

Life after high school, ten skills to teach your child - Diane Adreon, M.A.

Teaching adaptive behavior is one of the areas that are often overlooked for high-functioning individuals with autism spectrum disorders. However, adaptive behaviors have a tremendous impact on our ability to use our skills in common situations in everyday life. The following adaptive behavior skills are important if our children are going to experience success without our daily assistance. Of course, every child is different. Often it is not possible to master these skills by the end of high school. However, most of our children can improve and become more independent if we consciously work on skills in these areas.

1. Teach your child to wake up to an alarm clock. It is common for parents to wake their children for school. However, as your child grows older, it's a good idea to teach him to wake up to an alarm clock. You may have to experiment with buzzers, music, and various degrees of volume. Sometimes, for individuals who are particularly hard to wake, you may need to have them walk across the room to turn off the alarm clock. Eventually, this skill would include having the child learn to set the alarm clock. A more advanced skill would involve developing the child's ability to accurately estimate the amount of time needed to get ready and determining to what time the alarm should be set.

2. Teach your child to refer to a clock and/or watch to complete a task in a certain period of time. A visual timer, such as the Time Timer*, may be helpful. The Time Timer dial graphically shows the child how much time is left. One way to begin teaching this is to have the child guess how long the task will take and then comparing how long the task really took to accomplish.

3. Teach your child grooming (shower or bathe within the last 24 hours, hair combed or brushed, deodorant, clean clothes). Our children find routines comforting. Therefore, help your child establish healthy routines. Many children find it easier (in the long run) to follow rules such as having a shower or bath every day, rather than every two to three days. Specifically teach your child each step in washing properly (i.e., 4 times across each armpit with a soapy washcloth). Poor hygiene is a problem poorly tolerated by the community (Peter Gerhardt, personal communication).

4. Teach your child to be responsible for his/her belongings. Start with things such being responsible to keep track of the toy train that he/she brought to your relative's house or into the car. Build into the routine that it is the youngster's responsibility to find the toy after the visit, bring it to the car, & bring the toy from the car into the house. Progress to items such as school backpack & supplies.

5. Teach your child to learn to use visual cues to remember tasks. This might be keeping medicine in a certain place, so he/she remembers to take it at breakfast each morning. Or, it might mean, writing lunch on a piece of paper & taping it onto the school backpack to remember to bring lunch.

6. Teach your child how to cook. Young children can learn to make a sandwich and prepare snacks that do not require cooking. Later, teach your child to follow a recipe independently and use kitchen appliances safely.

7. Teach your child to use the phone. Start by teaching your child to answer the phone, take a message & relay the message to the appropriate person. Progress to skills such as calling information to obtain a phone number, calling a store to see if they have a particular item in stock, calling technical support to fix a computer problem, and ordering take-out food.

8. Teach your child how to go places independently. This may be walking to areas nearby, riding a bike, using public transportation or driving.

9. Teach your child to carry certain items when he/she leaves the house. This would include: Important phone number, money, house key, and possibly a cell phone.

10. Teach your child about personal safety. Consider skills such as knowing who to hug and kiss, and when it is more appropriate to shake hands, how to discretely carry money, NOT giving personal information to others over the internet, and what to do if you are walking down the street & someone unfamiliar approaches you or you feel that you are being followed.