

Karen Wolffe's Advice on Career Education

Three Things Parents Should Know About Career Education

First of all, the importance of having children do chores around the house to instill in them the appreciation for their connectedness to the family, their responsibility to the family, for them to feel like they're making a contribution to the family. So, the first thing I always think about is chores and the fact that we're teaching both responsibility and that connectedness to the family through the introduction of chores.

The second thing I think that parents can do to help children learn about careers and preparing for the world beyond school is to help them explore the world of work. And it really starts at home with an understanding of what your mother does, what your father does, what your relatives in the extended family do, the kinds of work that they do—and not just the name of the work, but what's involved in that work? What do you really do during the day? What kinds of tools do you use? What kind of uniform or costume do you wear? What software programs do you work with? All of what's related in a job. What you like about it, what you don't like about it and then, to build beyond that, into the neighborhood.

What are the neighbors doing? What kind of work do they do? What activities are they engaged in that tell you as an adult about the kind of work that they do and whether they like it or don't like it. And then, from the neighborhood, into the community. And what are the jobs that your child is going to need to learn about to really understand what's going on in the community. And first it's the community jobs that you encounter in your daily lives. The doctor, the nurse, the receptionist, the dentist, the people that you meet at the grocery store—what are they doing? What other kinds of jobs are they—to make that a part of the running commentary that you'll always be sharing with your child who's visually impaired about what's going on. But to complement that with what's going on in terms of work and the careers that people have.

And then, finally, in this area I think about the importance that parents can contribute in terms of making connections to role models—to adults—adults who are blind or visually impaired who are successfully working, successfully living, engaged in the kinds of activities that we want to see their children engaged in ultimately. It's important for the children—it's also important for the parents—to see those successfully employed blind, visually impaired adults. To see how they're living their lives. How they're managing. The tools that they're using, the techniques that they're using, and to learn from them what you can be doing in the home, to support the child's evolution into a successfully employed adult.

What Can Families Do at Home to Support Career Education Skills?

How can parents and other family members support their child's acquisition of skills related to career education and what would you like to ask families to do at home?

First, always expect the child with visual impairment to do the same kinds of activities that their same-aged peers are doing both socially, academically, avocationally, and then ultimately vocationally. The kinds of part time jobs their peers are doing, the kinds of volunteer work their peers are doing, extracurricular activities—the expectation should be that that child with the visual

impairment will absolutely do what that same-aged peer will do unless there's some limitations that inhibit that or prohibit it from being realistic.

The second thing I think of is to always encourage children to dream. They shouldn't try to restrict to reality children's dreams. Children should dream about becoming the next president of the United States or being a famous basketball or baseball star or being an actress or an actor or a musician. Children need to dream. They need to dream big, and they need to act out their dreams through fantasy, through play. To play the part of the teacher. To play the part of the doctor. To play the part of an astronaut or a president. They need to have that opportunity to dream and play it out.

And then as they get older, we understand that there's an important need to be more realistic as we get older. And the way to make that happen is to encourage children to start researching, to asking questions of the people who are doing those things that they think they might like to do—either writing them or e-mailing them or calling them on the phone or actually going to visit them and saying, "Well, what does it take to be an actress?" or "What does it take to be a musician?" or "What does it take to be an athlete?" To find out what the reality is, what the innate skills and the learned skills are that set the stage for people to either be successful going into a career or not. And then to actually encourage children to start doing work that's like what they think they want to do so that they can find out what they really like about it and what they don't like about it.

And then finally, I would say, in this area, one of the most important things that parents can do is to encourage their children—and support their children—in doing things outside of the home. Being a volunteer. Doing community service. Being a casual worker. Doing things like babysitting for the neighbors, or pet sitting for the neighbors. Or washing cars at a church car wash. Or being the volunteer ticket taker at an event that's happening. To get outside of the house and to contribute and to work because we learn about work through working.

What Can Professionals Do to Help Parents Reinforce Career Education Skills?

What do you believe that professionals should do to help parents teach and reinforce career education at the home, in the school, and in the community?

