



PREPARING FOR THE REAL WORLD: INDEPENDENCE AND LIFE SKILLS

Maureen Bennie



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
What Life Skills do our Kids with Autism Need to Succeed?	4-7
Critical Mass - Building in Practice Time for Individuals with ASD	8-11
Executive Function: What is it, and How do we Support it in Those with Autism?	12-15
Supporting Executive Function in Children with Autism	16-19
7 Household Chores for a Child with ASD	20-22
How to Teach Money Management for Independent Living with Autism	23-25
What's Cooking? Life Skills for Kids with Autism!	26-28
Getting Summer Work Experience for Those with Autism	29-32
Author Biography	33

INTRODUCTION

Life skills encompass a broad range of skills such as cooking, self-care, household chores, employment, personal safety, self-advocacy, money management, and executive function skills. Practice of these skills is on-going and ever changing as needs, circumstances, and goals evolve.

These skills are practiced from a young age and often begin at home with household chores. School programs should provide instruction on life skills because of the length of time it takes to reach mastery of a skill. Employment or volunteering provides more scope for the acquisition of skills and training.

While we often think of life skills leading to independence, we also need to think of “interdependence” because none of us truly functions alone. We all depend on others to help us with tasks we aren’t good at, we share the workload in a job or community, we offer to do things we can do, and we work in partnership with community members to ensure our health, safety and well-being.

Knowledge, understanding and the successful execution of life skills can enhance quality of life, increase self-esteem, and support overall well-being. Contributing in a meaningful way at home, school, on the job, or in the community fosters a feeling of satisfaction and happiness.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



WHAT LIFE SKILLS DO OUR KIDS WITH AUTISM NEED TO SUCCEED?

At some point we all have to face our children growing up. For those of us with kids on the spectrum, this milestone can seem even more daunting. For some parents, even [getting their kids into winter clothing](#) can seem next to impossible, so teaching other life skills can seem overwhelming. Even the word “succeed” might be misleading. Each child with autism will have a different measure of success. For some, putting on clothing, remembering to eat, or simply being able to navigate daily tasks will be the goal. For others, it will be remembering to get to class, or performing tasks at their jobs. Now that my children are in their 20’s, I am starting to see some of the early work on life skills paying off in certain areas. In some areas, they might always need support (don’t we all?). Below is a helpful list of categories for the basic skills necessary to meet individual levels of success.

The seven categories of life skills necessary for success for people with ASD

1) Executive functioning skills

These are organizational skills that are needed to plan the day, break down a task, create a “to do” list, and plan ahead for chores, outings etc... It will be an on-going process to build this skill, as it is something that is challenging for most of those with ASD. Michelle Garcia Winner, SLP, offers excellent advice and exercises to build executive functioning skills for high-functioning individuals through her [Social Thinking Program](#). Joyce Cooper-Kahn’s book, [Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents’ Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning](#), is a must have for any parent or caregiver for a child with autism.

2) Practical living skills

These skills encompass finding information (internet, books, newspapers etc.), money skills (budgeting, bank accounts, credit cards, making change), travel (reading a map, using transportation, planning a trip), clothing (care, laundering, organizing), home care (garbage day, housecleaning, doing dishes) cooking, and shopping. One of the best ways to teach these skills is through involving your child in your daily routine, rather than doing everything for them. The earlier you include your child in activities such as [cooking](#), cleaning, and laundry, the longer they have to develop comfort and routines in these important areas.

Superstore offers a cooking/shopping program for people with disabilities in Edmonton, AB. The program involves choosing a recipe, shopping for the groceries, then preparing the food. Check with your local grocery store, or kitchen shop to see if they offer (or are interested in offering) such a program. There are many resources available for segments of this kind of learning. [Please check our Resources page](#) for classes, courses, or support in your area.

3) Personal care

This would involve personal daily hygiene, exercise, nutrition, dealing with an illness such as a cold, and coping with stress. Create and rehearse relaxation routines, make task breakdown lists for showering, toileting or toothbrushing if steps are missed without prompting. Some of my favorite resources for teaching hygiene to youth is [101 Tips for the Parents of Boys with Autism](#) or [101 Tips for the Parents of Girls with Autism](#). If these don’t sound like what you are looking for, we have many resources in our [Life Skills Section](#) of our bookstore to check out. There is something for everyone.

4) Job skills

How do you look for a job? Create a resume? Get work experience? Be a good employee? A good place to start to gain job experience may be through volunteer work. If parents volunteer for an organization, take the child along too to gain some experience. My two children have shadowed me in the past at my volunteer position at our local farmer's market. They will get to know the vendors which could perhaps lead to a job later on.

