

# Great Expectations:

**Preparing Your Child with Developmental Disabilities  
for Employment Success**



**September 2011**

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Adapted for:  
Connecticut State Department of Developmental Services

Funded by Connect-Ability, the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant through  
the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.



The Department of Developmental Services' mission is to join with others to create the conditions under which all people with intellectual disability experience:

- Presence and participation in Connecticut town life
- Opportunities to develop and exercise competence
- Opportunities to make choices in pursuit of a personal future
- Good relationships with family members and friends
- Respect and dignity

DDS launched its Employment First Initiative in June 2008. This initiative is based upon a national movement that is being embraced by families across the nation. The Employment First Initiative embraces the following beliefs:

We Believe...

- Everyone can work and there is a job for everyone. Our job is to be creative and tenacious in providing supports that help people with intellectual disabilities to find, get, and keep real work for real pay.
- Not working should be the exception. All individuals, schools, families and businesses must raise their expectations.
- People will be hired because of their ability not because they have a disability.
- Communities embrace people who contribute.
- Everyone has something to contribute and needs to contribute.
- People are healthier, safer and happiest with meaningful work.
- True employment is not a social service.
- Employment is a win/win for everybody.

Special thanks are due to the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development for allowing the adaptation of this publication and to Judy Remington for her writing and editorial assistance.



“I cannot do everything, but still I can do something;  
and because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do something that I can do.”

“Only through experience of trial and suffering  
can the soul be strengthened,  
ambition inspired and success achieved.”

—*Helen Keller was an author, activist and lecturer.  
She was the first blind and deaf person to graduate from college.*



“Most importantly, embrace your son/daughter for the ‘typical’ child they are before you view them as your son/daughter with a disability. Make no doubt about it, there are more commonalities of concern for your capable son/daughter as there are for your disabled child.”

—Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability

# I. Facing the Challenge

As the parent of a child with developmental disabilities, you face unique challenges. This handbook is intended to help provide the inspiration, tools and understanding you need to help your child prepare for a fulfilling and constructive role in the workforce.

As you might already believe in your heart, there will be opportunities for your child, as long as he (or she) is afforded the appropriate education, training and supports. Labor market trends, changing skill demands, governmental programs, protective laws and employers looking to diversify will lead to more workplace opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Understanding the workplace trends, the intrinsic value of work, and the programs and supports available to your child are vital in helping him reach his highest potential. Learning from the experiences of other parents who have already faced these challenges also will help you set the stage for success.

Recognize the most valuable gift you can offer your child: Optimism. Help her envision the possibilities that lie ahead. Offer the encouragement, support and experiences that will prepare her to tackle the employment world and achieve an enriching and productive life in the community.



## II. Setting the Bar High: Why Should Parents Have High Expectations for their Child with Disabilities?

It is critical for parents to maintain high expectations for their child with disabilities. Children often see their own potential through the vision created by their parents. Research has demonstrated that family support is a vital component of a person's ability to achieve personal, academic and employment success.

Of greatest importance, studies have demonstrated that when parents have high academic and employment expectations for their children with disabilities, the children experience greater success in those critical areas. Simply increasing parents' awareness of their children's potential employability and the importance of work are likely to influence positive employment outcomes.

If you find yourself doubting your child's potential, you should remind yourself of the importance of retaining an optimistic and positive attitude and of maintaining high expectations.

### Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities Will Increase

Demographic trends are making it inevitable that employers will expand their hiring of individuals with disabilities. The workforce is aging, disability rates are rising and the traditional labor pool is not growing. In order to fill their ranks, businesses will have to increase the number of opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Numerous other factors make the hiring of individuals with disabilities a wise business decision. There are significant financial benefits and tax incentives that encourage businesses to employ workers with disabilities. Diversity is an increasingly important corporate

workforce policy. Additionally, businesses derive substantial benefits through improved public relations and community perception by hiring individuals with disabilities.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers are prohibited from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, as long as the person is qualified to do the job they are seeking.

