

# Developing Independent Living Skills

In addition to self-advocacy skills, teaching your child skills that will foster his or her independence on the journey to adulthood is also of utmost importance. As autism is a spectrum disorder, every individual is different, and as a result, the independent living skills that will be taught, as well as the pace at which they are taught, will vary significantly across the spectrum. For example, one young adult with autism may ultimately be able to live on his or her own with very little, if any, outside support, while another may require supports and services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

As with self-advocacy, starting to develop independence skills to the best of your child's ability at a young age will make a difference in terms of the ease of this transition period. Building these skills little by little is an effective way to teach skills you may not have thought your child would need one day.

Teaching your child independent living skills - home living, personal care, etc. - can be easier said than done, especially if he or she is accustomed to having things done for him or her. You may be rushed, your child may be fighting you every step of the way, you may be too exhausted, but teaching life skills early on is an important part of raising a child with autism.

## Ten Ways to Build Independence

This list from Autism Speaks Autism Response Team member Emily Mulligan provides information on how you can help your child increase his or her independence at home, at school and in the community. By introducing these skills early and building block by



block, you can help your loved one with autism gain the tools that will allow him or her to be more independent throughout his or her life.

### 1. Strengthen Communication

If your child struggles with spoken language, a critical step for increasing independence is strengthening his or her ability to communicate by building skills and providing tools to help express preferences, desires and feelings. Consider introducing Alternative/Augmentative Communication (AAC) and visual supports. Common types of AAC include picture exchange communication systems (PECS), speech output devices (such as DynaVox, iPad, etc.) and sign language.

### 2. Introduce a Visual Schedule

Using a visual schedule with your child can help the transition from activity to activity with less prompting. Review each item on the schedule with your child and then remind him or her to check the schedule before every transition. Over time, he or she will be able to complete this task with increasing independence, practice decision making and pursue the activities that interest him or her. You can learn more about using visual supports by downloading the [ATN/AIR-P Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorder Tool Kit](#).

### 3. Work on Self-Care Skills

This is a good age to introduce self-care activities into your child's routine. Brushing teeth, combing hair and other activities of daily living (ADLs) are important life skills, and introducing them as early as possible can allow your child to master them down the line. Make sure to include these things on your child's schedule so he or she gets used to having them as part of the daily routine.

### 4. Teach Your Child to Ask for a Break

Make sure your child has a way to request a break – add a “Break” button on his or her communication device, a picture in his or her PECS book, etc. Identify an area that is quiet where your child can go when feeling overwhelmed. Alternatively, consider offering headphones or other tools to help regulate sensory input. Although it may seem like a simple thing, knowing how to ask for a break can allow your child to regain control over him or herself and his or her environment.

### 5. Work on Household Chores

Having children complete household chores can teach them responsibility, get them involved in family routines and impart useful skills to take with them as they get older. If you think your child may have trouble understanding how to complete a whole chore, you can consider using a task analysis. This is a method that involves breaking down large tasks into smaller steps. Be sure to model the steps yourself or provide prompts if your child has trouble at first! Also, try using [My Job Chart](#): a great tool to help both kids and adults learn to complete tasks and manage time.

### 6. Practice Money Skills

Learning how to use money is a very important skill that can help your child become independent when out and about in the community. No matter what abilities your child currently has, there are ways that he or she can begin to learn money skills. At school, consider adding money skills to your child's IEP and when you are with your child in a store or supermarket, allow him and her to hand over the money to the cashier. Step by step, you can teach each part of this process. Your child can then begin using these skills in different settings in the community.

### 7. Teach Community Safety Skills

Safety is a big concern for many families, especially as children become more independent. Teach and practice travel training including pedestrian safety, identifying signs and other important safety markers; and becoming familiar with public transportation. The [GET Going pocket guide](#) has many useful tips to help individuals with autism navigate public transportation. Consider having your child carry an ID card which can be very helpful to provide his or her name, a brief explanation of his or her diagnosis, and a contact person. You can find examples of ID cards and other great safety materials.

