

# autism at-a-glance

April 2019

**Autism at-a-Glance**  
is a publication of the  
Center on Secondary  
Education for  
Students with ASD  
(CSESA).



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## Supporting Independence in Daily Living Skills

*Autism at-a-Glance* is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to high school students with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to support high school staff and family members in promoting independence in daily living skills for adolescents and young adults on the autism spectrum.



**I**ndividuals with autism often struggle to successfully perform and complete daily living activities and tasks ranging from taking out the trash to managing money. Recent research suggests that daily living skills should be a part of plans for individuals with autism, especially adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood (Bal, 2015). Improving daily living skills will allow for more independence, cleanliness, and organization in personal life and spaces.

### Examples of Daily Living Skills

*Steve really enjoys cooking. Each time he eats at home, Steve elects to utilize his dishwasher. However, often times he puts dishes in the dishwasher that are not dishwasher safe. He also doesn't remove food scraps from dishes prior to putting them in the dishwasher. Unfortunately, this has led to multiple maintenance visits for the dishwasher. With application of the steps outlined below, Steve can learn how to independently handle the dishes correctly!*

#### Housekeeping/Basic Chores

Chores such as sweeping, vacuuming, dusting, and taking out the trash all help keep a home tidy and clean. Clothes and dishes are necessities we use on a daily basis. Knowing how to clean dishes and do laundry is an integral part of maintaining a healthy home environment as well.



# Daily Living Skills

## Meal Preparation

Being able to cook healthy meals is important, but meal preparation is not limited to just that. One should also understand expiration dates and know where to store different food items, like what items belong in the refrigerator versus what items belong in the pantry. Knowing how long leftovers are okay to eat also helps maintain a healthy diet.

## Shopping

This includes purchasing groceries, toiletries, clothes, or even toys/games. We shop for so many different materials and knowing the ins and outs of all the scenarios is an arduous task, but imperative for improving daily living.

## Managing a Schedule

To succeed in other daily living activities, one may need to maintain an organized plan for each day's tasks. It is important to create and update a list of all prior commitments and activities that need to be completed. Planning ahead also means one must consider and arrange transportation to fit his or her schedule.

## Areas of Difficulty that Impact Daily Living Skills

*Angela is very busy. She tries to balance her job with her social and family life. Often she commits to too many activities and does not have time to herself or time for daily living activities. Using the steps that follow, one may be able to help Angela develop a*

*schedule to budget her time better.*

## Time Management

Knowing when to do tasks, as well as how much time they will take, is not always obvious. However, this is very important for individuals with autism as it will help them create schedules or routines they can reference when completing daily tasks.

## Flexibility

Some individuals with autism strictly adhere to schedules and routines, and do not enjoy changes. This can be difficult when new daily living tasks arise, or events happen that interfere with activities.

## Focus

Attention Deficient Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is often a co-occurring diagnosis in individuals with autism. A lack of focus or attention can hinder the success an individual has in completing daily living tasks. One must be prepared to help individuals stay on task.

## Understanding of Importance

Some individuals may not see or understand the consequences of not completing tasks such as doing dishes or managing money, leading to minimal desire to complete tasks. Showing and explaining the importance is key to help increase the individual's motivation.



### **Anxiety**

Individuals with ASD often experience high levels of anxiety. In a recent research study by Drahota and colleagues, they found that individuals with ASD who decreased their anxiety severity through cognitive behavioral therapy increased their daily living skills and reduced their parents' involvement in private daily routines (2011). In addition, although little research has investigated this, it is possible that increasing daily living skills could lead to a reduction in anxiety.

## **Process and Tips for Supporting Daily Living Skills**

It is important to note the steps below are adaptable and can be used in different orders or degrees to meet the individual's specific needs.

### **Task Analysis**

Consider whether a task analysis is needed. A task analysis is an evidence-based practice in which the mentor completes the task him or herself and carefully outlines each step on paper. This can include visual supports like photos of specific steps. The task analysis is then used to assist the individual as he or she completes the skill.

### **Orientation to the Task**

This should include an overview of what the task is, the importance of the task, and when the task should be repeated. This information could also be written on a summary sheet, for the individual to keep as a reference.

### **Modeling/Demonstration of the Task**

Use the outlined steps from the task analysis to model the task for the individual. You should explain each step of the task as you model it. Be sure to take your time with each step and allow the individual to ask questions or make comments.

### **Assist as Individual Completes Task**

Provide help as needed while they move through each step to complete the skill. During this time, make notes on any areas or steps the individual struggles with. This will help you assess their independence in the skill.

### **Determine What Technology/Support is Needed**

With the notes on the individual's abilities in each step of the skill, you should now be able to make informed decisions on what support is needed. The support may be in the form of paper reminders within the setting of the task, for example an instruction sheet with photos on the dishwasher. Another idea is the use of technology to provide prompting, modeling, and/or reminders. An example of this is using a tablet to provide the individual with access to videos modeling each step.

### **Implement a Personalized Plan**

After observing the individual complete the task and taking notes on his or her skills and the support needed, develop a personalized plan. The plan should include an outline of the steps for the skill, when the task should be completed, necessary support including reminders and visual supports, and (if necessary) rewards/reinforcement for success/completion.

### **Follow Up to Assess Improvement**

Ask them what went well. What did not go well? Is more or less support needed? And of course, provide the proper reward/reinforcement if deemed necessary. Following up should be a consistent occurrence, until you are comfortable with the individual's independence in the activity. As the individual improves, extinction of reinforcement and reminders should follow.



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The work reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grants R324C120006 and R324A180091 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Suggested citation: Hayek, L. & McIntyre, N. (2019, April). *Supporting Independence in Daily Living Skills* (Autism at-a-Glance Brief). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.

## Resources

**AFIRM Modules: Task Analysis, Reinforcement, Visual Supports, Prompting, Modeling, Self-management, Video Modeling, & Extinction**  
AFIRM Team. (2018). *Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder, FPG Child Development Center, University of North Carolina. Retrieved from [afirm.fpg.unc.edu](http://afirm.fpg.unc.edu)

### Daily Living Skills

Duncan, A. W., & Bishop, S. L. (2015). Understanding the gap between cognitive abilities and daily living skills in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders with average intelligence. *Autism, 19*(1), 64-72. doi: 10.1177/1362361313510068

### Functional Living Skills: Basic Living Skills Assessments

Basic Living Skills - Autism Life Skills. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://functionallivingskills.com/functional-living-tools/basic-living-skills/>

### Teaching Important Life Skills

Autism Speaks. (n.d.). Teaching Important Life Skills: Start as Early as Possible! Retrieved from <https://www.autismspeaks.org/teaching-important-life-skills-start-early-possible>

### Key to Independence

Sarris, M. (2014, April 10). Daily Living Skills: A Key to Independence for People with Autism. Retrieved from <https://iancommunity.org/ssc/autism-adaptive-skills>

### Transition Toolkit

Coyne, P. (2016). Autism Spectrum Disorder / ASD Transition Toolkit Unit 3.8. Retrieved from <https://www.crporegon.org/Page/285>

## References

Bal V., Kim S., Cheong D, & Lord C. (2015). Daily living skills in individuals with autism spectrum disorder from 2 to 21 years of age. *Autism, 19*(7):774-784. doi:10.1177/1362361315575840

Drahota, A., Wood, J. J., Sze, K. M., & Van Dyke, M. (2011). Effects of cognitive behavioral therapy on daily living skills in children with high-functioning autism and concurrent anxiety disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 41*(3), 257-265. doi: 10.1007/s10803-010-1037-4