



**Utah  
Parent  
Center**

**Special needs,  
extraordinary potential**

## **Tips For Teaching Soft Skills to High Functioning Youth With Disabilities**

### **1. A Strong Work Ethic**

Having a strong work ethic means understanding the importance of work and of being diligent or working hard. A person who does not care about work won't have the strong work ethic that employer's value.

One of the best ways is to teach value of work is through chores at home. Make a daily chore list of what you expect youth to do. Explain that every member of a household has a responsibility to pitch in and help.

Any time a child or young adult practices setting a goal and completing it, the youth is learning about having a strong work ethic.

- Set deadlines for when the chores need to be completed and be firm on those expectations. Explain how this will help prepare your son for employment in the real world.
- Offer an allowance for certain chores for a job well done.
- Communicate clearly what a job well done looks like. Rather than saying "clean the kitchen" say, "The kitchen is clean when the trash is emptied, the dishes are washed, the counters are cleaned off, the floors are swept and the table is washed".
- Write a list of the steps or, even better, have your youth make a list of them.

### **2. Dependability**

Employers want dependability. They want to be able to rely on their workers to do what they say they will do and be on the job regularly and on time.

There are many opportunities to teach dependability at home and at school. Teach youth the skills to manage their own time so that they can do things like getting up and ready for school on time, getting to classes on time and being where they need to be on time and as independently as possible.

- Make sure youth know their schedules and manage their time. Try some of the many high tech and low tech methods available for managing time. Support youth by helping them find the methods that will work best.
- Rather than waking a youth up every morning, have him set his own alarm on a phone or alarm clock.
- Have him wear a watch to track time and use a calendar on paper or on a phone, computer or tablet to track appointments and obligations. Encourage setting alarms or reminders for upcoming events.

### **3. A Positive Attitude**

Employers say that an employee who shows up to work with a positive attitude can often be taught a skill he or she does not already have. A positive attitude shows when the employee smiles, is friendly and is willing to learn or to do what is asked.

The most powerful thing parents can do is to model having a positive attitude. Lead by example, and show youth you are willing to learn new things even when it is challenging. Talk to them about your own work experiences, and how having a good attitude at work has helped you.

- Look for times when you notice your son or daughter having a good attitude and give specific praise about it. Praise youth for working hard and not just for the end result.
- Remind youth that having a good attitude means working through and staying motivated even during challenging times.
- Teach about the benefits of having a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. Having a growth mindset means believing that your abilities can improve over time with hard work. To learn more about how to teach a growth mindset, see the growth mindset resources found on this page.

### **4. Self-Motivation**

Self-motivation is the ability to do what needs to be done without influence from other people or situations. People with self-motivation find the reasons and strength to complete even challenging tasks without giving up or needing another person to encourage them. Self-motivation skills are essential when working on a job.

It is important to note that we all are often more motivated to do things we find enjoyable or to do things we care about in some way. Parents can help build self-motivation skills by finding things that interest their child or young adult and then

helping them experience the success that comes from the efforts they make when they are motivated.

- Ask what sorts of passions and interests youth currently have. Encourage them to pursue these interests on a deeper level.
- Explore with youth ways they could learn more about a topic (such as robotics for example). Perhaps they could research it on the internet or they could go to the library, join a club, take some classes, watch videos, join a blog, etc. Let youth make their own choices on how they want to learn more.
- Encourage efforts along the way and not just the end results. Don't bribe youth to learn more. Let them explore and let their own interest motivate them to learn more.
- Model and share how you have learned about your interests and how it has helped you.
- Help youth learn to move on to another task when one is completed. Have your student keep a list of a few things that need to be done and learn to identify and move on to the next task without being asked.

## **5. Being a Team Player**

Employers like a person who works well with others. At almost every job site, employees are expected to work with co-workers and to be a team player. There are many opportunities to practice being a team player at school and at home. Working on this skill can be especially fun and rewarding.

All youth should have access to extracurricular school activities that can provide opportunities to be a team player.