As long as a person with disabilities can perform all the essential functions of a job and meet the educational and experience requirements set forth by the employer, an employer must consider providing a "reasonable accommodation" – a modification or adjustment to a job or work environment that will enable the applicant to do the job. Such accommodations might include: modifying work schedules, modifying equipment, or making facilities used by employees readily accessible to individuals with a disability.

Technology has played a vital role in opening the employment door for individuals with disabilities. Technological advances allow workers with disabilities to perform job functions that they might not have been able to perform before and increase their ability to be more productive workers.

Telecommuting and the decentralization of business processes allow many workers with disabilities to perform their job duties from home or from locations other than a central office. These more flexible work options allow some workers to communicate more effectively, especially workers with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other types of social challenges.



“What is doable is based on each individual situation. Try to stay actively involved with the ‘system’ in which your son/daughter is seeking services and supports. Whether it is the educational, employment, housing or adult service system, do your homework and know the answer before you ask the question.”

### III. What are the Trends?

While the percent of individuals with disabilities who are employed remains below the general population, it is greater than many would anticipate. More than 27 million working age adults in the United States have a disability, according to 2011 statistics. As of February 2011, over 20 percent of working age adults with a disability were employed, compared to nearly 70 percent of individuals without disabilities.

And while there is an earnings gap, it is not as wide as might be expected. Across the nation, median labor earnings of working age people with disabilities who worked full-time in 2010 were \$35,600, while the median earnings for the non-disabled were \$40,700. In Connecticut with its higher than average salaries, those earnings would be higher.

Traditionally, there have been numerous barriers to the employability of individuals with disabilities, leading to this disparity in jobs, salary and education. While a number of those barriers have begun to disappear, one of the most significant barriers can still act as a stumbling block. Too often, individuals with disabilities fear they may be unable to succeed in the workforce and do not establish the high expectations of themselves that are needed to take on the tough challenges. It is imperative for parents to join in the fight to eliminate those negative perceptions, starting at an early age.



## IV. Why Should Your Child Work? Benefits of Working Versus Public Assistance

Why should your child confront the challenges of finding and maintaining employment?

Cutting-edge research indicates that accumulating assets can empower your child and promote independence and self-sufficiency. Financial success can be a crucial force in helping individuals feel better about themselves, feel secure, become involved in their community and have an optimistic attitude about the future.

Financial power for people with disabilities can enable them to buy homes, attend college, seek additional skills training to help with employment, and purchase assistive technology to further their success on the job. On the other hand, lack of assets and income limits an individual's ability to find stable housing and pursue higher education – keys to stopping the cycle of poverty among individuals with disabilities.

Saving money, building assets and being connected to mainstream banks are important because they:

1. Produce choices for people with disabilities that directly affect their current and future quality of life,
2. Lead to greater financial security,
3. Produce greater community participation, and
4. Change expectations and status with other community stakeholders.

Many parents are concerned that encouraging their child to work and earn an income will affect their child's eligibility for needed public benefits, such as Social Security and Medicaid. In Connecticut, a person with a disability is eligible to receive full Medicaid health coverage **and** earn an income through a program called Medicaid for the Employed Disabled (MED or Med-Connect). This program operates as follows:

- The person must have a disability and be over the age of 18 and
- The person can earn any amount of countable income up to \$6,250 per month (\$75,000 per year) and still be eligible for the program. There is no monthly minimum.
- There are no premiums for one person with an income below \$1,743 per month (\$2,334 for a couple).
- Certain possessions such as a home or car used for medical appointments or getting to work are not counted as assets. A person can have \$10,000 (\$15,000 for a couple) in counted assets such as a checking or savings account. Approved retirement accounts such as an IRA or 401K are not counted.
- People who are self-employed are eligible as long as they pay all appropriate federal and state self-employment taxes.

For more information, parents should refer to:

<http://www.ct.gov/MED> or  
<http://www.ct.gov/connecttowork>.

## V. Where Will the Jobs Be?

An important way to help your child find and keep a job is by knowing which industries and jobs will be growing and expanding in Connecticut in the near future and helping him acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success.