Other volunteer avenues to try are through churches, sports clubs, Guides or Scouts, museums, parks and recreation, the library – the list is endless. Try to find a good fit with the child's interests.

5) Personal safety

A tough topic to teach! Many children will memorize rules like don't talk to strangers, but will not know when to break those rules if necessary. Under stress, some people lose their ability to speak. It may be a good idea to carry around a card with a few statements on it for those stressful moments when it can be hard to gather one's thoughts. Teach what risks are, and how to avoid unsafe situations. For example, one rule may be not to use public transportation after dark if in a big city. Another may be not to do favors for an unfamiliar person. An excellent book to start off the topic with younger children is [*An Exceptional Children's Guide to Touch: Teaching Social and Physical Boundaries to Kids*](#). It has a number of short stories that illustrate different kinds of touch from accidental to friendly to harmful and helps to illustrate appropriate boundaries.

6) People skills

This would fall under the topic of social skills. Areas that need to be developed are working in a group, making friends, asking for help, dealing with family relationships, communicating over the phone, conversation, etc. Social skill is a broad topic. Although social rules and etiquette can be taught, if the child is high functioning enough, think about teaching flexibility in thinking and perspective-taking. Good books for this are [*Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success*](#), [*Thinking About You, Thinking About Me*](#), and [*Teaching Children with Autism to Mind Read*](#).

7) Self-advocacy

A topic that is often forgotten - children need to be taught how to get their needs met effectively. They need to know how and when to ask questions, who to approach for help, when to give their opinion, and how to say no. Judy Endow – one of my favorite authors on the spectrum – wrote a blog post that opened my eyes to what seems like an [implicit problem of class for those with disabilities](#), which makes teaching self-advocacy more important than ever. Two books that do a great job of outlining how to provide your child with self-advocacy skills are: [Ask And Tell](#), and [Autism Life Skills: From Communication and Safety to Self-Esteem and More](#).

The acquisition of life skills is an on-going process. All skills take time to acquire and become fluent with. It is ideal to start working on all of these skills while the child still lives at home. Make sure your child's school has a life skills program as this should be an integral part of every child's education. My top recommended life skills books to start with for both teachers, therapists and parents are Darlene Mannix's [Life Skills Activities for Special Children](#) or [Life Skills Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs](#) and [Tasks Galore for the Real World](#), suitable for ages 10 and up.

A topic that is often forgotten - children need to be taught how to get their needs met effectively. They need to know how and when to ask questions, who to approach for help, when to give their opinion, and how to say no.



CRITICAL MASS - BUILDING IN PRACTICE TIME FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH ASD

There is a new area of study emerging in autism called critical mass which means true mastery of a skill. Critical mass is the point where an individual has gained enough information to be successful in situations, activities, or skills for which instruction has not been provided. When there has been enough instruction and multiple experiences, a tipping point can occur and the person can apply the skill in many new ways.

Explicit instruction is required for those with ASD

Neurotypical people gain critical mass in the areas of social, communication, and basic living skills simply by implicit learning, not through being taught in school. For people with autism, they need explicit instruction in these areas throughout their school years and beyond in order to gain these skills. They won't learn these skills without direct instruction. This is what makes the leap out of school and into employment or independence so difficult – these skills have not been mastered as they are not taught in school like academics are. Reading, writing, and mathematics may be acquired upon graduation, but the social, communication and living skills pieces are missing which make a successful adulthood difficult to achieve.

To obtain critical mass, skills have to be practiced hundreds of times. Opportunities for practice can be provided at home, school, and in the community.

Here are four areas that can offer practice across a range of activities

1) Volunteering

[Volunteering](#) provides an important opportunity to prepare for the world of work. People with ASD need time and experience to build skills and feel comfortable out in the community. Volunteering within a preferred interest can help a person meet other like-minded people who share their passion for that activity.

My children began [volunteering every summer at a Farmer's Market at ages 13 and 11](#). At that job, they learned how to report to a manager, follow simple instructions, carry out tasks in a specific order, practice conversation skills, problem-solving, punctuality, and how to look presentable at a work site.

As a result of working at the market, an interesting thing happened to my son, Marc. He incorporated a broader range of foods in to his diet. For years, I had been trying to add new foods without success. At the age of 16, he began to try a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. I believe this was due to repeated exposure to them at the market, getting to know the vendors/growers of the produce, and seeing the produce in a less overwhelming environment. Grocery stores have bright lights, large displays, background music and lots of people in a small area. The Market has none of those factors; displays are small and the choices are not as broad. I also think Marc took such pride in this job, that eating what he saw at work made him think about work and how much he liked the job.

