

Promoting Independence for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The ultimate goal for all students is to successfully transition to postsecondary school or work with the skills needed to be independent. Teaching skills that lead to independence should start in early childhood and continue throughout a student's K-12 career. Students' school and life experiences help them become more independent over time. Students with autism are no different. It takes time, repeated practice, generalization, and intentional planning of activities, with support as needed, to help these students become more independent adults.

Where to Start?

To facilitate increased independence, teachers and caregivers can start by providing opportunities to help students become more self-aware, make informed choices, and use tools to make choices, solve problems, and independently navigate their world.

Areas to Address to Support Independence

Asking for Help

Asking for help can be difficult for everyone, but it can be a valuable skill to increase and maintain independence. Often, an individual will avoid a task or miss key steps to a task. This can lead to poor outcomes, including corrective feedback. On the other hand, when a student asks a teacher, employer, or others for help, accepts the help, and thanks the person for help, they practice a skill that will lead to positive outcomes.

Daily Living Skills

Start early and support students in establishing daily care routines with visual supports, checklists, and modeling. Parents can fade their support as a student gains skills. These skills include bathroom routine, bathing, and dressing, which are the main tasks to start with. Along with daily living skills, children as young as 2 years of age can start chores or small tasks. This can help children develop endurance while completing tasks. It will also help them to cultivate a solid work ethic and feel a sense of pride for completing a task or chore.

Coping Strategies

While it is often an expected behavior to know how to handle emotions, it is not a skill we are born with. Coping strategies need to be taught and practiced regularly. For students with autism, visual supports, modeling of coping techniques, and finding individualized coping strategies are important for success. Strong coping strategies can make a big difference in helping kids and teens be successful in and outside of school.

Communication

Every student must have a functional way of communicating with others. If spoken language is challenging, consider introducing Alternative and Augmentative Communication and visual supports. Please include colleagues to provide the best device or system for the student. Colleagues may include assistive technology specialists, speech language pathologists, etc.

SPIN

The contents of a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs (SPIN) may change over time. Teach students to recognize their SPIN, update it annually, and use their SPIN to learn and hone skills to best support their needs. Expanding and promoting students' strengths and preferences will increase their successful inclusion in meaningful activities.

Tips for Families

Teaching your family member with autism independent living skills is important for their safety and overall quality of life. Independence can be the key to successful community participation and future employment. In working toward greater independence for their children, parents should remember to:

- Start early
- Break tasks into smaller steps (if needed)
- Provide multiple opportunities to practice in multiple locations
- Stick with it even when it gets tough

Conclusion

For students to successfully transition to postsecondary school or work, they must develop the skills needed to be independent. Students who communicate clearly, identify their SPIN, ask for help, establish daily care routines, and develop coping strategies are better able to advocate and make informed choices for work, postsecondary education, and independent living.