

A Day in the Life of a Direct Support Professional

Good afternoon. My name is Tina Fagan. I am a single mom and my daughter's name is Corrynn. We live in Millbrook NY which is halfway between New York City and our Capitol in Albany. Like many of you, what motivates me to face each day and make it better than the day before are kids, family, your principles and your profession. I could tell you all about the first three things on my list of what matters, but let me speak a little bit about my work—really, my profession, which matters a great deal to me.

I am a direct support professional. We use the term “DSP.” Direct Support is a straightforward, yet complicated profession. Working 11 years at New Horizons Resources with people with developmental disabilities (which includes intellectual disabilities, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and many neurological disabilities), I will try to describe a typical day in the life of a DSP. Although this is my life as a DSP, I am sure other DSPs will relate this.

I shop; I cook; I clean; I drive; I plan; I lift; I hold; I hug; I heal; I aid; I guide; I teach; I learn; I solve; I help; I serve; I chart; I care.

That's the straightforward part. Here's the more complicated part.

I am a personal financial manager; I teach many life skills like basic personal hygiene, relationship and social skills, and job skills; I assume nothing, pay attention to everything and use every moment as a teaching and learning moment; I transport people and also show them how to get from place to place as independently as possible; I am central to individual service planning; I teach self-determination and responsible choice; I assist people with disabilities to realize their dreams and their plans for next week; I use behavior modification techniques; I administer medications of all kinds; I acquaint myself with individual medical histories; I second-guess doctors and clinicians; I practice first aid, CPR, and behavioral interventions as necessary; I assist in all aspects of personal care, adaptive equipment and therapies as needed; I participate in the life of our organization beyond my daily duties; I volunteer; I challenge systems and suggest better ways of doing things; I advocate for the people I support and for my colleagues; I am committed to and practice a

code of professional ethics; I debate what is just and fair and possible; I practice confidentiality from HIPAA to small talk; I do electronic data collection on all aspects of my work; I facilitate self-advocacy for those who are not used to expressing themselves; I facilitate connections with families, friends and others important to the individual being supported; I use instructional strategies based on how a person learns best; I employ communication strategies to promote an individual's self-expression; I identify potential crises and head them off; I am skilled at diffusing crises when they do happen; and I seek to self-improve within the profession of direct support.

One of the toughest challenges I welcomed this year was finding a "real" job for Chris, a young man with intellectual disabilities. I knew he had the potential. I wanted everyone else—employers, my fellow staff, as well as Chris himself—to see that same potential. I knew he was fully capable of working a real job and earning real pay. I just didn't realize how hard it would be to get others to see what I saw. Determination and skills I learned from my credentialing program paid off. He is now working part time and looks forward to work. He loves what he does and has a great relationship with this boss and co-workers.

Recently, a few other DSPs from our agency and I achieved a certified national credential from the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (NADSP). It was not easy but it was an eye-opener for me even though I have been in this work for many years. It took two years to complete, but I am not done learning. This credential demonstrates a mastery of skills through education and training, on the job learning and a practical demonstration of competencies. Thanks to this credential, I acquired more skills and more confidence. The process required:

- 3000 hours of on the job learning
- 200 hours of accredited instruction
- A portfolio that demonstrates practical, real life proficiency in eight out of fifteen nationally validated community support skill standards, and
- A signed commitment to the NADSP Code of Ethics.

So, being a DSP is very direct, very straightforward. It is also a bit more complicated than some people realize.

I thank ANCOR for this opportunity to speak to you about the work I love, I thank NADSP for the national credential program, and I thank all of you for listening to my story. I appreciate whatever influence you can bring to assisting us with developing and stabilizing our direct support professional workforce.