I think that parents need professionals to reinforce career education activities at home, and at school and in the community. And that the way that we support that is to really establish first of all, and maintain, a positive rapport. To reach out to parents, to let parents understand that we, as professionals, want and need their support. We need to engage them and help them understand what it is that we are doing at school, find out what it is that they are doing at home, and work collaboratively to support each other, to reinforce the skills that are being learned at home, in school, and to support the skills that are learned in school in an applied setting at home. So, establishing and maintaining that positive rapport.

That we ask parents, "What are the skills that you would like to see us teaching your child?" Not assume that we know everything, but to reach out to parents and say what's important to you? What would you like to see me doing? What would you like me to be working on? What do you think is most important for your child to be successful in your home, in your community and beyond school? And find out from parents so we can address their concerns, not just tell them.

I think we need to really support parents. If they're concerned at all about some of the activities that we recommend—I'm constantly talking about doing chores, for example. It's important to find out

from parents, are they comfortable with what we're asking them to do? And if they're not, to be prepared to go into the home and teach the skills—the same skill sets that we're teaching the children, teach the parents. So that they understand those alternative techniques that we teach as vision teachers. And not think that it's some kind of magic or mystery that they can't possibly learn because they didn't attend a college course in that. So we go in and we teach them, and I think that is one of the things that professionals have a responsibility to do.

And then I think we need to share with parents about the importance—always—of focusing on the next environment, which is how we help parents understand that career education doesn't suddenly just happen at age 14, 15, 16. Our instruction begins with them at home, bonding with the child, communicating with the child, teaching the child the organizational skills that they use at home, teaching the child the ordering of the schedule that happens at home.

All of those things that we want to be happening, we need to reinforce and let the parents understand that that next environment is always just right outside of the current situation. So, when the child came home from the hospital, that was a transition. That next environment went from hospital to home. When the child goes from home into that early childhood program, that early childhood program becomes the next environment, and at home you're preparing for that. From pre-school into elementary, you're preparing.

You're learning skills that are going to help you be successful in that next environment. And that notion of always planning for the next environment is a notion that I think we have to share with parents and help them understand the importance of that concept for them to really understand career education and how career education is a lifelong process—starting from birth and always working towards that next environment.

We give parents the instruction that they need in order to provide good home-based training and application of skills that the students have learned. And then finally, in this area I always think about the importance of helping parents understand the difference between early intervention, school-based services (K through 12), and adult services, because I think that they are so radically different. And parents often become complacent about the kinds of services that they are receiving at a juncture, like middle school, thinking that that's the way it's always going to be, and the reality is—as we know from a professional perspective—is that it's going to change and it's going to change radically, and we need to prepare parents for that change.

What Are the Benefits of a Parent/Professional Collaboration on Building Career Education Skills?

I believe that the benefits of a parent/professional collaboration related to Expanded Core Curriculum are that we can always do more together than we can ever—any one of us—do separately. And so the beauty of having parents as partners is that we can team up and work on the same skills, reinforcing those skills, encouraging those skills, asking children to apply the skills in different settings at different times with different instructional commands, so that we're much more likely to get generalization.

If children learn skills in isolation, if we teach a skill in a classroom, or we teach a skill on the playground, and it's never reinforced or encouraged or referenced outside of that environment, the chances are it's not going to be maintained and very unlikely that it will be generalized out beyond that environment where we first taught.

So the first and most important thing I think is that we can just do so much more together than ever do separately that it just makes perfect sense to team up. When we work together, parents and professionals, we have the opportunity to reinforce skills in natural environments. It's very difficult as a professional to teach a skill without having that natural environment readily accessible. So, for example, if I want to teach cooking, and I'm teaching that at school, it's always going to be on the school's stove top. Whereas if I have a collaboration with the parents, maybe I would also have that opportunity to go into the home and teach cooking on the stove top where that skill is likely to re-occur. So that notion of natural environment is a very important piece.

And then my last comment in this area would be that happy, satisfied parents make for happy, satisfied children who make for happy, satisfied educators.