

Factsheet #2: Work Experience

Intro

Quality, meaningful work experience placements bring multiple benefits to any young person, enabling them to explore their career options, develop their work-related skills, and build on their soft skills, self-confidence and abilities. Unfortunately for many young disabled people, including young people with SEN, work experience is often ineffective or out of reach, and fails to help them achieve their goals. In this resource young people identify themes relating to the barriers they often face, and offers some advice on supporting a successful work experience placement.

Barriers

Bosses think disabled young people will be slow.

Attitudes

Negative attitudes, including disablist language, towards young disabled people, either of a particular young person or the demographic more broadly, is frequently raised as one of the major obstacles to a good placement. Within the workplace, negative attitudes also exist when members of staff make negative assumptions about a young person's skills, knowledge and intellectual ability. Such assumptions and stereotyping can lead to young people being given menial tasks which do not play to their strengths, or may prevent a young person from accessing a particular placement entirely. Once a young person has started a placement, they can face negative attitudes from their colleagues, often based on appearance or assumptions based on stereotypes. Challenging these stereotypes may take more of the young person's energy than their placement tasks do.

Negative attitudes should be challenged

- Ensure that there is some basic disability awareness training in the workplace. This should include awareness of:
 - The Equality Act 2010
 - Obligations regarding reasonable adjustments
 - The Social Model of Disability
- Ensure that the young person has an identified, approachable mentor who is able to listen to and respond to issues raised by the young person related to attitudes in the work place.
- Approach the placement with a focus on the young person's strengths and knowledge rather than the challenges they face. Start the process by supporting the young person to create a profile with their strengths and preferred ways of learning.

People won't interview disabled people – their minds are closed.



Meaningful opportunities

Young people have raised concerns that the placements they are offered do not support their career aspirations or interests. Feedback from young disabled people suggests they sometimes feel pressured to undertake the only placement available, or their aspirations have not been taken into consideration when identifying placement opportunities.

Additionally, young disabled people have said the duties assigned to them often do not give them a realistic experience of the workplace. For example, they are not involved in tasks which demonstrate the range of activities an employee would undertake in the course of their day-to-day work. Young people have said they need to complete a range of tasks that allows them to reflect on what a job within that organisation or industry would be like in reality. In particular, young people want to demonstrate that they can complete tasks that develop their skills and knowledge, therefore showing employers that they would be good candidates for the role.

Placements should always link to aspirations

- Involve the young person fully in the process of identifying potential placements that relate to their career goals and interests.
- Once a placement opportunity has been identified, give the young person an opportunity to discuss their skills and goals with the organisation prior to starting, and draw up a support plan for the duration which takes these into account.
- Recognise that each individual brings their own knowledge and skills to the placement, and that these should be utilised in their daily tasks wherever possible.
- Give the young person opportunities to reflect on and record their experiences and related skills development, in a manner that works for them. This may be a brief diary, audio recordings, photos, or whichever medium the young person is most comfortable with.

Young people are often just given a placement that reflects others' lack of ambition for disabled people.

Consider our preferences and aspirations.



Soft skills development

As well as developing an understanding of particular work environments and industries, young people want their work experience placements to provide them with opportunities to develop their soft skills. Young people are aware of how valuable these skills are in securing employment or opportunities for further study.

Soft skills range from those specific to the work place, such as having a professional manner, to both personal and interpersonal skills. Such skills are numerous. For some young people this can mean improving their social and communication skills to work better with colleagues, and for others it may be about becoming more independent, having greater self-confidence or to being more organised. A good placement setting, where they are fully included, will support young people to build on these abilities.

People's opinions can get in the way - they need to learn to see past the disability.

There needs to be more support to combat the anxiety around entering the work place.



Young people should be respected

- Encourage organisations to treat young people as colleagues while they are on their placement.
- Ensure that young people have a range of tasks which encompass independent work, team settings and one-to-one work with staff members.
- Ensure that young people are informed of their tasks in advance, and are aware of what is expected of them. Encourage them to raise concerns or additional support needs before beginning the task.
- Encourage young people to share their opinions and questions on decisions and activities, and ensure organisational staff respect their ideas.
- Ensure that staff are tolerant towards communication needs and sensory processing issues, and make space for young people to think and join in with discussions.

Adequate and reasonable support

Any young person on a work experience placement will require support; this may be their first contact with the world of work and they are usually entering an environment and a knowledge base which is entirely new to them.

As with other areas of life, the support that a disabled young person requires will be unique to them, and is vital to enable them to access opportunities on an equal footing with non-disabled young people.

Young people have said that they have faced a range of issues relating to inadequate support during work experience, including a failure to accommodate access needs, an inflexible working environment and insufficient time being given to complete activities. All young people should be supported to complete tasks to the best of their ability.

Positive support is consistent but flexible

- Ensure organisations are aware of the legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments in the work place.
- Remember that each young person knows their own support needs best, so give them opportunities to discuss their support and what works for them before they begin their placement. This will give employers notice of what adjustments they will need to put in place.
- Be flexible; as with anybody, young disabled people have good days and bad days, and their support requirements may change through the duration of their placement.
- Give clear instructions when setting tasks, and keep an awareness of issues regarding memory and communication.
- Ensure that the young person has an approachable mentor who they can raise any issues around their support with.
- Be patient and allow plenty of time for young people to complete tasks, bearing in mind the impact that different disabilities may have on mental processing, reading and writing speed.

Good careers support helps you to find ways around the barriers

When they are not supported with good placements, young people – especially disabled young people – are missing out on valuable opportunities.



Positive work experience also includes:

Young disabled people have said that having a good mentor whilst on work experience can make all the difference. A mentor should be approachable and understanding, and have the authority to make necessary changes in the work place to better support the young person.

The most successful placements have been identified as those where colleagues offer praise and encouragement, are patient and open minded, and who are trustworthy and easy to connect with.

Good work experience does not end with the last day of the placement. Recording and reflecting on activities undertaken, skills learned, and personal development will support a young person to be aware of their own growth and identify next steps for their career path.

By improving access to, and quality of, work experience placements, young disabled people will be better equipped and more informed by the time they enter the workforce as adults. Skills and confidence supports improved quality of living for individuals, but they also have a positive impact on organisations, the economy, and society more broadly by recognising the positive contributions people with disabilities have to make.

This resource is part of the Making Participation Work programme, a joint partnership between the Council for Disabled Children and KIDS, and funded by the Department for Education. For more information about the Making Participation Work programme, visit us at <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/our-work/participation/practice/making-participation-work>