



TEN Essential Skills For Safety, Well-being and Independence

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Lifetime planning needs to include a discussion of the skills a person needs to learn to reach their lifetime goals. For example, for a person to live as independently as possible, he* will need to care for his own physical needs, like hygiene and eating. He will need to do some simple cooking and household chores, respect the privacy and property of others, handle money and valuables carefully, and do other tasks that are part of everyday life. For safety, he needs to know who to let into his home and when not to open the door. He will need to understand fire dangers, have a plan for an earthquake or other disaster, know how and when to call 911.

After being involved with hundreds of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and listening to their stories and cases, we suggest that the Ten Essential Skills described below represent key skills that must be acquired for a safe and independent life. You know a skill is essential when a lack of a skill puts the person at risk, hinders them in some way, or could even limit their freedom and independence. An example is the skill of responding to the command, “stop” that can be of life-or-death importance in some circumstances or situations.

Knowing that these Ten Essential Skills are likely to matter most, they should be part of the educational plans for all students, and part of the lifetime plans of all adults. The Ten Essential Skills should be taught from a young age, over time. Because individuals differ in their level of ability and understanding, not everyone will have the same ability to learn skills, or have the exact same goals. Create goals based on skills in the list that are appropriate to the development of the person, and make them part of their individualized educational plan (IEP) or individualized personal plan (IPP), every year.

It is particularly important to assess students in transition for the presence or absence of these skills, and teach any essential skills not yet mastered. Based on the experiences of hundreds of adults living outside the family home, the skills listed here are likely to be priorities for social interaction, personal safety, and independence. Select key skills needed for the ITP, the Individual Transition Plan that can be put in place for students with disabilities as early as age 14, and must be in place on a student’s 16th birthday.

1. **Eliminate all dangerous and potentially dangerous behaviors.** Dangerous or harmful behavior puts the individual and others at risk. Examples include hitting, kicking, biting, verbal threats, etc. A person must be considered non-threatening in order to live successfully in the community. Any and all kinds of physical or verbal aggression must be permanently eliminated, or else the person's ability to independently access the community will be severely restricted.

In fact and reality, dangerous behavior can severely restrict a person's opportunities and choices. If an individual is deemed a danger to society, the court system can place the individual in an institution or jail, no matter how "high functioning" the individual is and no matter how much love and money the parents have. The criterion for institutionalization in the United States is "danger to self/danger to others." If an individual wants to live in the community and freely access many environments, then all forms of dangerous behavior must be eliminated, as early in life as possible. The longer the dangerous behaviors remain unaddressed, the harder they are to change.

In addition, personal safety issues to address include skills such as crossing the street independently, or knowing to only cross with someone else. Safety about fire, water, emergencies, strangers, drugs and alcohol must be taught.

2. **Care for his or her own body: hygiene, toileting, dressing.** Our society values neat appearance and cleanliness. Unless someone is physically unable to care for herself, good self-care skills are equated to competence. Good hygiene makes a person more pleasant to live and work with. Hygiene problems can get in the way of successful social interaction.

Having good self-care skills make a person less vulnerable to sexual abuse. If an individual is competent in the care of his own body, then the individual can have privacy while in the bathroom and bedroom.

3. **Know how to touch and not touch other people.** Touching people in an inappropriate way can be distressing, offensive, or harmful. It can even be considered sexual aggression, sexual harassment or abuse. People with ASD have been jailed for inappropriate touching even though the individual with ASD meant no harm. Knowing the boundaries and limits of appropriate touching, including *who* to touch and not touch, *how* to touch and not touch, and *where* to touch or not touch keeps everyone safe.

Individuals with ASD must also understand the personal privacy of self and others. They need to maintain their own boundaries and respect the personal boundaries of others. They need to know who can and cannot touch them. A related issue is understanding when an interest or attraction in another person is mutual or not.

The person with ASD needs to learn to recognize when someone else is romantically interested in him, and have appropriate ways to show interest and physical affection in return. He needs to recognize signs that someone is not interested in him, and back off.

- 4. Know not to touch or take the possessions of others without permission.** A great deal of confusion and conflict can arise when people touch or take someone else's things. Even if a person only "wants to look," others may think he is stealing. The person must learn to ask first, (verbally or with clearly understood non-verbal signals) and take "no" for an answer.

If permission is given for an item to be borrowed, it needs to be used carefully and returned in good condition. A starting point for teaching these skills is teaching the difference between "mine" and "not mine," "OK to touch," and "not OK to touch."

- 5. Communicate wants and needs.** Whether or not a person can speak, he must have an effective way to let others know what he wants and needs. Having no effective way to communicate breaks down the social interaction required in a job or living situation, and can set the stage for problem behaviors.

