

Job opportunities for the autistic increasing

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necessarily all, individuals with autism. "Approaches that stress the importance of the normalization principle have not been without their problems," they note. "Natural settings, such as competitive employment opportunities or even workshops designed for mentally retarded individuals, are frequently not able to tolerate the unusual behaviors displayed by an autistic individual." The educators suggest that "the normalization process can sometimes lead well-meaning professionals to ignore environments that may ultimately be in the best interests of their clients," and note that self-contained programs such as Benhaven and Bittersweet Farms (see editorial on page 3) may offer more advantages to some autistic adults than programs stressing normalization. (Rosa Hayes of Benhaven notes that the program has transferred a number of its graduates to non-sheltered competitive jobs, with "mixed results.")

Several supported work programs are reporting encouraging early results, but Sidney Levy cautions that, "Although our present training technology is highly advanced, turning handicapped people into normal individuals is not feasible. It is probable that some of their behaviors will be tolerated in competitive job settings and some will not The reality of the present situation is that until our technology for assessing and training behavior improves, and our philosophy and economy change to accommodate all people into the work force, the sheltered work setting will continue to remain the primary work alternative for most impaired people."

One 1986 study of three autistic workers indicates that even severe behavior problems do not necessarily rule out employment in the community. Marcia Datlow Smith and Doreen Coleman found that even aggressive and oppositional behavior could be successfully controlled at an integrated work site using nonobtrusive behavior management techniques including training the employees to ask for advice; role-playing; removing rewards when tantrums occurred; "report cards" and self-monitoring (having the employee decide what grades he had earned); and praise for working at high rates of speed.

While Smith and Coleman note that these procedures did not disturb nondisabled co-workers or interrupt the workplace, they caution that maintaining appropriate behaviors of autistic workers may require the presence of permanent, full-time counselors.

Full independence: a reality for some

One research finding, by Edward Ritvo et al. (see ARRI 2/2), which has discouraging implications is that even individuals considered "normal" but with detectable autistic features frequently have very poor employment records—despite high school and/or college degrees and good job skills—because of their behavior problems.

A small but growing number of high-functioning people, however, are achieving success in fully competitive employment. According to Holmes, about 10 percent of autistic individuals may reach this level of employment. Some are backed by supported work programs which will provide a temporary job coach or additional training if the individual has difficulties. In other cases,

Prevocational skills training begins at age six at one school; students are placed in jobs in the community by age 12.

parents help autistic individuals develop particular skills such as artistic ability into businesses, or find work for their children in their own firms. A few high-functioning autistic individuals, such as Temple Grandin (who runs a successful stockyard designing firm), are able to complete college or even post-graduate work independently and start their own careers.

Grandin suggests that parents and teachers "use the tremendous drive created by [autistic compulsions] to motivate academic endeavors" which can later translate into job skills; she notes that one autistic boy who was a compulsive counter eventually became a banker (see ARRI 1/2).

Barry Prizant and Amy Wetherby agree, noting in *Autism: Nature, Diagnosis and Treatment* that employment training can capitalize on specific abilities of the autistic. For instance, the Community Services for Autistic Citizens (CSAC) program in Maryland makes use of autistic individuals' strong visual and spatial skills by employing them to sort library books, and do printing jobs such as collating and binding.

Rosa Hayes notes in *The Handbook of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders* that Benhaven has turned some autistic deficits into vocational advantages: for instance, autistic individuals can excel at jobs working on products which must be identical, because of their insistence on sameness. (While she notes that autistic workers often enjoy and do well at repetitive tasks that might bore other workers, a recent study by Levy and E. Kaplan found that two profoundly autistic men increased their production and lowered their error rates when tasks changed—even when they became more complex—indicating that they were bored by repetitive jobs.)

Early training encouraged

Educators stress the need for vocational training to begin in the schools. "Valuable vocational educational experiences need to occur during the primary, intermediate, and

secondary years in order to make the disabled student more employable during adulthood," Gaylord-Ross says.

Some programs begin vocational training very early; Zonta Children's Center in San Jose, California, for instance, begins prevocational training at age six and places each student in a job in the community by age 12. (Students do not receive wages, but do earn reinforcers for good work.)

Levy suggests beginning with simple discrimination (matching industrial parts, etc.) and advancing to manipulative skills (nut-and-bolt assembly) and use of tools. "Training does not have to be limited to mechanical bench assembly tasks," he adds. "For some individuals other activities such as kitchen work or maintenance, and for higher functioning individuals clerical, secretarial, and academic activities, could be a part of their vocational program."

Hayes suggests teaching such skills as measuring, counting, forming sets, reading numerals, understanding concepts of size and prepositions, reading simple labels, following directions, and visual discrimination and matching. Self-help skills also are important; a study by F. Rusch et al. found that employers in the food service and janitorial/maid occupations, asked what "survival" skills they would look for in potential employees, rated "keeping hair combed" as one of the five most important.

Pumpian notes that "educators are now using actual businesses as extensions of their classrooms....The teacher actually takes part of his/her class to the business and uses it for instruction on a regular basis." This allows teachers to develop and assess skills and interests; identify areas of need; evaluate various training techniques; develop ways of adapting jobs to the needs of workers; and identify the type of support that would be needed for disabled individuals to be successfully employed.

Vocational training in school, Gaylord-Ross says, should provide a variety of experiences (e.g., office, factory), and a variety of tasks varying in difficulty. "Such varied experiences not only develop general work behaviors like stamina and social skills," he says, "but also provide assessment information pertaining to the type of job tasks the individual can excel at and . . . prefers."

Pumpian also suggests that—while pay for work is an integral part of supported work—unpaid apprenticeships may provide a way for severely developmentally disabled workers to develop job skills and "gain access into the working world."

While such access is limited today, one thing appears certain: with a greater range of educational and employment programs, there will be more autistic cooks, office workers, gardeners, library assistants, and even archeology assistants in the future.

References available upon request; please send self-addressed, stamped envelope.