

Job satisfaction

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A two-week spell of work experience for one young girl with Down syndrome provided an opportunity for her to learn and grow from the new challenges she faced



When my daughter Charlotte was ready to move on to her next school at the age of 13 it was a decision not to be taken lightly. She was moving from a school of approximately 200 pupils to a large comprehensive middle school in Dorset with over 1,600 pupils. Like many parents in a similar situation, I wasn't sure what to expect, but I also had many other aspects to consider because of Charlotte's disability. She was also the first

student with Down syndrome to be taught at this school. It was because Charlotte was so passionate about going there with her friends that I tried to keep an open mind, and we decided to take a chance!

The past two years have proved that this was indeed the right decision. Charlotte quickly settled into a routine, made new friends and continues to love her teachers, teaching assistants and her life at Gillingham School. The expectations of the staff are high and Charlotte is encouraged to learn in a caring and supportive environment. She really likes going on all the school trips, which have included weekends and a whole week away from home, organised for her year group.

Finding the work!

In Year 10, students enjoy a two-week period of work experience near the end of the summer term. Placements are usually found by the student with help from their parents. Students then prepare their CVs to send to prospective employers. Charlotte was expected to do this and was treated no differently to the other students.

When I discussed with Charlotte where she might like to work

she suggested the police and the newsagent. Choosing the police was not really surprising as her favourite TV programme has, for a long time, been *The Bill!* The handcuffs and police hat are regularly in use and she can rattle off your 'rights' when she arrests you for, say, 'a breach of the peace or on suspicion of murder....'

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Even though the odds were against this choice, I decided to give it a try and so we visited the local police station together to make enquiries. We were advised to write to the Chief Constable for Dorset police to see if anything could be arranged within their community outreach programme. At the same time I arranged for Charlotte to work in the local post office and newsagent. When Charlotte said she wanted to work at the local newsagent it seemed, at the time, quite natural as her sister Emily did her work experience

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there two years earlier. Isn't this the sort of thing younger siblings often do, taking the lead from an older brother's or sister's experience? What is more profound is that even though Charlotte has Down syndrome she was able to make that choice herself!

When Dorset Police offered Charlotte a two-day placement she was absolutely thrilled. Mind you, I had to labour the point that she would not be arresting any criminals, and the handcuffs were definitely staying at home!

A happy experience

During her two weeks' work experience she organised herself, arranged her clothes the night before, got up in good time, and went off to work where she made daily notes about what she did. In the post office and newsagent this included pricing items, filling shelves, packing goods behind the counter, making drinks, going on a paper round with a member of staff. She even spent a day behind the post office counter, under supervision. She chatted politely to the customers which prompted one customer to tell of a family member with Down syndrome who also had a job in a newsagent.

The two days spent working with Dorset Police were also very positive. Charlotte was welcomed by the Section Commander and was supervised at all times by PC Maureen Hayward. She did some administrative duties in the station, went out in the police car, (the highlight of her two weeks!) visited neighbourhood watch co-ordinators and also went to another police station where she was shown the cells (empty at the time!).

Everyone was so very kind and helpful and provided my daughter with opportunities that many parents might think were out of reach for our children. During

these two weeks, Charlotte gained more independence, took more responsibility for her own needs and grew in maturity, which is most important. And I learned something too... that no matter what age or stage of development, our children must be provided with the same opportunities that their peer groups enjoy. They must be given a chance to experience things first hand, and to take from these experiences what they can. Believe me they will surprise us – as my daughter continues to do!

Gillingham School carries on providing Charlotte with practical ways to further her development, and more work experience with the local branch of Waitrose supermarket has been arranged. She is now working every Thursday morning at the store until the end of the Summer term 2006. This morning she went off to school with her uniform, excited at the prospect of going to work!

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some transition resources

Transition to Employment (2006). Angus Capie, Anna Contardi and Diane Doehring. The Down Syndrome Educational Trust.

Access to Education - Experiences of Transition (2006). Jane Beadman. Available from the Down's Syndrome Association at <http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/>

Get Down on It! (DVD on inclusion in the workplace). English version, originally produced in the Netherlands in 2000). Available from: <http://www.downsyndroom.nl/>. See page 33 for more details.



Mere Post Office



Gillingham Police Station



Waitrose