

Benefits of Self-Employment for Youth and Adults with Disabilities



By **Jagmeet Kaur Sangha, BCBA**

It's undeniable that individuals with disabilities face greater challenges in finding and retaining employment. These challenges can hinder their success in securing a preferred job, whether due to physical or mental limitations. In some cases, employers may fail to recognize the unique strengths and abilities that these individuals bring to the table.

However, recent data from the U.S. Department of Labor (2023) offers a glimmer of hope. It reveals a promising trend in business ownership among people with disabilities. The report highlights that around 9.5% of individuals with disabilities are self-employed business owners, a rate significantly higher than 6.1% among people without disabilities. This suggests that individuals with disabilities are more likely to embrace entrepreneurship, creating

their own opportunities rather than relying on traditional employment.

Owning a business can eliminate many of the common barriers faced in the job market, such as the struggle of job searching, conforming to workplace culture, and working in environments that may not be ideal.

The benefits of self-employment are clear: entrepreneurs can set their hours, create an environment that plays to their strengths, and ultimately design a career path that allows them to thrive. For individuals with disabilities, this offers a unique opportunity to focus on their specific talents and skills, which are often distinctive and highly valuable. If you build it, they will come!

“Owning a business can eliminate many of the common barriers faced in the job market, such as the struggle of job searching, conforming to workplace culture, and working in environments that may not be ideal.”

But when and how should families start exploring entrepreneurship opportunities for their children?

Exploring entrepreneurship

Caroline De Vega, a dedicated mother, is actively supporting the independence of her daughter, Polly, and other local youth by providing hands-on job training through the pop-up café she runs out of her garage. This unique initiative offers valuable work experience while fostering entrepreneurship skills and helping young people gain confidence and independence in a real-world setting.

In an interview with Caroline, she shared what inspired her to start Polly's Café, its mission, and some general tips for families interested in starting something similar.

It was Polly who inspired me to start this endeavor. Our story centers on how she interacts with her environment (home and community). Each child can learn, and we, as adults, are responsible for instilling the core values that will empower a child to contribute to our society. Polly has a genetic condition called DiGeorge syndrome, as well as a diagnosis of autism and sensory processing disorder, and a diagnosis of epilepsy. She uses a non-verbal form of communication through her augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device. These things can make it seem already daunting to think about the future, but Polly's Café is all about meeting individuals where they are.

How do you see Polly's Café helping Polly develop essential skills for her future, and what specific skills are you hoping she will gain from this experience?

By providing Polly with a structured environment, she can easily navigate the workstation, knowing I am there to support her independence. Emotional regulation can be

challenging among teens, but Polly knows what she can and cannot do, how much she can handle, and has access to her sensory/self-regulation tools when needed.

More than just the basic skills of taking orders using the AAC device, making simple coffee using the Keurig machine, restocking supplies, and cleaning and organizing workstations, I am more focused on character building. Core values such as patience in learning how to operate a machine, perseverance in finishing a task, respect towards peer workers, and prioritizing commitment to work are at the core of this endeavor, hence our tagline: “Serving Ordinary Coffee with an Extraordinary Heart.”

What main goals do you hope to achieve with Polly's Café beyond offering job training?

Our mission is to provide an inclusive environment where individuals with and without autism (and special needs) are empowered to train and work together to serve the community.



Our vision is to create a community that values neurodiversity with respect and dignity through a culture of awareness, acceptance, and action.

Every barista in the cafe can be encouraged to create their cafe with their families' support and personalize it, for example, Balian's Cafe or Donovan's Cafe. Polly's Cafe is an educational space that empowers people in the



community to reconsider thinking about having a diagnosis as something limiting or wrong; rather, it is the baseline of doing something good for others.


How have the local youth, including Polly, responded to the opportunity to gain hands-on experience through the café? Have you seen any personal or professional growth in them?

We are in our pioneering adventure to work with individuals who are primarily non-verbal or have some vocals as well, and honestly, Polly has enjoyed being around her teen friends, Baristas Donovan, Balian, and Keira. They can take turns serving coffee with our support as Barista Moms (Anh, Ria, and Michele). Seeing their smiles when they receive their guests' affirmations is priceless. They feel valued and worthy and that they matter. Their self-confidence grows, and they enjoy doing their tasks. When their unique potentials are celebrated, they can dream big for themselves.



Jagmeet Kaur Sangha, BCBA is a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst. For over a decade, Jagmeet has worked in homes and schools, providing applied behavior analysis (ABA) services to children, supporting educators, and offering parent training consultations to caregivers. She is invested in educating the community and helping families and individuals receive top-quality behavior intervention services. Jagmeet uses the science of ABA to promote well-being and advance individuals, organizations, and society through connection, education, and behavior science.

Her organization, Behavior Pivot Consulting, works with employees and employers to create neuro-inclusive communities within the workplace by focusing on identifying and building on individual strengths, promoting self-advocacy, and offering person-centered solutions related to workplace wellness.

 www.behaviorpivot.com

 info@behaviorpivot.com

How do you plan to expand or evolve Polly's Café? Are there any specific projects or initiatives you're hoping to implement?

In the future, we hope to be an after-school or adult-day program for our children. We want to educate, not just exist. We plan to continue our pop-up booths at different local marketplace events in the community, partner up with a local restaurant to hold Autism Awareness and Acceptance events, and host holiday events. We have featured young bakers like Haley's Delights in our pop-up booths, and we plan to continue to promote an inclusive space where typically developing youth like Haley can be peers with our children. Our dream is big; perhaps a food truck or an actual space for Polly's Cafe? Why not?!

What advice would you give other parents or community members interested in starting similar initiatives to promote youth entrepreneurship and independence?

My advice is to follow your child's lead. Polly nodded "yes" when I asked if she wanted to become a business owner. She created the menu using her AAC device: coffee, hot chocolate, tea, and, of course, desserts like donuts, cookies, and cupcakes. She picked her own logo out of the three samples I created. Her "voice" matters to me, and she knows her main purpose is to serve her community. Another thing is to know you cannot do it on your own. Bring your closest friends in and collaborate. Work on their strengths and build them up as well.

We hope this article has inspired you and your family to explore employment opportunities for your loved one from a fresh and innovative perspective. To get more tips and ideas, contact info@behaviorpivot.com.