Expressing emotions is as important as expressing needs. It is important for the person with ASD to have a way to tell others what he does not want or like, using phrases such as "I don't want..." and "I don't like..." It is also important to have a way of expressing disagreement or anger with others, in a way that is not overly intense or aggressive.

- 6. Ask for help.** A person needs to learn to recognize when he is vulnerable, at risk, or in danger and become aware of when, where, and why he would need help. This includes learning to recognize possible consequences of his own actions, and learning to recognize potentially dangerous situations. A person with ASD needs to be able to identify an authority figure in a variety of settings and be able to ask for help either verbally or non-verbally.

- 7. Accept a "yes" and a "no" answer differently.** Every day, people need to take "no" for an answer. When the answer is "no" the person must respond in a different way than when the answer is "yes." The person needs to learn that he cannot always do what he wants or have what he wants, when he wants it. He may need help to learn ways to deal with the frustration that the situation may cause.

In fact, taking "no" for an answer needs to include learning the many verbal and nonverbal ways that people use to mean "No," even when they do not say the word "No." For example, a woman might say she's "busy" when a man with ASD asks her on a date. Unwelcome interest and attention may cause people to be afraid or even lead to accusations of stalking.

- 8. Learn to identify internal states and express them.** Everyone has a variety of emotional and physical states. The levels or intensity of feelings can range from mild to extreme. Everyone needs a way to safely express of their feelings. Options to express the type and intensity of feeling include words, pictures, scales or “thermometers”, a number rating, a voice output device or gestures. Skill in understanding and recognizing his own feelings will help the person to learn to recognize the emotions of others.

Self-regulation, that is, recognizing, understanding, and coping with feelings in an acceptable manner while remaining in control, is expected and required in all situations. This may be very difficult for many people with ASD to learn, and require support, assistance, direct instruction and time.

Because teenage and adult friendships and romantic interests, are increasingly based on sharing feelings rather than shared activities, it is important to learn to share feelings appropriately, be a good listener, and respond to the feelings of others. Understanding and recognizing his own feelings can help the person with ASD learn to recognize the emotions of others. Individuals with ASD need to recognize the feelings of others, and the intensity of those feelings, and the physical and verbal signals the person is sending. the job, it is important to appear caring and concerned about workmates, and be sensitive to them. Living with and working with others involves being a “team player,” valuing the thoughts and opinions of others. People with ASD can learn to do kind and sensitive things for others based on recognizing the feelings of others (empathy).

A starting point for understanding emotions is learning how to identify and label an emotion while it is being experienced. A starting point for learning empathy is understanding that other people have thoughts, feelings and reactions that may be very different from our own at any given time (also called theory of mind, or ToM). It is also important to learn that there are certain social expectations in different emotional situations, such as what to do or say if someone is grieving. People with ASD also need ways to recognize the verbal and non-verbal signs that show that someone else is angry with them or agitated, to either de-escalate the situation or get out of harm’s way.

- 9. Make “Plan B:” Repair Strategies.** Many times we teach people with ASD what to do, and how to do it, in particular situations. However, we sometimes forget to teach the person how to “fix it” if things do not go according to plan. *Repair strategies* are pre-planned options to use when something unexpected occurs. It is important to teach and practice Plan B for many different situations, before a “repair” is needed.

For example, a person learns how to take the bus, and does it successfully many times. One day he arrives late at the bus stop and the bus is pulling away. Does he know to take a seat at the bus stop and wait for the next bus, or might he run into traffic to get the bus that is leaving? What has someone been taught to do if he arrives at home, the door is locked, no one is home, and he has no key?

Individuals with ASD needs to be able to recognize when the “unexpected” is happening, consider options for solving the problem, and make a safe choice. “Stop, think, and choose” sums up this strategy very well; however it is important to be sure that the “think and choose” steps have been thought out and practiced in advance!

- 10. Listen to and immediately obey the instructions given by law enforcement professionals.** Individuals with autism spectrum disorders who are active in the community are more likely to have an encounter with the police or other law enforcement officials than individuals without autism. They need to know to follow instructions like stop, come, and turn around. They need to learn to show their identification safely and allow officers to “pat them down” without over-reacting. Individuals with ASD need to be able to recognize law enforcement personnel in different types of uniforms or clothing. They also need to learn when it is appropriate to speak freely, or when it is appropriate to take advantage of the “right to remain silent” and wait for a parent or lawyer to be present to help explain things.

*The words “he,” “his,” and “himself” are used here for simplicity. Think “she,” “her,” and herself as appropriate! We know that there are many types of families, so when we say “parent,” think caregiver, grandparent, sibling, etc., as fitting to your situation. When we say “young adult,” we are discussing those who are still in the planning process for transition to adulthood. It is clear that the considerations discussed here may also apply to adults of all ages, including those who are already living outside the family home. Finally, the information may also be helpful in planning for adults with other diagnoses or conditions as well as “typical” young people and adults.