

Strategies for IPS Specialists to Partner with Family Members



Employment Center

Answers to questions IPS specialists often have about family members and natural supports, and how to include them in IPS

What would a working person say about their employment experience and how family involvement matters to them?

[To watch a video about this topic with Debbie Homan, click here](#)

Working people often credit their family and loved ones with providing critical support and encouragement towards their employment success.

Some things shared by working people about their family support include:

- Family members are often seen as extensions of the person's treatment team.
- Family members offer encouragement and help to build the confidence of the person as they pursue work and hold a job.
- Family members and other natural supports can be there to celebrate even the "small wins" to help the person continue along their path to employment success.
- Family members begin to see the person in a different and positive light when they go to work.
- "Family" doesn't have to be limited to blood relatives.
- Coworkers can serve as supports just as significantly as others in the person's life.
- Family members can reinforce the value of the person having structure, reliability, earning power, responsibility and social connection through work.
- Family members often support individuals by helping them remain organized with things like employment paperwork, interview appointments and work schedules.
- Family members can provide ongoing encouragement, even when the person is having a hard time. Knowing the family "is not giving up on me" can motivate the person to work through difficulties and continue toward their goals.

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What do family members say about being included in the employment and education process with their loved one?

To watch a video with Tara Alley about this topic as it pertains to young adults, [click here](#)

To watch a video with Warren Taylor about this topic as it pertains to adults in IPS, [click here](#)

Some IPS specialists are unsure exactly how family members can be helpful and supportive to participants pursuing work and/or school.

From the perspectives of actual family members, some points to keep in mind are:

- Look at family members as a resource and support. They can add valuable information to the career profile and job search.
- Gently ask the young adult about who they are most comfortable having involved in their IPS experience. Ask open-ended questions and use reflections to understand how the young adult sees their relationships and to learn who they tend to trust and lean on the most.
- Offer concrete ideas to the person about how family can support them in work or school, such as:
 - Assistance to obtain and/or access needed identification documentation
 - Help with resume development and job applications
 - Support obtaining clothes for job interviews and starting work
 - Providing rides to and from work or school
 - Giving wake-up calls
 - Offering reminders about medications and mental health appointments
 - Helping to open checking or savings accounts
 - Providing encouragement toward goal attainment
- Invite family members to participate on IPS steering committees, or to speak at events to educate others about supporting people in IPS and the value of work to a person's recovery.
- Examine any biases you may have about involving family. Talk them through with your supervisor and coworkers.
- Work on your skills for conflict negotiation and problem-solving. Practice facilitating collaborative discussions and shared decision-making.

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What are some strategies I can use to help job seekers think about family and people in their lives who could be included in their IPS process?

To watch a video about this topic with Rachel Hoard and Darby Remley, [click here](#)

Sometimes, IPS participants have lost touch with relatives, due to difficulty dealing with symptoms of their illness or even due to behavioral problems related to illness or substance use. They may be at a loss for identifying people who can be natural supports.

Some ways you might encourage their thinking around this are:

- Talk about how involving someone important to them in their IPS process can give them extra support, bringing an important perspective to employment planning, and providing people with whom to celebrate successes. Share that the reason for a broad definition of “family” is in order to identify support. It’s like pulling in an extra set of eyes and ears to help you look for work.
- Help them explore other ways to define “family,” pointing out that the definition can include people who are not blood relatives. Help them think about neighbors, friends or previous coworkers, and how they define ‘support’ for themselves. Ask, “Who else do you know, or who would recognize/know you from your comings and goings in the community? Stores you frequent, or coffee shops where you like to go? What about church attendance, AA or NA groups, or other community groups?”
- Ask the question, “When you get a job, who will be the first person you will want to call?”
- When it comes to youth, help them think about “mentors” or “brothers and sisters in care.”
- Sometimes people who have experienced homelessness will identify a “street family.” Help people think about who they’ve connected with if they’ve had time in shelters or living unhoused.
- Suggest ideas for re-connecting with loved ones if contact has been limited but the person wishes to have them involved.

