

Increasing Independent Living Skills for Employment Success

The development of independent living skills is critical for success in our everyday lives. These skills can also set us up for success in our careers, even when the skills do not seem directly related to employment. The following information provides parents ways to help their children develop independent living skills in the home and community by identifying what skills to teach and how to develop these skills.

What are Independent Living Skills?

Independent living skills are the skills that children and youth need to acquire to manage their day to day activities. These skills can be viewed in the context of the following major categories.

Self-Care

Includes maintaining personal hygiene, diet, clothing, exercise, and stress management.

Example Skill: Doing laundry

Navigation

Includes use of public transit, reading a map, awareness of landmarks, and driving.

Example Skill: Riding the bus

Financial Literacy

Includes opening bank accounts, budgeting, saving, bills, and knowledge of credit or loans.

Example Skill: Paying utilities

Safety

Includes privacy, best practices for crossing streets, avoiding danger, and safety resources.

Example Skill: Calling 911

Social Growth

Includes respecting boundaries, understanding romance, and knowing how to maintain friendships.

Example Skill: Appropriate texts

Community Engagement

Includes knowing where to find key resources like stores and being engaged in local activities.

Example Skill: Grocery shopping

Questions to Ask when Deciding on a Skill to Teach

What are your child's strengths and goals?

It is important to align the independent living skills that your child is developing with his or her existing strengths and goals for the future.

Is your child interested in learning the skill?

Working on new skills can be stressful, so start with a skill he or she has interest in to produce the best outcome.

Does your child have the prerequisite skills?

It is important to think about whether prerequisite skills have been mastered. Working on a complex skill with an unmastered prerequisite skill will be far more challenging.

Building a New Skill

Now that you've determined a new skill to work on, it's time to build that skill. Begin by teaching and modeling the skill while your child follows and repeats your actions. Next, support your child with learning the steps of the skill through prompting, as needed. Finally, fade back and monitor by having your child complete the task independently while only offering support if a critical step is missed.

Riding the Bus Example

Knowing how to ride the bus can serve as a prerequisite for other skills and increase an individual's independence and ability to take care of simple needs. Riding the bus is also a valuable skill for employment, as it enables individuals to get to work on their own if they cannot drive or need a cost-efficient way to travel.

1. Teach and Model

Choose a destination that matters to your child for more buy-in. If he or she is employed, the job site is a perfect destination. Then, review the bus schedule with your child to identify the best route. Get on the bus first, show your child how to pay, and pick a seat while encouraging him or her to repeat your action. Keep track of each stop, and point out how to recognize the stop to get off at. Exit first as he or she follows.

2. Support and Prompt

Ask your child which route is needed to get to work on time and wait for him or her to find it. Ask your child to get on the bus first and only make corrections if necessary. When you are close to the destination, ask your child to show you what stop to get off at. Wait for your child to initiate getting off the bus before prompting as long as you can.

3. Fade Back and Monitor

Follow quietly behind your child the next time you ride the bus, offering guidance only when he or she might miss something critical. If your child is independent, you can let him or her ride alone next time (following in a car if you like).

The amount of time it takes to build a skill depends on the skill and the individual. With any skill, your goal should be to build independence by offering less guidance each time until your child is independent. This relies on a concept called "prompt fading"—gradually using less instruction each training period until there is no instruction at all. If your child can complete the skill, but only does so when you provide direction, then he or she has yet to become independent. You can apply this process to learning any new skill.