

## Developing Appropriate Work Attributes

By Jayne Dixon Weber

*(Note: There is a vignette on the DVD based on this material.●)*

Work attributes differ from ones in the school and home, and it is important to realize that there is a certain “formal” air to work that is and should be different from home. This applies to volunteer jobs as well as paid ones. Ian works at a clothing store for one of his jobs. He also works part-time at a grocery store. Some of the differences between work and home are discussed below.

### 1. DRESS

It is very important that Ian be appropriately dressed at work every time, whether it is neat, clean clothes or a uniform. At home, Ian can wear a cap, T-shirt, jeans, and sandals/tennis shoes. When Ian is at one job he wears his own clothes suitable for an employment setting, and when he is at his other job, he wears a clean uniform.

### 2. HYGIENE

The work setting does not accommodate poor hygiene. When Ian is at home, he does not have to “spruce up” all the time. However, when he is at work, he should arrive showered, shaved, and with clean hair, teeth, and fingernails. It is also important to help Ian realize that when he needs a tissue he needs to excuse himself and get one. Ian needs to maintain his hygiene the entire time he is at work. If he eats or has a snack, he must remember to wash his face and hands afterwards.

### 3. PUNCTUALITY

It is important for Ian to be ready to go to work on time, every day. When he is at home and not expected at work, he can lounge around all he wants. But he should arrive at work a little before starting time, which in his case is 8 a.m. He should be well rested and dressed when he walks in the door. If something causes Ian to be late, he should call work as soon as possible. Being late cannot become a habit.

### 4. MANNERS

Ian should pay close attention to his manners when he is at work. At home, he can talk on his phone as much as he wants. In addition, his manners do not have to be perfect. At work, Ian should make sure he always says “please” and “thank you.” He should clean up after himself right away when he has been in the snack room, putting trash in the receptacle. He should not chew gum or talk on his cell phone.

### 5. SPEECH

Using appropriate speech is another critical attribute for success in the workplace. When Ian is at home, he can use casual language, e.g., calling his friends “dude” and saying “whatever.” While at work, his speech must meet a more formal standard. He should not use slang or swear words, and he must speak at an appropriate sound level.

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## 6. ATTITUDE

When Ian is at work, he should have a good, positive attitude. At home, he can do mostly what he wants (within certain limits). When he is at work, he follows the rules or instructions, he does his best, he works when he is “on the clock,” and he takes breaks when he is supposed to. He must understand that time spent at work is usually much more structured than at home.

## 7. BEHAVIOR

Ian needs to meet work standards for his behavior. At home, it's okay to hit a pillow when he gets angry. But this is not appropriate in the work setting. Taking deep breaths is okay, throwing and hitting are not. You might practice this at home so Ian does not forget when and/or how to do it.

Also, while it is okay for Ian to hug a friend outside of work, it is more appropriate for him to shake hands with others at work. Setting limits on the type of touching permitted in the workplace helps eliminate any ambiguity and potential awkwardness for both Ian and his colleagues. This is another behavior that can be practiced at home.

## 8. PERSONAL/WORK SPACE

Ian must learn to respect others' personal and work space, and the fact that most people prefer a certain amount of space between themselves and others. Sometimes with good friends, that space is reduced. Standing about an arm's length away from another person at work is a good general rule. It is also important to show Ian where he can go and not go at work. For example, an employee does not ever go behind the employer's desk. Do not assume that Ian knows this.

## 9. ILLNESS

Everyone gets sick on occasion, and Ian must come to understand that if he gets sick, he should stay at home. He should call in as soon as he can, or have someone call for him. If Ian feels ill at work, he should tell the boss right away. Co-workers do not like being exposed to sick people in the workplace.

## 10. ASKING FOR HELP

It is important that Ian learn to ask for help when he needs it so he does not persist in doing something wrong at work. At home, others may be in the habit of asking him if he needs help. At work, he needs to feel confident about who to go to and when it's appropriate to do so. This ensures the job is either done right the first time, or that mistakes aren't unknowingly repeated.

Ultimately, Ian must learn that there is a home life and a work life. Sometimes the difference is minimal—for example, it really is not appropriate to swear in either place. But usually, work and home are different spheres with different standards. These may include dress, speech, behavior, and many other factors he will have to take note of if he is to be successful at work. He must learn that he will have more choices at home than he will at work, but that is simply how work and the larger world is. Learning this is a crucial lesson that will benefit him throughout his life.

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## Behavior at Work: Modifying the Environment

By David Hessler, PhD

Problems at work often result in (or from) inappropriate behaviors. Generally, it is easy to identify the sources of problems that arise in the work environment, and often it requires only simple changes to the environment and interaction patterns to improve the situation.