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I am not sure how suggest or plan “family” engagement with my clients.

To watch a video about this topic with Kim Gable and Olivia Jennings, [click here](#)

It can be difficult to bring together participants and people who can be natural supports for them as they go to work. Thinking ahead about a meeting is a good way for you and the IPS participant to feel comfortable and confident.

- Help the individual understand what “natural support” means-- this is someone who is an advocate for them. It could be a friend, family member, church member, past co-worker or a neighbor.
- Assist the individual to develop a list of people, rather than just asking them who they have in their life.
- Give some specific ideas about what a natural support person can do for them. For example, in the event that something happens at work when the IPS Specialist is not available, this person might be available to listen and allow them to decompress.
- When developing a job support plan, have the person take it home with them and share with people they know. This can spark a conversation about how they can be a support for something the person needs while working.
- Use your supervisor to role play, ask them what tips they have for engaging family and what thoughts they have about meeting with people.
- Invite those identified to a meeting in a place where they would be comfortable in their own community, and at a convenient time for them.
- If possible, include light refreshments at the meeting.
- Open with a warm greeting and brief introduction of the purpose for coming together.
- Ask each person to share a strength about the person who is participating in IPS.
- Invite the “family” to share their thoughts as well as concerns about the person working. Use active listening skills and reflections and validate what they share. Then invite everyone to brainstorm together around how to avoid any past problems or how to manage potential barriers that have been brought up. For example, if someone is concerned the person may relapse if they go to work, generate ideas for addressing this possibility.
- Ask those present how each might specifically support the person in their working life. For example, could they help with transportation or by reminding the person to take their medications.
- Thank everyone for attending and being a part of the process. Think together about next steps that feel comfortable to everyone.

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Someone I'm working with has a history of justice involvement, and they say they've burned bridges with their family. How can I help?

To watch a video about this topic with Karla Jones, [click here](#)

People with justice involvement sometimes lose touch with family and significant others, or their relationships become damaged due to their behaviors. Helping them think about people who can support their work experiences is important.

- Invite conversation about their life since incarceration. Where have they spent their time? With whom have they come in contact? Are there people with whom they have now become comfortable?
- Help expand their thinking around who could be considered supports...roommates? Neighbors? AA or NA sponsors? Probation officers? Church members or pastors? Give examples of ways that different people could be involved and helpful to the job search or maintaining a job.
- Gently approach discussion of those with whom they feel the relationship has been damaged. Now that they are receiving support from IPS, would it be worthwhile to reach out to any of those individuals, advocating for their involvement in the person's efforts to create a more positive path for themselves?
- Offer to facilitate a meeting with anyone the person is willing to include. Plan an agenda together to include some explanation about IPS, discussion of the person's aspirations for employment, and ideas for needed support, such as ideas for jobs, network connections, transportation help or positive encouragement.
- Invite family input respectfully. With the person's consent, include family in planning meetings to share insights on strengths, work history, and support needs.
- Educate family on the IPS model. Help family members understand the principles of IPS, especially its focus on rapid employment, integration with mental health services, and individualized support. Emphasize the strengths-based approach.
- As a way to help develop supports, think about contacts in your own network who you might introduce to the person. For example, community interest groups, local support groups, training programs or interest-based classes.
- Address fears and misconceptions. Help families understand how employment can reduce recidivism, improve mental health, and promote independence—countering common fears about relapse or job loss.
- Maintain Flexibility: Recognize that some family relationships may be strained or complex—include only those the individual identifies as supportive.

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I'm working with someone who wants to get a job, but their parents worry that they will lose benefits and then have a hard time getting them back. What can I do?

To watch a role play video about this topic with Sharon Darnell and Cathy Epperson, [click here](#)

It's common for family members of an IPS participant to be concerned that they might lose their Social Security and other benefits if they start working. IPS specialists often must address those concerns as part of the IPS process.

