at work, as well as providing assistance to employers to support employees with disability in the workplace.
- **Employment/Job Coaches** – Employment/Job Coaches are people who have specific skills in supporting people with disabilities to find a job, and support them when they are in a job. The person will usually connect with an employment/job coach through a DES provider. The employment/job coach will support the person to identify what their strengths are, and how their interest, skills and experiences can be matched to a job that is best suited for the person. They can also conduct workplace assessments and work closely with the employers to provide support to the organisation.
- **Guidance Counsellors/Officers** – Guidance Counsellors/Officers are usually specialist teachers who work within the school, to provide a broad range of support to the students and the school community. They can also provide advice and support around vocational needs with students.
- **Local Area Coordinators** – Local Area Coordinators (LACs) can provide support to help the person with their NDIS plan, and link them in with information and support in the community.