

# *Teaching Essential Skills for a Safe and Independent Life*

Suggestions for Families, Educational Staff, Adult Services Staff, Administrators, Mental Health Professionals, Therapists, Peer Mentors, Medical Personnel, and Others

*by Barbara T. Doyle, MS and Emily D. Iland, MA*

Co-authors of **Autism Spectrum Disorders from A to Z**,

Published by Future Horizons, USA 2004

and

**Los Trastornos del Espectro de Autismo de la A a la Z**

Published by Emily Iland, Inc., USA 2005

This information is intended as sharing to help teams plan more effectively.  
All decisions about individuals should be made by the teams supporting them.

All children and adults need to accomplish goals that result in safe and productive lives.  
Here are some guidelines for identifying and addressing ten essential life goals.

## **1. Use only safe behavior: Target the elimination of dangerous or potentially dangerous behavior**

- the criteria for institutionalization against your will and choice is:  
*Danger to self, danger to others*
- could be misunderstood, viewed as a criminal, victimized
- children and adults with ASD can be put in the corrections system or in jail
- teach alternate behaviors for the person to use instead of the dangerous ones

Be sure to teach

- crossing the street with someone or knowing when to move forward into the street with someone else
- moving away from danger
- asking a trusted adult before doing something a stranger says to do
- not to enter other people's homes without permission
- to stay away from bodies of water when they are alone

List behaviors that the child or adult uses that are dangerous or could become dangerous. List alternate behaviors that should be learned.

## **2. Taking complete care of her/his own body: Everyone needs to be independent in the bathroom to the greatest extent possible**

- may not have as many job opportunities if have to be taken to the toilet
- others usually prefer to live with someone who can toilet or bathe on their own (with the exception of physical disabilities)
- being clean and smelling good makes us more acceptable in society (appearance is important)
- potential for sexual abuse is VERY high among people with disabilities and caring for oneself helps to reduce that potential by having private activities done when alone.

Be sure to teach:

- rules regarding privacy for self and others
- as much independence as possible in the bathroom and while dressing

What skills in self-care are needed? Be specific.

## **3. Touching others and being touched appropriately: Who to hug, touch, kiss, and continue to talk to, or follow**

- “circle of friends” concept can be used to teach many different concepts, including concepts of touching
- need to recognize different ways that they be subtly told to go away or stop touching the other person
- need to be able to take “no” for an answer
- need to be able to tell “NO!” and get away and seek help quickly
- need to learn who to touch, how and when
- need to learn who can touch them, how and when

Be sure to teach:

- what to do if you are not sure if someone should touch you or you should touch them, how to seek help or go to a safe place
- how to move away from someone who does not want your attention
- how to move away from someone bothering you and you need to get help

What behavior and skills related to touching, being touched and showing interest in others are needed?

## **4. Respectful use of property: How to touch or use other’s property and knowing how to ask first**

- asking can be verbal, gestural, printed, etc. does not depend on speech
- need to learn how to tell “my” things from someone else’s, perhaps with a visual reminder at first
- need to know how to use property properly and put it back in good condition

Be sure to teach:

- some way to ask before taking something that belongs to someone else
- some way to know the difference between your property and someone else's
- treating things with respect and care
- replacing what you broke or destroyed

How does the child or adult currently react to the property of others? Does s/he understand the underlying concept of property/possessions? What behaviors and skills are needed in this area?

## **5. Knowing two different responses to give when people tell you YES or NO**

- won't always develop automatically, but CAN be learned
- use charts, social stories, choice-making charts, decision trees and videos
- teach physical coping skills (deep breathing, stretching, walking, singing)
- practice in many environments
- practice for new social situations that may arise in the future

Be sure to teach:

- who to talk with to help you cope after receiving an undesired answer
- how to move away and do something else when someone tells you "no" and remain calm

How does the child or adult respond when someone says either yes or no when the child or adult wants to hear the other answer? What kind of coping/communication skills does the child or adult need to learn in this area?