### 8. Build Leisure Skills

Being able to engage in independent leisure and recreation is something that will serve your child well throughout his or her life. Many people with autism have special interests in one or two subjects; it can help to translate those interests into age appropriate recreational activities. The [Autism Speaks Resource Guide](#) contains activities that your child can get involved with in your community; including team sports, swim lessons, martial arts, music groups and more. For more information about participation in youth and community organizations, see the [Autism Speaks Leading the Way: Autism-Friendly Youth Organizations guide](#).

### 9. Teach Self-Care during Adolescence

Entering adolescence and beginning puberty can bring many changes for a teen with autism, so this is an important time to introduce many hygiene and self-care skills. Getting your teens into the habit of self-care will set them up for success and allow them to become much more independent as they approach adulthood. Visual aids can be really useful to help your teen complete his or her personal hygiene routine each day. Consider making a checklist of activities to help your child keep track of what to do and post it in the bathroom. This can include items such as showering, washing face, putting on deodorant and brushing hair. To stay organized, you can put together a hygiene “kit” to keep everything your teen needs in one place.

## 10. Work on Vocational Skills

Starting at age 14, your child should have some vocational skills included on his or her IEP. Make a list of his or her strengths, skills and interests and use them to guide the type of vocational activities that are included as objectives. This is also a time to start planning for the future. Consider all of the ways up to this point that you have been fostering your child's independence: communication abilities, self-care, interests and activities and goals for the future. The [Community-based Skills Assessment](#) (CSA) can help you evaluate your child's current skills and abilities to create an individualized transition plan.



## Teaching Daily Living Skills

A 2015 study funded by Autism Speaks and Foundation of Hope, presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR), found that the single most important predictor of positive outcomes in adulthood is the mastery of self-care skills such as bathing, dressing, cleaning and cooking. According to the researchers who tracked children with autism into middle adulthood, these skills prove more important than language, intellectual ability or the severity of autism symptoms when it comes to maintaining employment and achieving life satisfaction.

**We can't necessarily change IQ or symptom severity, but we can teach daily living skills.**

*Laura Kling, lead researcher, University of North Carolina's TEACCH Autism Program*

One tip for teaching independence skills like self-care is to think of the specific skill you'd like your child to learn and work backwards so that you can break down lessons piece by piece and eventually build to your goal. For example, if you are teaching your child to bathe on his or her own, you can teach him or her step-by-step, gradually lowering your involvement in the process:

1. **Identify when a shower is necessary.**
2. **Turn on the shower.**
3. **Find the desired water temperature.**
4. **Use soap to wash arms, legs and stomach.**
5. **Use soap to wash underarms and private parts thoroughly.**
6. **Wet and use shampoo to wash hair.**
7. **Rinse off soap and shampoo until no more bubbles.**
8. **Turn off the shower.**
9. **Dry off with towel.**
10. **Get dressed.**

Be sure to reinforce your child with positive feedback once he or she masters each step. Motivation is critical to learning and as your child becomes familiar and more competent with new skills, confidence, interest and motivation will increase. Keep in mind that each step might take a long time, some more than others, but the ultimate goal remains the same – to teach your child appropriate self-care and hygiene, an important skill as he or she ages into young adulthood.



## Conclusion

Whether your child will move on to postsecondary education, live in a group home or continue to live with you and your family, independence skills are important for individuals with autism of all ages and abilities. You may look at your child and think that the challenges he or she faces will keep him or her from learning any skills that foster independence. At times along the way, you may feel frustrated with the progress or lack thereof, but keep trying and little by little, your child will learn some of these skills. Celebrate the little things and don't dwell on the bumps in the road.

*Be patient. Remember, the transition to adulthood, and teaching the skills that go along with it, is a marathon, not a sprint!*