Help a young adult learn to be a team player by helping him understand differences people have. Introduce him to people who are different from him by taking part in activities like community festivals that feature different cultures, various places of worship, or through books, magazines, film, television, or the internet.

Give youth many opportunities to enjoy working on group projects.

- Have youth participate in small group work in their classes, community or church activities.
- Encourage youth to get involved with school clubs, special interest groups, committees, and other extracurricular activities.
- Look for opportunities through local parks and recreation departments that

often offer low cost opportunities for classes that promote teamwork such as sports classes, theater classes, archery and more.

- Check for low cost options through your local school district or college community education classes for classes for youth on sports, crafts, cooking, technology and many other topics.

## **6. Organization**

The ability to be organized is a key to job success. School is a great place for youth to learn to keep information organized. Using a calendar or daily organizer of some kind can help youth understand how being organized helps them to be prepared.

- Help youth identify class expectations at the beginning of the course. Usually there is a course syllabus that outlines some of the expectations.
- Help youth set up a schedule to get assignments turned in using a calendar such as a paper calendar or one on a computer or a phone.
- Using a daily planner can also be a helpful strategy. Consider setting an IEP goal to learn how to use a planner.
- Be sure both you and your son or daughter knows how to log in to the school's website to track due dates and check grades received on assignments. It is helpful for youth to see the results of their efforts.
- Help youth identify what is needed for a job. This might include being dressed appropriately, having the money needed for the day and planning transportation.

## **7. Working Under Pressure**

The ability to work under pressure is important since sometimes work will be stressful, and there will likely be multiple demands placed upon a person at the same time. Both school and home environments present many opportunities to develop skills for being resilient and coping under pressure.

One important skill for working under pressure is to know how to ask for help. Children and young adults can also learn skills for managing their stress. We certainly want to prepare our children and young adults so that work is not stressful to the point that it is harmful to their physical and mental health.

- Help youth figure out the best ways to ask for help in school. Some youth prefer to raise their hands, while others may prefer sending the teacher an email. Explore and practice. Make sure youth feel confident in asking for help in real world situations.

- Work with your child or young adult on ways to manage stress. Hobbies, reading, exercise, listening to music, writing, social activities, slowing breathing and meditation are all examples of coping skills that reduce stress.
- If your youth is struggling with stress management, and coping strategies don't seem to be working, ask for help. A school psychologist's services or private counseling can be very helpful when stress has started to turn into depression or anxiety.
- Youth can practice judging how long it takes to do a task.
- Role-playing interactions with other people can help them to be prepared to handle a variety of situations.

## **8. Communication Skills**

Employers want people who can communicate well whether it is being able to ask and answer questions clearly or the ability to actively listen and participate in conversations. Youth also need to be able to judge when they should speak with supervisors about issues that come up.

An important part of developing IEP transition plans should be determining what communication skills your youth needs to work on.

- Teach more sophisticated ways of asking questions appropriately. Help your young adult enhance his conversation skills by engaging him in conversations frequently. Ask him open-ended questions that require him to answer with more than just a simple yes or no answer.
- Practice non-verbal communication. Have your young adult look people in the eye and shake hands when introducing himself to others. Practice the nonverbal language that would take place at a job interview. Let him know that it's important to have eye contact with the person doing the interviewing and to limit fidgeting or nervous movements.

## **9. Flexibility**

Flexibility will go a long way toward helping youth have success on a job. Consider how well your young adult adjusts to change. Workers on the job often need to adjust to changes in assignments or schedule changes.

Cognitive flexibility includes two skills: flexible thinking and set shifting. Young adults who are able to think about a problem in a new way engage in flexible thinking, while young adults who get stuck in their ways tend to engage in rigid thinking. Set shifting refers to the individual's ability to let go of an old way of doing something to try a new way.

Having a variety of experiences and activities will help all youth develop more flexibility, confidence, and ability to cope with change.

