
FAMILIES: A SUBJECT FOR VOCATIONAL EVALUATOR TRAINING

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Abstract

The trend towards home and family as a resource for care for disabled individuals means that vocational evaluators will need to prepare themselves to interact well with families, particularly when a member is in transition from the school to the community and from childhood to adulthood. The paper is based on the premise that vocational evaluators can facilitate a successful rehabilitation outcome if they are sensitive to family needs and develop positive interactions with family members.

Rehabilitation personnel need to learn more about working with families with adult children who have a disability (Johnson & Atkins, 1987; Power & Dell Orto, 1986). The vocational evaluator in rehabilitation who interacts with families and children throughout the process of assessment and life planning will be the subject of this paper. A vocational evaluation professional can be a key player in the transition of children and families from school to the community (Clark & Knowlton, 1987; Stodden, 1986).

Definitions

Family will be defined in a functional and conceptual manner according to Karpel and Strauss (1983), who state:

Often, when we speak of families, we are referring to the group of persons living together in the household, the persons who see one another daily and coordinate the chores of shared living. This is the functional family. In other cases, the term "family" is meant to imply long-term, in fact, essentially lifelong, relationships based on mutual commitments. (pp. 4-5)

The first definition is useful for an evaluator because it is applicable to children who live with responsible adults that may not be birth parents. The second definition is important because it acknowledges the fact that families continue to be families once a child becomes an adult. Children with significant developmental delay or multiple physical disabilities are likely to remain in the family home as adults when school is completed and they are a unique subgroup of adult children. Rehabilitation will be defined functionally, as stated by Wright (1980):

...the provision of any kind of service provided individuals to correct, avoid, or compensate for their handicapping problems. (p. 8)

For the purposes of this paper, vocational evaluation personnel will include certified and noncertified professional performing vocational assessment and related rehabilitation services in schools, agencies and private practice.

Need for Training

The need for vocational assessment, related services and parent or caregiver involvement is increasing as a result of Federal legislative activity in education and rehabilitation. Power and Dell Orto (1986) proposed that specific curriculum changes in rehabilitation counselor training be made to accommodate the trend towards increased interaction with families. The authors described the content of an elective course on the role of the family in rehabilitation available at Boston University and the University of Maryland. Family studies need to be developed for training vocational evaluation personnel as well. Course content might include family systems theory, the concept of family life cycles, the impact of work on the family, and techniques for improving

professional and parent interaction.

Family Studies

The implications of family systems theory for rehabilitation were addressed by Cottone, Handelsman and Walters (1986). The authors defined systems theory as a theory of relationships, the smallest relationship being a "dyad" of two people. With this perspective individuals, families and problems are studied in a social context. Behavior is assumed to be the result of the circular or dynamic relationships between people. The individual with a disability is not viewed as an isolated person in systems theory; he is seen as having an influence on family life and the family is seen as influencing him.

The concept of family life cycles is promising for the study of families with disabled members, particularly when applied to the transition from school back to the community at large. The stages in the life cycle are marriage, birth, individuation of the children, individuation of the adolescents, departure of the children, and aging and death of the parents (Karpel & Strauss, 1983). The later stages are especially relevant for evaluators who desire to understand more about the difficulties that families encounter as they develop over time. When children are old enough to leave home, normal family issues of independence and separation can be more difficult to resolve if a member has a disability and lives at home as an adult.

Families can influence the successful outcome of rehabilitation, including the attainment of vocational goals (Cottone, Handelsman & Walters, 1986; Wright, 1980). Likewise, the employment or unemployment of one or more breadwinners influences a family and makes it more vulnerable to changes in society (Karpel & Strauss, 1983). Society and work are neither static or benign, so the change associated with work and society can be threatening to families with disabled members (Linari & Belmont, 1986). Vocational evaluation is synonymous with the concept of work; the results of an assessment can be threatening to a family or the results can clarify the role that the family can play in vocational development.