## **6. Knowing from whom to get help, and how and when**

- need to be taught efficient and effective ways of getting safe, adult assistance in all settings
- teach in each situation many different times until they get the concept or provide them with the information if the concept never develops
- create rules (first ask a person with the store uniform or a name tag, for example)
- have a system of identification that every child or adult carries. Teach when and how to give that to authority or helpers
- teach each child or adult to carry a current list of all medications (amounts, types and times administered) being taken
- need to know how to get help from authority figures or police officers, how to respond to their commands including how to remain calm while being questioned or physically searched by an officer

Be sure to teach:

- the "signs" that mean the child or adult needs help
- a way the children or adults can tell their name and address to persons in authority, tell that they need help that does not depend only on speech
- an efficient way to and give information upon request by authority figures
- whom to call to help them if they are having problems
- how to decide who is safe to approach to ask for help in many environments

Note: do not depend on the child or adult's ability to speak in a crisis. Everyone's ability to use speech and language decreases under stressful conditions. Use something written, taped on a tape or CD player, and/or carried in a wallet or purse.

What does the child or adult do when s/he needs help in public? How does s/he identify who can help them? How does s/he ask for help? What skills are needed in this area?

## 7. Learn to identify internal states and express them

- describe feelings or sensations in terms of intensity and level of ability to cope
- a problem coping is not a *tantrum*: language to describe is important here
- need to become aware when they may be ill or uncomfortable and need medical help, and be able to communicate it to others
- need to have a plan to avoid upsetting stimuli and find safe places in all environments for when they become overwhelmed

Be sure to teach:

- pointing or other symbol for something hurts inside
- how to cover ears, dim lights, etc. to increase comfort level (Repeated exposure to something that you cannot tolerate does not make you able to tolerate it!)
- how to move away from an unliked stimulus instead of moving toward it.
- words, signs, or symbols to use. Practice using these signals during a time of low or no stress. Then apply it during emotional/highly stimulating situations
- watch for situations and provide words/symbols for "You feel... (best guess)." "You need to...." "Be sure to provide rewards when individuals talk about internal states.
- refer to the book How Does Your Engine Run by Williams and Shellenberger to teach self-regulation and self-understanding

How does the child or adult identify internal states and communicate about them? What skills are needed?

## 8. Learning to express empathy, sympathy and caring

- friendships become more intimate and meaningful as people share their feelings with one another; it is important to express feelings appropriately to the right person and be a good listener
- while a person may be competent at a job, s/he will not be well-liked if s/he appears "cold" or uncaring. Negative perceptions can affect success on the job and in social settings
- peers, school friends and workmates expect others to be sensitive to their feelings and needs
- being a team player involves understanding and valuing the thoughts and feelings of others; this is a highly valued trait in education, sports and business cultures

Be sure to teach:

- that others have and express feelings "just like me"
- that sometimes people feel the same things I do at the same time
- that sometimes people are feeling a different feeling than me at the same time
- that others like it when we care about their feelings

- physical signs of emotion in others (body language, facial expression) and correct responses
- “danger signs” when someone is angry and could get out of control and how to move away from that person
- specific ways to show empathy and learn to comfort, such as offering a tissue to someone who is crying or getting them a glass of water
- the boundaries and rules of expression of feelings: what can be shared, with whom and when

How does the child or adult show that he understands the feelings of others?

What behavior and skills related to empathy, recognizing and responding to the feelings of others are needed?

## 9. Giving Negative Feedback: protesting, refusing, disagreeing

While many people can learn to follow a sequence of events or a plan, they do not know how to appropriately express “negative” things such as

- I don’t want to \_\_\_\_\_
- I don’t like \_\_\_\_\_
- I disagree with you.
- I think you are wrong.
- I won’t \_\_\_\_\_

Be sure to teach:

- how to identify the feeling when “negativity” is building up
- to find a way to name and express the negative thought or feeling in a way that is not harmful
- to choose and practice options for handling emotion in “negative” situations (practice in advance in supportive environments)
- how to choose words that let someone know that you do not like what they are doing or saying, but you still like them

In what situations is expressing negative feelings, protesting or refusing a problem for the child or adult? What skills are needed?

## 10. Making Plan B...Fixing situations and dealing with the unexpected

- there will always be unexpected occurrences
- people with ASD do not automatically learn how to change their minds or change plans
- situations in which a new plan might be needed should be thought about in advance and practiced in supportive environments and then in the actual places those skills might be needed
- these skills must be systematically taught, not just talked about

Be sure to teach:

- what “unexpected” feels like while it is happening
- how to stop and say, “this is something unexpected”
- how to consider several options that could fix the problem
- to think about the options, and then choose one
- to anticipate the “unexpected” and invent their own options in advance
- that we can choose another option and we are still OK when something unexpected happens

In what situation does the child or adult “fall apart” when something unexpected happens?

What routines does the child or adult have that cannot be changed without upset? What skills are needed?

**List other needed skills:**