Individuals 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.
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.
Resources

AFIRM Modules: Task Analysis, Reinforcement, Visual Supports, Prompting, Modeling, Self-management, Video Modeling, & Extinction

Daily Living Skills

Functional Living Skills: Basic Living Skills Assessments

Teaching Important Life Skills

Key to Independence

Transition Toolkit

References
