

## FUTURE PREPPING YOUR CHILD

By Dan Coulter

Live in the moment. Prepare for the future.

Two good pieces of advice. Success and happiness require a bit of both.

Balancing the present and future is hard enough for parents, but it can be even harder for our children who have Asperger Syndrome or similar conditions. Many are firmly anchored in the “live in the moment” camp. But ready or not, the future is coming.

I got to thinking about this when my wife, Julie, told me about her day at a high school college fair. She stood at table among a roomful of other representatives ready to explain the virtues of her alma mater to students. After each discussion, the students were supposed to get the representative’s signature on a card. I suppose this was to ensure that students didn’t just use the event as an excuse to cut class.

Some students in the room were interested and engaged the college reps with questions about the curriculums and campuses and their futures. Others spent their time hanging around talking with their friends and pretty much ignoring the representatives. Except to occasionally dart to a table, extend an arm and ask, “Would you sign my card?”

Interested in the future vs. living in the moment. In an increasingly tough, global job market, who’s on track for a happy, successful life?

But preparing for the future doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy yourself now.

The magic formula is merging the two concepts to get our children so fired up about a subject that they use it to shape their futures. Many of our offspring have a head start. I can’t even count the children on the autism spectrum I’ve met who are passionate about a special interest.

Sure, I hear you say, but how do I convert my son’s obsession with Japanese Anime or my daughter’s passion about weather into a career?

First, do some research about your son or daughter’s interest. Contact people in a related business and find out what jobs exist in that field. Then, take your child to meet some of those people. You don’t have to limit your aspirations to an existing job. Assess your child’s skills and ask the people you’re meeting with if an employer might craft a new job around those skills. Your weather-obsessed child may not be cut out to be an on-camera weather reporter, but might excel at building the computer models used in forecasting. If the skills your child has -- and wants to

attain -- have value, you've got a shot. (If your child doesn't display a particular interest, perhaps your school could administer an aptitude test that could help you get the ball rolling.)

Your local community college also could be of help. Many have career programs and contacts with businesses you could use as resources. Or you could get in touch with your local chamber of commerce. Arranging a visit with a local artist or weather reporter could have a tremendous impact on even a young child. Set up these meetings with as many different people as possible. Discovering what your child doesn't want to do can be just as important as finding what he does. Remember, you're not working to absolutely determine your child's path. You're exposing him to possibilities and seeing what catches his imagination.

My son, Drew, has Asperger Syndrome. His special interests have changed over the years. When he was little, he was enthralled by Star Wars and Greek mythology. Later, he became fascinated with Japanese anime. But he's also interested in math and loves working with spreadsheets. After getting a B.A. in creative writing, Drew went back to college for a two-year accounting degree after we introduced him to an accountant and let him see what a job in that field would be like. (And after he took a basic online accounting course to make doubly sure.) Now, he works in an accounting department.

Business people often appreciate others who take the initiative. You may be surprised at the number of people who would be willing to talk with a student about their jobs. Especially if the student is excited about the visit. Some of these visits could even result in a part-time job or internship where your child can learn important job-related social skills. Unemployment is especially high among people with Asperger Syndrome, not because they don't have the skills to do a job, but because they have difficulty interacting with supervisors and co-workers. Outstanding job skills and a base level of social skills can be a winning combination for someone with Asperger Syndrome.

A part-time job in high school can help your child learn crucial workplace lessons that could make the difference in keeping a full time job later on. If it's too much to deal with a job after school hours, consider a summer job. But try as hard as you can to find something related to your child's interests.

Consider how your child reacts when asked to do something that doesn't appeal to him. Compare that to how animated he can be when urging you to let him do something he loves. I just know that when my son is not interested in something, working on it can be like a long hike in ill-fitting boots. When he is interested, he's winged Mercury.

Here's hoping you can link your child's passion to a career that makes preparing for the future one of the most fun things he can do with his moments.

He might just land a job ahead of the typically developing kids who spend their living-in-the-moment time hanging out instead of talking to representatives at a college fair. Now wouldn't that be something?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dan Coulter is the producer of the videos, "Asperger Syndrome at Work: Success Strategies for Employees and Employers" and "Asperger Syndrome: Transition to College and Work." You can find more information and articles on his website at: [coultervideo.com](http://coultervideo.com).

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