Building Independence in Children with Intellectual Disabilities or Autism

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Essential Questions

• What does “independence” mean for you regarding your child?
• What expectations do you want to set?
• What areas require growth in independence?
• What practical strategies can you use?
• How do you help your children move from knowing what to do to actually doing it independently?
Defining “Independence”

- Definition will vary, depending upon:
  - the age of your child
  - The abilities of your child
  - The goals you have for your child
Expectations and Goals

• Traditionally, children with cognitive disabilities were viewed as kids who “couldn’t”; culture of low expectations;
• Current view: these kids “can.”
• Child’s understanding of expectations important.
• Goal is independence, not perfection.
Setting High Expectations

• Avoid learned helplessness.
• Allow child to do things, even if it is quicker and easier to do it yourself.
• Expect that your child will do some chores around the house.
• Setting expectations that your child will do things for him/herself will increase independence and social appropriateness.
Areas for Growth in Independence

- Independent Living Skills-Chores and Household Skills
- Independent Living Skills-Personal Care
- Independent Living Skills-Out in the Community
- Becoming Socially Appropriate
Targeting Skills to Teach

• Think about what you currently do for your child.
• List what you want her to do for herself.
• Prioritize. Consider:
  • Is there a lack of skill that poses a problem for the family?
  • Is there a skill your child is ready to learn or wants to learn?
Preparing to Teach

• Analyze the task and break it down into small enough steps to be easily managed by your child.
• Teach one step at a time.
• Do not move on to the next step until your child is ready-do not demand too much too soon. Be patient.
• Plan to teach when you can devote all of your attention to the task.
• Teach the skill in the place it will be used, like brushing teeth in the bathroom.
• Make sure you have all materials you will need for teaching.
• Do not try to teach if child is hungry or tired.
• Do not try to teach, if there are distractions.
• Rewards will increase likelihood of success.
Tell. Show. Guide

- **Tell**
  - Tell child clearly and simply what to do.
  - Make sure *you* know exactly what you want your child to do.
  - Be consistent in your choice of words and in the steps.

- **Show**
  - While giving verbal instructions, model the activity.
  - Model each step of the activity and have child try each step herself before moving to the next step.

- **Guide**
  - Do the task with your child.
  - After telling him and showing him, do the task in hand-over-hand.
  - At the earliest stages, you will are one who is essentially performing the task.
  - As time goes on, fade the support and let child take leading role.
  - Be sure to end each session with success. If having trouble, go back to previous step you know he can do, before stopping. *(Baker, 2011)*.
Hand-Over-Hand
Backwards Chaining

• Teaches a skill from the end goal backwards.
• Premise is that once a child starts, she can always finish the task successfully.
• Baker (2011).
Tracking Progress

• Important for motivating child.
• A chart tracks child’s progress and can be used for rewards.
• Tracking progress allows parent to trouble-shoot.
Independent Living Skills - Importance of Chores

• Successfully completing chores builds competence, confidence and self-esteem.

• Designate some chores as child’s special job.

• Doing chores and small jobs around the house sets the stage for working as adults and increases future housing options.

• When teaching how to do chores, set the stage for success.
Strategies to Increase Success with Chores and Household Skills

• Are there tools/strategies you can use to make a chore easier or safer?

• Examples:
  • marking the dial on the washing machine with a large red arrow;
  • using a small bottle of laundry detergent that is easier to pour;
  • Creating a placemat which shows the correct positioning of dishes and silverware;
  • Using tools like apple corers and bagel slicers for safer cutting;
  • Teaching cooking using pots with lips for easy pouring and deep lids that won’t fall off easily.

• Have your child do whatever part of the chore he/she can do, rather than waiting until can complete all of the steps.
Tools for Success
Independent Living Skills - Personal Care: Importance

• People with intellectual disabilities are at greater risk for abuse than their typical peers (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000);
• Sense of modesty often not that of peers, because of dependence upon others for help with toileting, bathing and dressing. Leaves them more vulnerable to abuse. (Couwenhoven, 2007);
• Children with cognitive disabilities need opportunities to make choices, so that they feel it is acceptable to say “no” to potential abusers. (Couwenhoven, 2007)
• Choices are important in self-advocacy.
Planning for Self-Care Teaching

• Remember that there may be sensory issues involved and that it may take a long time to overcome fears.
• Expose children to self-care routines before they need them.
• Social stories and visual schedules can be very helpful in preparing kids for self-care routines and reminding them of the sequence of steps in a hygiene routine.
Tools and Strategies for Self-care

- Help your child get used to clothing as needed.
- Elasticized waists promote independence in dressing while child learns how to zip pants.
- Mark shoes with a star, so child puts it on the correct foot.
- Use music to cue steps in bathing, shampooing, brushing teeth, etc.
- Timers can be helpful.
- Use prepackaged portions of shampoo and soap, if your child has trouble measuring.
- Mark the faucets with red and blue tape to distinguish from hot and cold.
Independent Living Skills-Out in the Community: Allow Your Child to be Away From You

- Encourage your child to use Special Education Transportation rather than diving him/her to school.
- Work with school so child can move independently through school.
- Where appropriate, gradually leave your child alone at home for increasingly long periods of time.
- Where appropriate, have your child practice moving unaccompanied through neighborhood.
- Review behavioral expectations and rules beforehand.
Independent Living Skills-Out in the Community: Tools and Strategies

• Prepare your child head of time using social stories, Model Me DVDs and verbal preparation.
• Review behavioral expectations with your child before you go out.
• Pick times that will promote success: 8 a.m. on Saturday morning, rather than 4:00 p.m. Saturday afternoon.
• Always give advanced warnings for transitions.
• If you go to a restaurant or out for frozen yogurt, have your child order for himself.
• Let your child pay, if appropriate, so that she gets used to handling money.
• Have your child be the one to push the button in the elevator or put the key in the lock.
• Every time you cross the street, ask your child if it is safe to cross.
• Review the rules of etiquette for public restrooms.
Child Helping at Grocery Store
Becoming Socially Appropriate

• Address behaviors that disrupt family life and interfere with social appropriateness.
• Insist that your child learn and use good manners.
• Help your child become more flexible about things that go wrong or are unexpected.
Tools and Strategies for Becoming Socially Appropriate

• Engage in role playing with choices:
• Practice thinking about “who can help me with that?”
• Reward the use of good manners.
• Give your child the gift of limits and boundaries. Be consistent in enforcing them.
• Make sure you always model appropriate behavior.
• Address behaviors surrounding privacy and modesty.
Fading Support

• Once a child has acquired a skill, she needs to know when to use it or implement the steps independently without relying upon you.

• Encourage child to ask questions:
  • When do I do this skill?
  • What do I need to do it?
  • Which step comes first?
  • What next?
  • When have I finished the task?

• Rather than telling your child what to do, ask her what she needs to do.

• Practice hypothetical situations:
  • If it is raining, what should you wear?
  • What do we take with us when we go to the beach?
Fading Support: Challenges

• Generalizing is difficult for many children with cognitive disabilities.
• Many children with cognitive disabilities have executive function challenges and struggle with sequencing and planning.
• Motivation can be a problem. Rewards can help.
Help Your Child Assess Whether She Has Done a Good Job

• Teach child to take a look in the mirror to check to see if has done a good job with self-care skills.
• Ask questions: did you miss anything? Are your shoes on the right feet?
Summary

• Break Tasks into Steps.
• Track Progress.
• Prepare and Practice.
• Fade Support.
Resources

- Available at the Parent Resource Center:
- *Model Me: Going Places* -DVD
- The Arc of Northern Virginia (703) 208-1119.
Contact Information

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