LAUNCHING INTO WORK

An Evidence-Informed Framework for Transition to Competitive Integrated Employment

ABOUT ME

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Autism Services For Teens And Young Adults

preparing autistic teens for adulthood

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Learning Outcome 1:**
  Participants will be able to identify evidence-based predictors of employment success (e.g., paid work experience, self-determination, vocational preparation) and explain how each informs occupational therapy or educator intervention design.
- **Learning Outcome 2:**
  Participants will learn how to implement occupation-based and educational-based strategies that strengthen job readiness, including communication, workplace planning, and self-advocacy skills.
- **Learning Outcome 3:**
  Participants will gain practical tools to translate predictor research into transition plans and employment supports across education, vocational rehabilitation, and community settings.

EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS PREDICTORS

- Paid work experiences
- Vocational preparation
- Self-determination
- Communication and social competence
- Transition planning
- Family expectations

OT & EDUCATOR ROLE IN EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

As occupational therapists and educators, we are uniquely positioned to address employment readiness because we understand:

- Routines
- Executive Functioning
- Sensory Regulation
- Participation & Initiation
- Adaptation
- Environmental Fit
- Role Development

INFLUENCING EMPLOYMENT PREDICTORS

OTs & Educators can influence employment predictors through interventions:

- Structured experiences
- Supports, coaching
- Environmental modifications
- Parent/family education
- Coordinated planning

PAID WORK EXPERIENCES

OT & Educator strategies/interventions to facilitate paid work experiences:

- Scaffold from low-stakes work exposure to paid work
- Grade work demands by hours, pace, complexity, and sensory load
- Energy conservation
- Use real-world practice to build stamina and tolerance
- Embed executive function supports into actual work experiences

SELF-DETERMINATION

OT & Educator strategies/interventions to build self-determination:

- Reframing readiness myths as planning statements
- Goal writing to develop self-determination skills
- Reinforcing the parent shift from manager/fixer to coach

COMMUNICATION, ADVOCACY, & SOCIAL COMPETENCE

OT & Educator strategies/interventions to facilitate communication and social competence:

- Modeling and role-play for common workplace interactions
- Written scripts and visual cues for self-advocacy, greeting supervisors, and handling correction/feedback
- Modifications: Low-stakes social exposure through job fairs, informational interviews, and community observation
- Adaptations: Alternative communication modes and accommodation planning where needed

TRANSITION PLANNING

OT & Educator strategies/interventions to support transition planning:

- Teaching executive function supports, such as time blocking, chunking, and organizational systems for the job search
- Reinforcing planning before job applications to reduce anxiety and improve follow-through
- Understanding challenges and supports needed to identify accommodations and develop self-advocacy
- Coordinating parent, school, therapist, VR, and employer supports around fit and readiness

FAMILY EXPECTATIONS & COLLABORATION

OT & Educator strategies/interventions to align expectations:

- Parent journaling on myths and fears
- Strengths-first, fit-based language
- Helping parents move from protector/fixer to facilitator/coach
- Encouraging small, supported work experiments rather than waiting for complete readiness

CASE STUDY: SAM

16 y/o, some volunteer experience, wants paid work to be independent

OT & Educator Interventions:

- Visual aids: goal writing menu, strengths & interests checklist, challenges checklist, My Job Preferences Worksheet
- Environmental modifications
- Modeling and repetitive practice
- Reframing challenges as supports and ADA reasonable accommodations

CASE STUDY: SARAH

22 years old, entry level paid work history, seeking her first professional job

OT & Educator Interventions:

- Goal writing support
- Visual models and scaffolding support for resume development
- My Job Preferences Worksheet
- Modeling and practice with job interviews
- Modifications: Real time practice with job interviews, low stakes
- ADA self-advocacy education

CASE STUDY: ABBY

18 y/o, no high school diploma due to ASD challenges, wants to work

OT & Educator Interventions:

- Energy conservation through the job search process
- Visual aids: goal writing menu, strengths & interests checklist, challenges checklist, My Job Preferences Worksheet
- Real world practice- volunteering, job shadowing
- Modeling
- Education for Abby and mom on executive function development

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QUESTIONS?

