

Teaching independent living skills

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Children with Asperger Syndrome are usually on a regular diploma track in high school. However, just because they graduate from high school with a regular diploma or go to college or graduate school does NOT mean that they have learned sufficient independent living skills to cope successfully. Independent living skills (ILS) include numerous items that (typically) are not taught to neurotypical (individuals NOT on the autism spectrum) because they usually learn them by observing others around them. However, individuals with ASD often need explicit instruction to learn ILS.

The home environment is the “natural” environment for teaching many of these skills. The following list includes some of the items one might want to work on in the kitchen/food arena.

- Kitchen Household Chores
- Setting the table
- Emptying the trash -Inserting a new trash bag
- Clearing the table
- Putting food items away
- Knowing amount of food worth saving
- Obtaining correct container & transferring food to container
- Determining whether items go in refrigerator or pantry
- Doing the dishes
- Handling dishes with care
- Handling knives
- Rinsing items sufficiently
- Knowing what does/does not go in the dishwasher
- Learning what items need to be placed on the top rack
- Wiping off counters
- Where to place sponges/wet dish rags/towels
- Unloading the dishwasher

Many individuals with ASD have difficulty generalizing skills

Generalization refers to the ability to perform a skill that has already been learned in one setting with different materials across a variety of settings. For children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders, we often overlook how these challenges affect learning. The following scenarios illustrate the kinds of challenges that may come up.

I was recently at a party with a number of children with ASD. Mark (age 9) was asked to help return items to the refrigerator. He walked into the kitchen, looked at the refrigerator and asked “Is this the refrigerator?” His mother immediately understood that he was confused because their refrigerator at home had the freezer compartment on top, and this was a side-by-side refrigerator.

Another family recently relayed a story about their daughter, Lisette. She was helping clear the table and put the food away after dinner. They had eaten spaghetti and Lisette had four strands of spaghetti on her plate. Getting ready to clear the table, she asked her mother whether she was supposed to (a) find a container and save the leftover spaghetti, or (b) throw it away.

Situations like these remind me of how hard our children work on understanding what we want them to do. This helps me plan to orchestrate teachable moments.

Here Are a Few Tips to Remember

1. Always evaluate whether this is a good time for an instructional moment.
2. Make numerous positive statements for every one correctional statement.
3. Use few correctional statements.
4. Look and listen carefully! People with ASDs get stuck in all kinds of ways.
5. The whole lesson may take less than one minute.
6. Be realistic! You can only work on a limited number of skills at a time.
7. Try to end on a positive note.

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