According to the Connecticut Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Center for Occupational Employment Information and Labor Market and Demographic Research, there are 10 high growth industry sectors in Connecticut (2008):

- Health Care and Social Assistance
- Educational Services
- Professional, Scientific and Technical Services
- Arts, Entertainment and Recreation
- Information Services
- Real Estate and Rental Leasing
- Management Companies and Enterprises
- Other Services (except Government)
- Accommodation and Food Service
- Wholesale Trade

High growth industries are those that are critical to the state's economic vitality and development, industries that significantly affect the growth of other important industries, are a new or emerging industry, and those that are transformed by technology that requires significant changes in the workforce skill sets.

Education, energy, environmental, health care and security are among the industries that are expected to survive this current economic downturn and to grow in the coming years.

In the education and energy fields, many retirements are anticipated in the next 10 years, leading to abundant hiring. With the new "green" consciousness and awareness of global warming, eco-friendly jobs are expected to thrive. Security is a rising concern for employers and they expect to continue to add jobs in the coming years. Meanwhile, health care is still booming with half of the 30 fastest growing jobs found in health services.





“Try to work backwards. First, ask yourself, ‘Where do I see my son/daughter with regard to employment?’ Then roll back to where you are now, making sure all the necessary steps in between are covered. Are you securing all the necessary goals and objectives with a focus on the projected outcome? If he/she transitioned out without a well-executed plan in place, what does he/she now need (supports and services) to get to the appropriate ending place? As much as the ages 0 to 21 may seem like an eternity, pace yourself. Recognize that 21 and beyond is much longer lasting, so focus on the **long-term plan!**”

*—Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*

## VI. What Do Employers Need?

The key to success for your child is understanding what the employer needs. What function does the employer need someone to perform? What skill sets are employers really looking for?

As a parent, you know best the unique strengths your child possesses. Focus on those strengths and talents and help her develop skills based on those strengths. The more advanced and fine-tuned your child can develop those skills, the greater opportunity she will have for success in the workplace and the more valuable she is to an employer. Think

creatively about how your child's strengths can make her an asset for an employer.

It is also crucial to help your child to develop the "soft skills" that employers are consistently saying are lacking in the general workforce. Such skills include: timeliness, responsibility, appropriate dress, strong basic skills, willingness to learn new things and commitment to the job. If your child can demonstrate strength in these skills, he will have an advantage in obtaining and retaining employment. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth has additional tips on how you can prepare your child for work: <http://www.ncwd-youth.info>





**Lisa Ellis**  
**Lifeguard and Swim Instructor - YMCA**

Lifeguard Lisa Ellis is proof that you can be whatever you want to be. That when employer, family and the Connecticut Department of Developmental Services (DDS) come together, we all succeed. Call 1.866.844.1903 or visit [connect-ability.com](http://connect-ability.com). See the ability. See how we can work together.

Connect-Ability is managed by Connecticut Department of Social Services. Funded by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services



## VII. How Can You Help?

Once your child reaches high school age, or preferably sooner, it becomes very important for you and the school to work together to devise an individual education plan (IEP) that outlays the best course of action for your child regarding his education and employment opportunities. The most important thing to remember is to base much of the plan on the unique strengths, abilities and talents of your child and always maintain the goal at its highest level.

If work is the best option for your child, ensure that she has as many work experiences as possible with exposure to many different job settings. Summer jobs are also a great way for a child to gain valuable work experiences. Parents should also be closely connected with the

Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS). For more information, parents should refer to: <http://www.ct.gov/brs/site/default.asp>

There are some postsecondary institutions in Connecticut that provide specialized services for students with developmental disabilities. The Connecticut State Department of Education has developed a 2010 Directory of Transition Services in College, University and Community-Based Settings. Copies of this document are available for download at the Connecticut State Department of Education web site: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde> or the State Education Resource Center (SERC): <http://www.ctserc.org>





“How can I, as a parent, collaborate with the direct service professionals to ensure the best possible outcome for my son/daughter? Collaboration that began in educational entitlement **must** continue throughout the young adult/adult journey... perhaps to a lesser degree, but continuance must occur.”