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Launching into Work: An Evidence-Informed Framework for Transition to Competitive Integrated Employment

I. Context and Purpose

- Youth with disabilities, including ASD, experience significantly poorer adult employment outcomes than their peers who do not have disabilities (employment, independent living, financial independence).
- Many students graduate without:
    - meaningful work experience
    - confidence navigating workplace demands
    - a clear pathway into adult roles
- Graduation is not the same as employment readiness.
- Goal of this presentation: Apply Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) framework and other interventions to support the transition to competitive integrated employment.
    - MOHO: volition, habituation, performance capacity, environment

II. Learning Objectives

- **Learning Outcome 1:**
  Participants will be able to identify evidence-based predictors of employment success (e.g., paid work experience, self-determination, vocational preparation) and explain how each informs occupational therapy intervention design.
- **Learning Outcome 2:**
  Participants will learn how to implement occupation-based strategies that strengthen job readiness including communication, workplace planning, and self-advocacy skills.
- **Learning Outcome 3:**
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III. Predictors of Employment Success

A. Paid work experience

- High school paid work and work-based learning predict later employment for autistic youth.

- Work experience provides performance history, stamina, and a developing work identity.

B. Vocational preparation

- Career exploration, skills training, work-based learning, and job-placement services improve employment outcomes.
- Structured vocational preparation models (e.g., Project SEARCH–type programs) are associated with better employment.

C. Self-determination

- Goal setting, decision-making, problem solving, and belief in personal agency predict employment and post-school success.
- Self-determination supports persistence despite other people's low expectations and societal "stigma" associated with disability.

D. Communication and social competence

- Functional communication (verbal or alternative modes), asking for help, taking feedback, and basic coworker interaction are linked to work participation.

E. Transition planning

- Early, coordinated, student-centered planning that connects school activities, employment goals, and adult services predicts better work outcomes.

F. Family expectations

- Parent expectations strongly predict employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.
- Youth expectations strongly predict employment and independent living outcomes.

IV. Occupational Therapy and Educators' Role and Interventions in Transition Planning

A. OTs and Educators can influence employment predictors through interventions and strategies:

- Routines and habituation
- Executive functioning
- Sensory regulation
- Participation and adaptation
- Environmental fit
- Role development

B. Intervention Strategies

- Structured experiences (starting small; supported exposure)
- Coaching and supports (modeling, scaffolding, time blocking, checklists, visual aids, repeated practice)
- Environmental modification (job fit, intensity of hours, level of support)
- Parent/family education (scaffolding, coaching stance, executive function education, opportunities for engagement)
- Coordinated planning with VR, DDD services, schools, and employers

V. Applying Predictors in Practice

A. Vocational preparation

- Identify strengths, interests, challenges, and job fit early in the process
- Use an "environment–task–support" lens to link daily functioning to real work options
- Techniques: activity analysis, task simplification just-right challenges, visual supports and menus, job shadowing, and informational interviews

B. Paid work experience

- Frame volunteering, shadowing, internships, and micro-jobs as developmental steps toward paid work
- Use reflection after each work attempt to identify fit, overload, and helpful supports (data collection)
- Techniques: graded exposure (hours, pace, complexity, sensory load), embedded executive function supports, structured stamina-building

C. Self-determination

- Create opportunities for choice-making, problem-solving, risk-taking, and ownership
- Address readiness myths with youth and parents; rewrite them as planning statements
- Techniques: therapeutic use of self (coaching vs directive), journaling and reflection, goal menus and scaffolded choices, strengths and interests checklists

D. Communication, advocacy, and social competence

- Explicitly teach workplace communication: asking for clarification, requesting support, managing conflict, writing emails, responding to supervision

- Techniques: modeling and role-play, written scripts and cue cards, low-stakes practice (job fairs, informational interviews), AAC and accommodations where needed

E. Transition planning

- Link transition goals to concrete work experiences and executive function demands
- Prepare for the job search before applying by identifying strengths, challenges, work fit, and interests to reduce anxiety and support follow-through.
- Techniques: time blocking, chunking, organizational systems, early identification of accommodations and advocacy needs, coordinated multi-system planning.