### DAY 1

Jack has fragile X syndrome and like many people with the condition, he easily becomes stressed or anxious. In addition, he can be very sensitive to sounds, touch, and other types of sensory stimulation. These things can make it hard for him to work and relate to others.

He is standing at a table collating materials for a mailing, with several others doing similar work nearby. Jack is trying to focus on his task, but there is a lot going on around him. Two of his co-workers are talking loudly and joking around, and another is dancing to a nearby radio and occasionally bumping into Jack. The phones are ringing and there is the constant paging of people over the PA system. While the others are productive in preparing materials for mailing, Jack has not completed anything, and his materials are scattered.

The supervisor comes over to talk to Jack. Jack looks down while his supervisor is speaking. The supervisor, appearing annoyed, leans in towards Jack in an effort to make eye contact with him. Jack becomes very anxious and upset because he is unfamiliar with this supervisor, he feels threatened by direct eye contact, and he cannot process all of the instructions. The phone conversation and loud music are over-stimulating him and adding to the overwhelming environment.

Jack turns his head away from the supervisor and starts biting his hand in an effort to cope. The supervisor becomes annoyed. The supervisor tells Jack to look at him and asks him if he understands the directions. Jack indicates that he does understand, but when the supervisor walks away, Jack just starts moving papers back and forth. Jack clearly did not understand the instructions, and does not know how to ask anyone else for help.

The supervisor becomes clearly upset and walks back to where Jack is standing. He asks why Jack did not follow through with his instructions. Jack, still looking down, shrugs his shoulders.

The supervisor throws his hands up and walks away. Jack clenches his fist and angrily gestures towards his co-worker who is working nearby. The other co-workers start to back away nervously. It is hard for Jack to express his feelings easily with words, so he expresses his feelings through behaviors that are not welcome or appropriate in any work environment.

Jack gets anxious, then agitated, pounds his fist on the table, and ends up walking out of the building. He is trying to communicate that he is unhappy and that he needs help to make this work experience better.

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*Now, we are going to explain some changes that can be made to Jack's work environment and in his interactions with others, resulting in a more successful work experience.*

## **DAY 2**

1. Jack and his supervisor are sitting next to each other, eating lunch, and talking casually. The supervisor is taking steps to get to know Jack in a relaxed atmosphere. This will help to reduce Jack's anxiety about interacting with him, hopefully making Jack more motivated and less irritable at work. Lunch is a great way to do this because they do not have to maintain eye contact to have a conversation.
  2. The radio is removed from the work area. The area is also regularly monitored for unnecessary or extraneous sounds, blinking fluorescent lights, and pervasive odors from the nearby restaurant. If any of these hinder Ian's performance, minor adjustments can be considered (e.g. replace deficient light fixtures, install a fan).
  3. The supervisor sets up a separate workstation for Jack, with his back against the wall. He can still see his co-workers and talk with them if he wants to, but he is not in as close proximity. By sitting with his back to the wall, Jack feels more comfortable in his own space and does not have to worry about someone approaching him without any warning.
  4. The supervisor has created a board with three pictures on it, each with a red X through it. One shows Jack threatening with a clenched fist ("No hitting or even pretending to hit."). The second shows Jack yelling angrily ("No yelling."). The third shows Jack threatening to break something ("No breaking things."). The supervisor explains each one to Jack.
  5. The supervisor sets up a visual display showing Jack the steps necessary for completion of his task. He has the materials organized in separate boxes and there are photographs of each step mounted on a poster board on the wall, with each step numbered. The supervisor is going to watch Jack do the task, give him positive feedback on his successes, and encourage him to work carefully. He does not stand too close to Jack and he does not try to make eye contact.
  6. A reward system is set up with reasonable expectations for Jack to manage aggressive impulses in order to obtain the reward of playing basketball with his co-workers at the end of each week.
  7. Jack has identified a person that he can go to when he has any questions. The identified person's name has been shared with the supervisor.
  8. If Jack should become upset, he should take a break and remove himself from the source of frustration. He may need help recognizing these feelings. If so, the person that Jack can go to with questions has agreed to help Jack recognize them.
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*Employment*

You may need to identify a person who is qualified to go into the work environment and suggest changes such as these. Anyone familiar with the characteristics of fragile X syndrome should be able to help explain the combination of sensory integration issues, processing issues, and anxiety, and their influence on daily work and social activities. Professionals to consider for this are occupational therapists, special education teachers, case managers, and social workers. And, of course, parents always know their children better than anyone else does! They or other close relatives can serve important roles in smoothing the way for their child's job success.

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