A few tips for this are:

- Educate yourself, the IPS participant and the family. Learn about how working affects benefits like SSI, SSDI, Medicaid, or housing assistance. Understanding the rules helps reduce fear and misinformation.
- Connect with a benefits counselor. Help the person to meet with a certified benefits planner or community work incentives coordinator (CWIC) to get personalized guidance. Invite the CWIC to provide education to the vocational and clinical teams, as well.
- Support small steps. Reinforce that part-time work can be a good way to start without risking full loss of benefits.
- Respect the person's autonomy and dignity to make their own choices. Advocate with the family for their goals while also sharing accurate and comprehensive information.
- Help navigate systems. Offer support with paperwork, appointments, or transportation, rather than discouraging work out of fear. Talk with family members about ways they too, can support the person to work and manage their benefits situation.
- Reinforce the value of work. Focus on the emotional, social, and developmental benefits of employment, not just the financial aspects.
- Monitor changes together. Offer multiple opportunities to talk with the CWIC and the IPS specialist. Help track income, report it properly, and understand how benefits may adjust over time to avoid surprises.
- Build a support network. Encourage connections with peers or mentors who have successfully navigated working while receiving benefits. Support family members in the same way, connecting them with others who have related experience.

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Sometimes family members have different ideas about employment goals than the person in IPS. What tips do you have for handling conversations about that?

To watch a video about this topic with Kari Olson Lleva, [click here](#)

It can be challenging to navigate conversations between IPS participants and their significant others when there is disagreement about whether they should work, what type of work they should do, or how many hours they should work. You want to develop rapport and trust with the family or significant others, while also honoring and advocating for the preferences of the person you're serving.

Some tips for dealing with this kind of situation are:

- Think about convening the group around a round table, versus a square or rectangle one. This may help with decreasing an adversarial feeling.
- Invite the family/significant others to express their concerns and listen without judgement. Use active listening skills. Validate what they share, and their thoughts about employment goals.
- Show respect, recognizing they may have been through some painful experiences with the participant, due to symptom exacerbation or crises. Remember, they have their own lived experience, too. Keep in mind that the family member/loved one likely knows the person better than you do.
- Support the participant to voice their ideas and thoughts about their employment goals.
- Validate all perspectives and invite collaborative discussion of what is possible for the person, ways to mitigate potential problems or to avoid issues that occurred in the past.
- Support the IPS participant to make the ultimate decision of which direction they go.
- Think about whether it may be better to have separate conversations with the participant and their significant other, and then come back together. Only do this if you have the person's permission.

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What are some ways I can respond when family members fear someone with a substance use history might relapse if they go to work?

Many family members and significant others who care about someone with a substance use disorder express concerns that working could lead to relapse. The potential stressors of being on a job or the allure of having money in their pocket could pose triggers. As a result, they are not always supportive of the person going to work.

Some ways to approach this include:

- Listen carefully and without judgement to what family members share. Try to understand where they are coming from. Validate their concerns and perspectives. Acknowledge fear and anxiety, or ambivalence about the person working.
- Ask questions about the person's past experiences. What has helped them maintain sobriety in the past? What things have triggered substance use for them? What ideas do they have for supports to help the person to be successful?
- Share the following:
 - "Some people find that structure and getting paid enhances their life and is helpful as part of their recovery. We work with clinicians who refer people to us for employment support. Work is considered to be part of the journey."
 - "Relapse is possible whether working or not. Structuring one's time often lessens the chance for relapse versus increasing it."
 - "There is data that supports a person being engaged in employment and the benefits of working on their recovery."
 - "Team support is available – there are a lot of people in the person's corner. Support from the team can include therapy, budgeting assistance, advocacy with the person's supervisor, or help identifying positive and sober workplaces as well as social outlets/activities to complement their working life."
 - "Zero exclusion means no one is excluded from IPS services due to substance use. If there is a setback, it won't be the end of the world. We will still support them."
- Encourage the family to offer words of affirmation to the person, to be hopeful, and to acknowledge their efforts to meet their goals.
- Let the family members know about resources available to support them as they are supporting the person in their recovery.