

Sam is a 22-year-old with autism spectrum disorder whose aspiration has always been to be employed in the community. To achieve his goal, Sam attended an occupational academy prior to turning 22 where he received educational opportunities in independent living, social learning, vocational training, and applied academics. Thanks to thoughtful preparation and intervention by Sam's teacher and paraprofessionals, he has been employed at an urban farm in Chicago as a landscape associate for one year. Although Sam achieved his employment goal, he faced many barriers along the way. One such barrier that significantly impacted employability was his restricted patterns of behavior that centered around changes in his work schedule and daily routines.



Most work experiences Sam had at the academy were at a local urban farm working in horticulture. This seemed like a perfect fit for Sam because his grandfather was a farmer and Sam had interest and experience with farming. Although working at an urban farm

seemed like an ideal job for Sam, his difficulty with being flexible in the presence of change presented many challenges. One of those challenges was due to the unpredictability of his work schedule. In particular, when it rained, Sam was not able to go to work due to the weather's impact on the cultivation of plants. On those days, Sam participated in community-based instruction with other students at the academy.

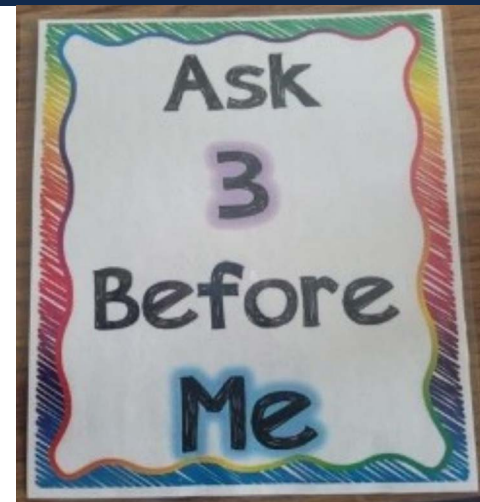
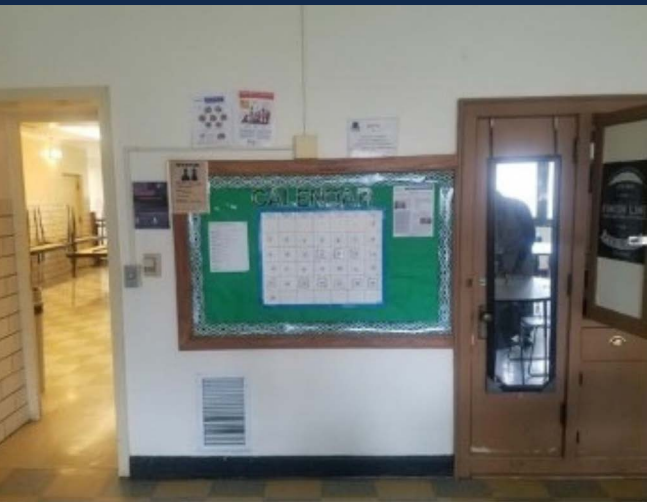
Unfortunately, the weather does not always give sufficient notice and therefore, there is little time to prepare for change. Like many teachers of students with autism, Sam's teacher tried to make each day as predictable as possible by providing visual supports using a classroom calendar. Each morning upon arriv-



ing at school, students were expected to check the calendar to determine their schedule for the day. This was helpful for most students; however, because of Sam's difficulty with being flexible in the presence of change, the calendar was not enough to reduce his anxiety and the stress such changes presented.

Upon arriving to school, if Sam did not see the work icon on the calendar, he became very anxious, which in turn caused him to perseverate on the change. Sam's perseverations were in the form of continuous questioning to process what was changing and why. Sam would ask the teacher and paraprofessional questions repeatedly such as where they were going since they couldn't go to work, why they weren't going to work, and what they were going to do about lunch. This type of questioning could last up to 20 minutes.

To help Sam cope with changes to his schedule, the teacher implemented several strategies. One strategy was *priming*. Priming involves preparing students



for a situation or task before it occurs. Every morning the teacher reminded Sam why changes occur to the schedule, when they may occur, and what to do when they do occur. A second strategy was to involve students in making changes to the schedule. For example, on days when students could not attend work due to the weather, the teacher had them identify various indoor places they could go in the community and decide collectively where they would go for the day. Once a location was selected, the teacher clarified the change in the schedule and the reason for the change. Although involving Sam in the decision-making process helped to reduce his anxiety, it did not eliminate the number of questions he asked. Therefore, the teacher implemented a third strategy called *Ask Three Before Me* to decrease the amount of dependence he had on the teacher for answering his questions. This strategy required Sam to ask three of his peers before he could ask the teacher. The strategy was not only used to simply answer questions, but also to encourage more peer interactions. In addition, this helped Sam to understand that the teacher would not always be there to answer his questions and he would have to learn to find other appropriate people to ask. When teaching Sam the *Ask Three Before Me* strategy the teacher modeled how to approach other students, which students to approach, and what questions to ask. Once Sam learned the strategy and became more comfortable asking his peers questions, the teacher monitored his progress by occasionally sabotaging the

schedule (i.e., mixing up the icons of work and community) to test his ability to implement the strategies he learned to cope with change.

Because of the three strategies (i.e., priming, involving students in making changes, ask three before me), Sam was able to overcome his major barrier to employment—flexibility. Today Sam is thriving in his career as a landscape associate. He works 4–5-hour shifts, 3–5 days per week. Sam’s employer is very proud of his accomplishments as well as his strong work ethic. In fact, his employer states that he is timely, respectful, and can perform all tasks he is given. Helping students overcome barriers to employment is not an easy task. However, as seen in Sam’s case, with the right supports in place students can successfully gain and maintain employment.

### Additional Resources

Ask Three Before Me Strategy  
[careervision.org/backwards-planning-great-strategy-find-hard-get-started](https://careervision.org/backwards-planning-great-strategy-find-hard-get-started)

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