Families and Disability

Disability affects family life even from birth (Perske, 1973). The fear, mourning and issues of independence that families experience when a child becomes disabled through birth or trauma erupt throughout life, particularly when there is a transition from home to school, from school to work, or in some cases, from school to home. If vocational assessment results are presented to a family and the evaluator is not sensitive to the fact that that adjustment to a disability for a caregiver is an ongoing process, that evaluator can become a negative factor in family adjustment. The author has observed families in crisis over transitional issues in private practice and as a vocational evaluator in the school system. Several examples of family problems made worse by evaluators

poorly prepared to work with families have been described to the author by two Southern state-wide parent groups.

For the purpose of illustration consider the case of a woman in her 40's with an intact marriage who is seeking vocational services for a 22 year old son with cerebral palsy, who uses a wheel chair for mobility and a communication board and dictionary to "speak". The mother has worked since her son entered kindergarten and he is a young man, no longer eligible for school services. If the mother is abruptly told by rehabilitation personnel that her son has no vocational options and no other alternatives are made available to her, practical care problems and personal frustration can become overwhelming. The parent may be a competent, stable individual, but she and her family will deal with issues that are unique because of disability, in addition to the issues that all families need to resolve when children grow up. The unique factors in this case are: whether home care is economically feasible for the son, whether the mother will have to quit work or get a second job to provide care, whether the child will regress physically, socially or emotionally without the consistent stimulation and services provided at school, whether the son can develop more independence, and whether the son will be happy.

If the same mother is abruptly told that as a result of assessment, there are indicators that the son can work, issues worthy of concern will not be eliminated. A parent may have justifiably mixed feelings about work. The economy changes and the parent may be unsure about their child's ability to retrain for jobs if a job is lost (Linari & Belmont, 1986). Employment programs for people with disabilities are still quite dependent on State and Federal funds and the programs vary in quality and availability and parents are increasingly aware of that. If an individual receives Social Security benefits, income from work can interrupt the steady though limited income to the family. Transportation duties are often transferred to the family when a person leaves school, purchasing and maintaining fully equipped vehicles can be too expensive.

Family Involvement

It is a gross oversimplification for evaluators to perceive a parent as "for work" or "against work". Family reactions are much more complex and an evaluator needs to understand that because the family will be instrumental in achieving or abandoning habilitation or rehabilitation. It is constructive to view the family as a legitimate resource in providing rehabilitation services (Cook & Ferritor, 1985). An evaluator can facilitate positive family behavior when vocational plans are discussed informally or within mandated meetings for Individualized Education Plans (IEP) or Individual Written Rehabilitation Plans (IWRP).

The literature on improving IEP parental involvement cites practical and reasonable techniques which are applicable to the vocational evaluation process. Some of the IEP

methods recommended by de Bettencourt (1986) include:

1. Hold discussions in small rooms with minimal distractions.
2. Start and stop meetings on time.
3. Set chairs so that people can see each other easily; do not use a desk.
4. Take care to make sure you understand parents and that they understand you.

The author recommends that evaluators consider additional methods for productive family contacts:

- A. Inform families about what vocational evaluation consists of in your locale and differentiate it from psychological and educational testing.
- B. Identify whether family and neighborhood resources for work are available before making final written recommendations.
- C. Address the family member by name; avoid using "Mom", "Dad", "Guardian", or "You".
- D. Make available to parents an up to date hand-out of local vocational and pre-vocational services, parent support groups and independent living resources.
- E. Ask family members how they feel, particularly how they feel about work or a lack of work for their adult child. If families demonstrate signs of severe stress, do not hesitate to suggest family therapy and support services from qualified professionals and parent organizations.

Discussion

Vocational evaluators need to learn more about working with families in order to facilitate the successful habilitation or rehabilitation of clients. This is especially true for evaluators who assess individuals with disabilities who have grown up and are leaving school for life in the community, yet remain at home with the family. Further research and graduate level elective coursework in family systems and family cycles are recommended. Vocational evaluators can become more sophisticated about the role and reactions of families in the process of transition and increase the potential for positive communication and productive activity in rehabilitation.

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