VI. Expectations and Family Collaboration

- Parent and youth expectations are associated with employment outcomes, education, and independent living.
- Expectations can expand or restrict opportunities; OTs and educators can provide intervention to shape expectations.
- Techniques to improve family expectations:
    - Encourage journaling on fears and myths for reframing
    - Educate on strengths-first and fit-based language
    - Educating about the parental shift from protector/fixer to facilitator/coach
    - Encouraging small, supported work experiments instead of "waiting for readiness

VII. Case Examples (Brief)

- **Sam is a 16-year-old teen with ASD. Sam has a history of volunteer work with a local church. He has a supportive family who are willing to learn how to coach and not fix.**
    - Interventions: strengths and challenges checklists, job preference tools, graded volunteer placement, and accommodations planning ("repeat instructions," "short breaks," "extra time to learn tasks").
        - Goal writing using a goal menu- Sam wants to work because he wants to live on his own one day and be independent.
        - Use of visual aids and coaching to help Sam identify a good work fit and the support needed for success- addresses self-determination, metacognition, organizational skills, planning, flexible cognition
        - Sam completed a strength checklist. His strengths are: I show up on time, I'm good at following directions, I'm kind to others

  - Sam's interests were hiking, cooking, the outdoors, and playing the piano.
  - Sam's challenges were struggles with reading, he has trouble talking to other people, he has trouble managing stress.
- Completing the challenges checklists helps to improve metacognition and empowerment- Sam is thinking about where he struggles and working with the OT to identify where supports were needed
- Other exercises can include helping Sam identify effective support and turn them into ADA reasonable accommodations requests
  - Example- Sam recognizes he needs instructions repeated and sometimes modeled/ADA request "I need instructions repeated several times and I need a job coach to help me learn different job processes"
- He completed a job preferences worksheet and determined he liked working outdoors, working with a small team, and working with food.
- Environmental modification: Since Sam had not worked before and he experienced anxiety when meeting new people, he and his OT decided a volunteer opportunity with St. Vincent DePaul kitchen would be the best first step- he could work shorter hours, he could slowly develop executive function and job skills in a less stressful environment.
  - They completed the volunteer registration together.
  - Modeling and repetitive practice: Sam and his OT mock practiced the interview.
  - Visual aid- list of anticipated interview questions

- Sarah is a 22-year-old with ASD. She is completing an associate's degree in marketing. She has worked at a restaurant making salads and busing tables for the past 2 years. Work goal: She wants an entry-level professional job.
  - Interventions
    - resume support, mock interviews, job fairs, visual supports for interview preparation, coaching on rights and accommodations while respecting autonomy around disclosure.
    - Sarah's strengths and challenges checklist:
      - Strengths: responsible, shows up on time, follows directions
      - Challenges: making eye contact, managing anxiety
    - Work preferences: Sarah prefers a quiet environment. She wants to work in an office environment.
    - Visual models and support: Her OT assisted with writing a resume from a template. Her OT provided choices for descriptions of prior work experience and job skills. Sarah selected the preferred choice for her resume

- Modeling and real time practice with interviewing: Sarah attended 2 job fairs to gather information and practice meeting employers- mini mock interview, low stakes; Autism Society- sensory job fair
- Visual aids for interview preparation:
  - What to wear for an interview
  - List of possible interview questions for planning to determine what to say
- Mock interview in an office with an OT student as an unfamiliar person. This provided Sarah with an opportunity to practice making eye contact and managing nerves.
- Sarah's inter was online. Her OT helped her practice blocking the time on the calendar, researching the interviewer, "dry run" logging into the zoom, and other preparatory steps
- Education about self-advocacy: Sarah was educated on her rights under the ADA and the OT discussed possible accommodations. Sarah declined to request accommodations for the interview. She was very sensitive to disclosing her disability. She feels she will not get the job if the potential employer knows she has a disability. Sarah decided she would ask the interviewer, "Please repeat the question," and "I need a minute to think about my response."
- This approach educates Sarah about her legal rights and ways to advocate for herself, while also respecting her autonomy.

- Abby is an 18-year-old young adult with ASD. She did not complete high school due to challenges with initiation and task completion. Her high school class helped her create a resume. She has interests and a vague work goal. She avoids looking for employment because of anxiety and frustration with lack of progress.
  - OT interventions-
    - Energy conservation- chunking, time blocking, starting small
    - Visual supports and coaching for engagement
      - Strengths, interests, and challenges checklists with OT help to answer
    - Real-world practice
      - Volunteer or job shadowing opportunities that allow her mother or the OT to also attend
      - modeling, energy conservation, executive function development, scaffolding
    - Executive function skill development- time management, planning, organizational skills, metacognition

VIII. Practical Takeaways

- Employment readiness is built through supported, graded participation
- Predictors of employment success offer concrete targets for OT and educator intervention.
- Small, well-designed experiences (with reflection and support) can meaningfully shift long-term outcomes for autistic and disabled youth

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Endnotes

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