- Support flexible thinking by changing or bending the rules from time to time. While rules are important, sometimes youth hyper focus on the rules to the point that it is difficult for them to get along with others. Try changing the rules to board games. This will help youth learn that they can bend. When youth learn that rules aren't always set in stone, they begin to approach problems from new directions and they will learn flexibility.
- Teach youth to use self-talk to work through a problem and deal with frustration.
- Teach your young adult to take a few deep breaths, state the problem, consider at least three solutions and choose one. This skill takes practice, so don't give up if your young adult struggles with it at first. When young adults can talk through their problems, they are able to problem solve more effectively which makes them more flexible.

## **10. Confidence**

Confidence or self-esteem is a feeling of appreciation for one's own abilities. The teen years are a particularly important time for youth to build up their self-confidence. Developing healthy self-esteem and confidence is essential for obtaining and keeping a job and for overall life success and happiness. Parents have a critical role in helping youth to develop a healthy sense of self-confidence.

All youth benefit from appropriate honest praise and recognition of their efforts and hard work and from a positive uplifting environment at home.

All youth also benefit from learning social skills. Knowing when they are acting appropriately builds confidence. The very basic social skills are things like how to make eye contact, how close to stand to another person and how to shake hands.

- Provide frequent but specific praise. Praise should specifically describe what youth have done successfully and should not be generic. Sometimes as parents we need to provide criticism, but always keep that criticism constructive rather than using ridicule or shame. Rather than saying "Your room is always such a disaster. You're such a slob," you could say "I would like you to keep your clothing picked up and put away in the dresser and in the closet instead of on the floor."
- Have youth take part in family decisions and discussions. Youth build

confidence when they feel like their input and opinions matter. Ask them to decide things like what you should have for dinner or what activities the family should do together.

- Engage youth in interesting conversations on important topics where they have opportunities to share their opinions on politics and the world.
- Encourage activities where the youth can give needed service or accomplish goals that they choose to work on. Volunteer work is a great way for youth to see that they can accomplish important goals and make a difference in the world.

## **Resources Listed by Skill. Most resources are applicable to all ability levels.**

### **1. A Strong Work Ethic**

Fact sheet with examples of how to break down larger tasks into simple steps using either pictures or words. Created for teachers, and also helpful for parents: <http://www.ttacnews.vcu.edu/2012/08/task-analysis-teaching-multistep-skills-made-easy/>

Article about why chores are important and how to get teenagers to do household chores: [http://www.naspcenter.org/adol\\_chores2.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/adol_chores2.html)

Article on how to create and use checklists for chores and other tasks. Includes links to apps and other helpful resources: <http://lifeafterieps.com/unleash-the-power-of-checklists/>

Article for parents about visual schedules: [https://ed-psych.utah.edu/school-psych/\\_documents/grants/autism-training-grant/Visual-Schedules-Practical-Guide-for-Families.pdf](https://ed-psych.utah.edu/school-psych/_documents/grants/autism-training-grant/Visual-Schedules-Practical-Guide-for-Families.pdf)

### **2. Dependability**

Video for youth about being dependable and professional on the job: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=91>

A video about how parents can teach their children dependability: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=teaching+depenability&&view=detail&mid=9FB46DD4CBA2ED9F54A89FB46DD4CBA2ED9F54A8&&FORM=VDRVRV>

Utah Center for Assistive Technology (UCAT) web page: <https://jobs.utah.gov/usor/vr/services/ucat.html>

### **3. A Positive Attitude**

Short video about having a good attitude at work: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=250>

Video for youth about having a positive attitude: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=93>

Article providing information about a growth mindset and free growth mindset printables for various ages: <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/building-on-strengths/download-growth-mindset-activities-for-kids>

Article on The Power of Praise: <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/celebrating-successes/ways-praise-can-empower-kids-learning-issues>

Resources for parents and educators for teaching a Growth Mindset:

<https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/growth-mindset-resources>

<https://www.mindsetkit.org/>

<https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/mindset-net-site/FileCenter/3JIQAYABR8M8GHQCQ05Q.pdf>

