

Preparing Paraprofessionals to be Job Coaches

Paraprofessionals play a critical role in the education of students with disabilities. Although most paraprofessionals work in classrooms, some provide instruction in community-based work settings. Paraprofessionals who assume this role are often referred to as job coaches. This brief will explore effective approaches and strategies for preparing paraprofessionals to work as job coaches, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive training, evidence-based practices, and ongoing support.

What are Job Coaches?

Job coaches, sometimes referred to as employment specialists, support individuals with disabilities to obtain and maintain paid employment. They may also support individuals to participate in unpaid community-based work experiences prior to obtaining employment. Within school districts and other educational programs, paraprofessionals are often hired as job coaches although it is common for teachers, vocational coordinators, or other school staff to also fulfill the job coach role. Typical job coach responsibilities for paraprofessionals include using evidence-based instructional strategies to teach work and work-related skills, maintaining positive relationships with businesses, and transporting students to work sites. Some job coaches may also be tasked with developing and maintaining community job sites and finding students paid employment.

What the Research Says

Several studies have investigated components of paraprofessional training programs, but few have specifically focused on the preparation of paraprofessionals as job coaches. One example of a comprehensive job coach training program is the Job Coaching Academy (JCA; Gilson et al., 2021). The JCA was designed to prepare transition educators and job coaches by providing training on a range of topics including job

development, instructional strategies, and support techniques. The program was piloted in three school districts. Participants in the JCA reported increased confidence and competence in their ability to support individuals with disabilities in employment settings.

A second comprehensive training program described in the literature focused on preparing job coaches to use three evidence-based instructional strategies: task analysis, simultaneous prompting, and least to most prompting (Brock et al., 2016). The training was provided in whole group format to six job coaches and involved descriptions of the techniques, modeling, repeated practice, and performance feedback. Some job coaches learned the strategies solely through group instruction. Others needed individual coaching over time to implement the strategies with fidelity.

In summary, comprehensive training programs support job coaches to learn skills needed to work effectively with students at community job sites. In addition to comprehensive training programs, it is important to provide paraprofessionals with well-defined roles and allot time in teachers' schedules to provide paraprofessionals with training and support (Brock & Anderson, 2021).

Guidelines for Practice

Investing in high-quality training programs and ongoing support is essential when utilizing paraprofessionals as job coaches in work-based learning programs. The following guidelines highlight key practices to consider when building training programs that promote improved post-secondary employment outcomes for students with disabilities.

- *Develop and implement comprehensive training programs* – Establish structured training programs that include both initial and ongoing support for paraprofessionals and incorporate practical, real-world training opportunities.

- **Integrate evidence-based practices into training curricula** – Emphasize the use of evidence-based-instructional strategies that job coaches can use to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.
- **Promote collaboration among teams** – Encourage a collaborative approach where paraprofessionals, teachers, and other related service providers can share best practices and support each other in their roles.
- **Address a wide range of topics** – Incorporate a broad range of content in job coach training programs to provide paraprofessionals with a comprehensive skill set (e.g., behavior management techniques, communication strategies, instructional support).

Additional Resources

Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE)

<https://www.acreducators.org/>

ACRE is a national organization for professionals who support individuals with disabilities to obtain employment.

ACRE Certification

<https://www.acreducators.org/competencies.html>

ACRE offers competency-based certification in employment services with the mission to improve the quality of employment services and outcomes for people with disabilities.

Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI)

<https://www.communityinclusion.org/onlinelearning/>

ICI offers a variety of online certification courses in job coaching that address a range of relevant topics.

References

- Brock, M. E., & Anderson, E. J. (2021). Training paraprofessionals who work with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities: What does the research say? *Psychology in the Schools, 58*(4), 702–722. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22386>
- Brock, M. E., Cannella-Malone, H. I., Schaefer, J. M., Page, E. J., Andzik, N. R., & Seaman, R. L. (2016). Efficacy of training job coaches to implement evidence-based instructional strategies. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 45*(3), 351–364. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-160835>
- Gilson, C. B., Thompson, C. G., Ingles, K. E., Stein, K. E., Wang, N., & Nygaard, M. A. (2021). The Job Coaching Academy for transition educators: A preliminary evaluation. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 44*(3), 148-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143420958607>

This research brief was developed by the Illinois Center for Transition and Work at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign through a contract with the Illinois State Board of Education. Information presented may not reflect the position or policy of the Illinois State Board of Education.

