

Career exploration – Job shadowing

by MARY MAZZONI on OCTOBER 14, 2012 <http://lifeafterieps.com/career-exploration-job-shadowing/>

How can teens make informed career choices?

They need a variety of meaningful career exploration experiences over a number of years.

The National Collaborative for Workforce and Disability – Youth ([NCWD-Y](#)) emphasizes the value of job shadowing. It's an important way for kids to get an "up close look" at careers of interest to them.

Well-planned job shadowing experiences help teens learn about:

- work environments and routines
- job tasks and responsibilities
- skills needed for success in careers of interest

Let's look at some tips and tools to plan effective job shadowing opportunities.

Early, informal experiences

Beginning when our kids are very young, we can intentionally draw their attention to diverse job roles and environments.

Point to the people who are working all around them. Some people work inside – some outside. Work environments may be busy and loud, or very quiet. Some jobs involve technology or special equipment. Often jobs involve working with people – but some jobs require working alone. Which of these environments are interesting or appealing to your child?

You and your child will be amazed at what you can learn about career preferences just by looking closely at people who work around you.

You'll also be surprised at the willingness of many businesses to take you behind the scenes and answer your questions – as long as you ask ahead of time and come at a time that is not too busy for them. These free, informal experiences provide a wealth of background knowledge that really inform kids' preferences.

At an early age, kids can begin an informal journal or idea book about job tasks and environments they prefer.

More structured, focused job shadowing

In the tween and early teen years, kids can begin exploring particular careers of interest.

[Early in the career exploration process](#), kids typically desire to be just like their heroes – and they may be very emotionally invested in a particular job – without having information about related career options. This is a good time to help them broaden their focus by using informal career interest inventories.

[My Next Move](#) is a user-friendly website by the Department of Labor that combines a free interest inventory with a powerful career research tool. Kids can learn about the required training and education, job market, and working conditions of related careers of interest. For kids with significant reading and language challenges, simpler [reading-free career interest assessments](#) are also available.

When kids have identified specific careers of interest – it's time for more focused, structured job shadowing experiences.

Let's face it, there's just so much our kids can learn about a career from a computer program or website. Being in the actual work environment and attending specifically to the tasks and conditions of a job can empower kids to make more informed choices about their career direction.

Planning structured job shadow experiences

The National Collaborative for Workforce and Disability – Youth (NCWD-Y) identifies job shadowing as [one of several strategies](#) to support youth in making informed career choices.

To be effective, job shadow experiences should be structured so that:

- parents, student, school and host business understand the purpose of the experience and their specific role
- there is a structured process for the student to follow in communicating with all parties involved
- the student receives the support needed to plan for, participate in, and reflect on the experience

Before the Experience

Some planning considerations:

Where will the student job shadow? (Family and school can collaborate to identify potential host businesses)

What is the business asked to do? (Negotiate with employer and follow up with an email specifying date, time, details of the experience)

What questions will the student ask? (Develop a list of questions and role play with the student)

How will student record answers to the questions? (Will student take notes, or audio record with prior permission? Will a support person take notes?)

What business etiquette is expected? (Role play beforehand)

What will the student wear? (Consider safety and “dress for success” within the specific business environment)

Will someone accompany the student? (To support communication and/or attention)

How will the student get to and from the experience?

Will the student miss classes? (Follow procedures for obtaining administrative permission, communicating with teachers, and making up class work)

After the experience

Make the most of this valuable learning opportunity:

Reflection and action planning

An adult will need to help the student reflect on what was seen and heard during the experience. Help the student consider not just the answers to the questions, but also what was observed.

What aspects of the work environment and job tasks were appealing? Uncomfortable? Surprising? What academic skills and physical skills did the student see in action? Is the student still interested in this career?

Most importantly, the student should be supported to develop an [action plan](#). How will she act on what she has learned?

If the student remains interested in the field:

- What steps can she take to learn more about related careers?
- What skills should the student learn to prepare for this career?
- How can he begin to develop these skills?
- What planning steps should be taken to prepare for a career in this area?

If the student is no longer interested in this career area:

- What characteristics of a work environment will he want to avoid in the future?
- What other careers may be of interest?
- What steps can he take to learn more about these other careers?

Add the experience to a portfolio

The student should include the [action plan](#) and summary of his experience to a portfolio that can be used for ongoing career planning.

Write a thank you letter to the employer

This letter should be written by the student, with support as needed.

Reporting to the school

Typically, students who miss class to participate in job shadowing must complete a report of the experience in a format specified by the school

Free resources for job shadow planning

These free downloadable resources offer tips, planning checklists and communication templates:

- [Job Shadow Handbook](#) - Santa Cruz County Schools (view on GoogleDocs, can download in .docx format)
- [Build Partnerships for Career Exploration](#) – Monadnock Center for Successful Transitions

Next steps

Once your child has narrowed interests to just a few careers and work environments- the next step will be to gain experience in those environments through volunteering, community based assessment, and/or work based learning. We'll look more closely at these options in future posts.

In the meantime, job shadowing is an excellent way for kids to assess their career interests in genuine work environments.