Article: Using Video Modeling for teaching students with disabilities: <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/video-self-modeling>

Information on using Social Stories: <https://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/assets/files/tipsheets/socialstoriestips.pdf> <http://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/social-stories/>

### **4. Self Motivation**

Video about a young adult who overcame personal challenges to pursue her passion: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=238>

Article about different learning styles: <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/building-on-strengths/studying-options-for-your-childs-strengths>

Video: How to Motivate your Teen: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=teach+your+child+self+motivation&&view=detail&mid=746E5E3F85FA2A9414A6746E5E3F85FA2A9414A6&&FORM=VRD GAR>

### **5. Being a Team Player**

Video for youth about being a team player: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=92>

Family fun ideas that encourage teamwork: <https://www.verywellfamily.com/family-fun-night-ideas-with-teens-2609697>

Reviews of various board games that require cooperation and teamwork to play: <http://www.theboardgamefamily.com/all-game-reviews/cooperative-games/>

Centers for independent living around the state offer a variety of classes for youth and young adults. Offerings vary by location. Directory for Utah: <http://www.ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory-results/UT>

## **6. Organization**

Video for students on how to organize homework: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=learning+how+to+self+advocate+and+ask+for+help&qvvt=learning+how+to+self+advocate+and+ask+for+help&view=detail&mid=FFAF372CDAC8E9E5351FFFAF372CDAC8E9E5351F&rvsmid=6B5B7D626FD9B99605876B5B7D626FD9B9960587&FORM=VDQVAP>

Video about using assistive technology at work to help yourself stay organized: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=254>

A simple homework checklist that can be used to track and reinforce responsible school behaviors: [https://cdn.empoweringparents.com/simple\\_homework\\_chart.pdf](https://cdn.empoweringparents.com/simple_homework_chart.pdf)

9 Simple Steps to Breaking Down a Homework Assignment: <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/homework-study-skills/9-simple-steps-for-breaking-down-assignments>

A sample homework contract for both parents and youth. This helps everyone know how to be accountable: <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/homework-study-skills/download-sample-homework-contract>

## **7. Working Under Pressure**

Article: The Importance of Resilience for Kids With Learning and Attention Issues <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/building-on-strengths/the-importance-of-resilience-for-kids-with-learning-and-attention-issues>

Ideas to help high school students deal with stress: <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/managing-feelings/stress-anxiety/10-ways-to-help-your-middle-or-high-schooler-manage-stress>

Short video for youth about asking for help: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=learning+how+to+self+advocate+and+ask+for+help&qpv=learning+how+to+self+advocate+and+ask+for+help&view=detail&mid=107DE4E865F23DED9956107DE4E865F23DED9956&rvsmid=6B5B7D626FD9B99605876B5B7D626FD9B9960587&FORM=VDRVRV>

## **8. Communication Skills**

Video for youth on the value of good communication skills on the job: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=82>

Suggestions on teaching your child about pitch and tone during communication: <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/common-challenges/picking-up-on-social-cues/at-a-glance-helping-your-child-notice-voice-pitch-and-tone>

10 ways to help your teen improve communication skills: <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/communication-disorders/10-ways-to-improve-your-high-schoolers-communication-skills>

## **9. Flexibility**

Video for youth demonstrating flexible thinking and problem solving on a job site: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/video/player.asp?video=84>

Video about how to teach problem solving skills to children and young adults: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=teaching+teens+with+disabilities+to+problem+solve&&view=detail&mid=E578946AB3C40FAE0E78E578946AB3C40FAE0E78&&FORM=VRDGAR>

## **10. Confidence**

Article on 7 Ways to Help Your Child Build Positive Self-Esteem: <https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-esteem/7-ways-to-boost-your-childs-self-esteem>

Your son or daughter needs self-determination skills such as making choices, setting goals, and self-advocacy. This Self-Determination video will provide you with a foundation of how to teach these skills to your son or daughter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-C4RXGSeeU&feature=youtu.be>