

INTRODUCTION

Life skills encompass a broad range of skills such as cooking, self-care, household chores, employment, personal safety, self-advocacy, money management, and executive function skills. Practice of these skills is on-going and ever changing as needs, circumstances, and goals evolve.

These skills are practiced from a young age and often begin at home with household chores. School programs should provide instruction on life skills because of the length of time it takes to reach mastery of a skill. Employment or volunteering provides more scope for the acquisition of skills and training.

While we often think of life skills leading to independence, we also need to think of “interdependence” because none of us truly functions alone. We all depend on others to help us with tasks we aren’t good at, we share the workload in a job or community, we offer to do things we can do, and we work in partnership with community members to ensure our health, safety and well-being.

Knowledge, understanding and the successful execution of life skills can enhance quality of life, increase self-esteem, and support overall well-being. Contributing in a meaningful way at home, school, on the job, or in the community fosters a feeling of satisfaction and happiness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maureen Bennie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



WHAT LIFE SKILLS DO OUR KIDS WITH AUTISM NEED TO SUCCEED?

At some point we all have to face our children growing up. For those of us with kids on the spectrum, this milestone can seem even more daunting. For some parents, even [getting their kids into winter clothing](#) can seem next to impossible, so teaching other life skills can seem overwhelming. Even the word “succeed” might be misleading. Each child with autism will have a different measure of success. For some, putting on clothing, remembering to eat, or simply being able to navigate daily tasks will be the goal. For others, it will be remembering to get to class, or performing tasks at their jobs. Now that my children are in their 20’s, I am starting to see some of the early work on life skills paying off in certain areas. In some areas, they might always need support (don’t we all?). Below is a helpful list of categories for the basic skills necessary to meet individual levels of success.

The seven categories of life skills necessary for success for people with ASD

1) Executive functioning skills

These are organizational skills that are needed to plan the day, break down a task, create a “to do” list, and plan ahead for chores, outings etc... It will be an on-going process to build this skill, as it is something that is challenging for most of those with ASD. Michelle Garcia Winner, SLP, offers excellent advice and exercises to build executive functioning skills for high-functioning individuals through her [Social Thinking Program](#). Joyce Cooper-Kahn’s book, [Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents’ Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning](#), is a must have for any parent or caregiver for a child with autism.

2) Practical living skills

These skills encompass finding information (internet, books, newspapers etc.), money skills (budgeting, bank accounts, credit cards, making change), travel (reading a map, using transportation, planning a trip), clothing (care, laundering, organizing), home care (garbage day, housecleaning, doing dishes) cooking, and shopping. One of the best ways to teach these skills is through involving your child in your daily routine, rather than doing everything for them. The earlier you include your child in activities such as [cooking](#), cleaning, and laundry, the longer they have to develop comfort and routines in these important areas.

Superstore offers a cooking/shopping program for people with disabilities in Edmonton, AB. The program involves choosing a recipe, shopping for the groceries, then preparing the food. Check with your local grocery store, or kitchen shop to see if they offer (or are interested in offering) such a program. There are many resources available for segments of this kind of learning. [Please check our Resources page](#) for classes, courses, or support in your area.

3) Personal care

This would involve personal daily hygiene, exercise, nutrition, dealing with an illness such as a cold, and coping with stress. Create and rehearse relaxation routines, make task breakdown lists for showering, toileting or toothbrushing if steps are missed without prompting. Some of my favorite resources for teaching hygiene to youth is [101 Tips for the Parents of Boys with Autism](#) or [101 Tips for the Parents of Girls with Autism](#). If these don’t sound like what you are looking for, we have many resources in our [Life Skills Section](#) of our bookstore to check out. There is something for everyone.

4) Job skills

How do you look for a job? Create a resume? Get work experience? Be a good employee? A good place to start to gain job experience may be through volunteer work. If parents volunteer for an organization, take the child along too to gain some experience. My two children have shadowed me in the past at my volunteer position at our local farmer's market. They will get to know the vendors which could perhaps lead to a job later on.

Other volunteer avenues to try are through churches, sports clubs, Guides or Scouts, museums, parks and recreation, the library – the list is endless. Try to find a good fit with the child's interests.

5) Personal safety

A tough topic to teach! Many children will memorize rules like don't talk to strangers, but will not know when to break those rules if necessary. Under stress, some people lose their ability to speak. It may be a good idea to carry around a card with a few statements on it for those stressful moments when it can be hard to gather one's thoughts. Teach what risks are, and how to avoid unsafe situations. For example, one rule may be not to use public transportation after dark if in a big city. Another may be not to do favors for an unfamiliar person. An excellent book to start off the topic with younger children is [*An Exceptional Children's Guide to Touch: Teaching Social and Physical Boundaries to Kids*](#). It has a number of short stories that illustrate different kinds of touch from accidental to friendly to harmful and helps to illustrate appropriate boundaries.

6) People skills

This would fall under the topic of social skills. Areas that need to be developed are working in a group, making friends, asking for help, dealing with family relationships, communicating over the phone, conversation, etc. Social skill is a broad topic. Although social rules and etiquette can be taught, if the child is high functioning enough, think about teaching flexibility in thinking and perspective-taking. Good books for this are [*Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success*](#), [*Thinking About You, Thinking About Me*](#), and [*Teaching Children with Autism to Mind Read*](#).