—*Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*

## VIII. Who Can Offer Advice? Words of Wisdom from Parents

Other parents with children with developmental disabilities have the best understanding of the challenges you will face and the possibilities that lie ahead. They offer the following advice:

1. Keep all levels of employment in mind.
2. Focus on self-sufficiency and teach your child to be independent.
3. Pre-employment skills should start before the age of 14. Children should participate in paid and unpaid employment to learn a variety of skills, such as computer skills and cooperating with others.
4. You have to motivate your child with a "can do" attitude.
5. Provide many opportunities to contribute and learn skills in many different settings.
6. Help your child to understand that life is trial and error and failing is part of life. Even if he tries a job and doesn't succeed, there are lessons to take to another job.
7. There is a progression: school, volunteering, internship, supported employment, part-time employment, full-time employment.
8. Do not depend on one agency and do not look to school to provide everything.
9. Start at home to develop your child's strengths and work ethic.
10. Accept that your plan might not work; it's OK if it doesn't work. Still keep going.
11. Recognize that there are always choices, always alternatives. Do not accept dead ends.
12. Parents need to strike a balance. Decide when to be involved and when to step back.

## IX. Is it Really Possible? On the Road to Success

Twenty-four year old Tommy, who has a developmental disability, is experiencing success in the workforce due in large part to his family's belief that this was not only possible but also an essential part of his life as an adult. He is currently employed 15 hours a week as a mail courier at a local bank where he makes a good hourly wage. After work is done each day, he participates in life skills training and social skills building as he gets ready to move into his own apartment.

His parents worked closely with the school system to make this happen. His mother had professional connections at this bank and realized early on that Tommy could make a valuable contribution to the workplace. The school supported this dream and assisted Tommy to start his career path several years before graduation. After visiting and trying out a number of other work options, Tommy and his team decided to focus on the bank and he began employment there 2 years prior to graduation as part of his educational program. He worked there part time during the school year and also during summer vacations. The school system provided job coach support and training while he was still in school and these supports were then picked up by an adult service provider upon graduation. Tommy's parents realized that this transition to an adult provider was critical and they began the selection process well before graduation.

Tommy's parents also started early at home with an emphasis on good manners and appropriate social skills along with the expectation for him to help out with typical household chores. As a result, Tommy has made a smooth transition into the world of work and continues to grow and mature as a young adult.

Every parent faces different challenges in preparing their child for adulthood. As the parent of a child with developmental disabilities, your path will present unique obstacles that may stress your resolve. But with the appropriate knowledge, support and attitude, you can serve as a vital ally for your child and become a catalyst for her success. While this handbook provides some suggestions and links for supports and service, do not hesitate to turn to other parents who have already faced these challenges to gain from their wisdom and experience.

“There are **many more** reasons to celebrate the positive experience(s) than there are to dwell on the difficult journey. Childhood...the teenage years...and young adulthood are a **blink** of the eye. Try not to miss the joy of parenting.”

—*Parent of an adult child with a developmental disability*

For more information on parent advocacy and support groups, or to learn more about where to go for employment assistance in Connecticut, please refer to the following web sites:

Connecticut State Department of Developmental Services

<http://www.ct.gov/dds/site/default.asp>

connect-ability

<http://www.connect-ability.com>

Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities

<http://www.ct.gov/ctcdd/site/default.asp>

Connecticut State Department of Labor

<http://www.ctdol.state.ct.us/>

Connecticut State Department of Education

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde>

Special Education Resource Center

<http://www.ctserc.org>

Connecticut State Department of Social Services

<http://www.ct.gov/dss/site/default.asp>

Connecticut Community Rehabilitation Provider Searchable Database

<http://www.ctbrs.org>

Connecticut Family Support Network

<http://www.ctfsn.org/>

Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center

<http://www.cpacinc.org>

FORConn

<http://www.forconn.org>

Connecticut Down Syndrome Congress

<http://www.ctdownsyndrome.org>





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