Julia, now 20, is successfully volunteering at a cat care facility. She has wanted to work with cats since she was 13 years old. Because she came to that position with her experience from the Farmer’s Market, she knew how to sign in for work, report to a manager, and perform tasks in a specific order. In essence, she had gained critical mass from the other job to be able to do this one successfully.

2) Using an interest

Every person has [interests](#) that they enjoy and find motivating. You need to use that interest to provide multiple opportunities for skills practice.

For example, my son loves numbers. The great thing about numbers is that they are everywhere. I started using the numbers interest to teach how to use a self check-out at the grocery store, how to read a price tag, finding library books through call numbers which also taught decimals, telling time digitally, reading a gas pump, money, counting bottles for recycling – just an endless list of practical tasks. The practice of reading numbers comes up continually. As a result of this constant practice in real-life situations, Marc knows his numbers into the millions now.

I see parents helping their adult children start a business based on an interest that they practice repeatedly. Brad, a 28-year-old with autism from Edmonton, started a company called [Made by Brad](#). He loves to [put furniture together](#) and turned his interest into a business. He has had lots of practice over the years with many different projects to gain mastery of this skill.

My daughter, Julia, loves to bake, but she wants to have a purpose for baking. Her local autism society has given her the chance to come and bake for the staff one afternoon a week. They also share the treats she makes at meetings. By having this weekly baking practice, she is getting more independent with the baking process, reading and following directions, and expanding her recipe repertoire.

Schools that have kitchens could open these up for cooking practice and the creations enjoyed by others. Sitting down to a meal together creates a natural opportunity for socializing as well.

Every person has interests that they enjoy and find motivating. You need to use that interest to provide multiple opportunities for skills practice.

3) Chores at home

[Chores at home provide great opportunities for skills practice.](#) One example would be sorting. You have to sort laundry, cutlery, groceries (perishables, non-perishables, cleaning products, etc.), clean clothes, socks, sporting equipment, papers, photos – the list is huge. The sorting of different items helps to understand categories and how items are grouped and related. When things are in their proper place, finding them is easy and the home environment is less stressful. I wrote an article about [how to organize](#) the Marie Condo way. Adopting this new system has increased independence throughout our home because things are easy to find and are organized logically.

Having set chores like emptying the dishwasher provides daily practice. There is also a sense of accomplishment when things are done. Starting chores at a young age gives many years of practice to get it right. You can add more difficult chores when simpler chores are mastered. Not sure what chores your child can do? Here are [some ideas](#) to try. Chores can also be a shared experience providing an opportunity for informal socializing and conversation.

4) School

There is an endless array of activities to do in school which provides the opportunity for interaction, communication, socializing, self-regulation and skill-building. Here are a few articles/websites that suggest different activities:

- [Activities for Preschoolers to Teens](#)
- [Social, Sensory and Calming Activities](#)
- [Inclusive Classroom Ideas – Paula Kluth](#)
- [Life Skills Activities](#)
- [The Life Skills Room](#)

Providing opportunities to practice skills across a wide variety of contexts will eventually lead to mastery and generalization of that skill. I am seeing this happen all the time because skills practiced at home are then taken to a job or independence in self-care is increased. Remember – there is no cap on learning and it happens continually over the lifespan. I’m still learning new things all the time!

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Excelling With Autism: Obtaining Critical Mass Using Deliberate Practice*](#)
- ☰ [*Steps to Independence – Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs*](#)



EXECUTIVE FUNCTION: WHAT IS IT, AND HOW DO WE SUPPORT IT IN THOSE WITH AUTISM?

Executive function is a term that is widely used in autism circles to describe a broad array of skills that have to do with an individual's [cognitive function](#). Some sources say that up to 80% of those with autism suffer from executive function disorder, leading to difficulties managing time, completing tasks, and making what for many of us would be simple tasks – like cleaning our rooms – very complicated or seemingly impossible.

For some people with ASD, social and communication difficulties are not the primary issue. They are socially engaged and are doing their best to communicate frequently, but they are unable to respond in a timely and organized way to the requests of parents and teachers or to organize and initiate sophisticated play because they have considerable difficulty with executive function.

What is executive function?

The technical definition of executive function is the cognitive processes that help us regulate, control and manage our thoughts and actions. It includes planning, working memory, attention, problem solving, verbal reasoning, inhibition, cognitive flexibility, initiation of actions and monitoring of actions. But what does that look like in real life?

Cynthia Kim, in her blog [Musings of an Aspie](#), says:

“In practice, executive function is a slippery concept. Sometimes it looks like responsibility. Sometimes it looks like self-discipline. Sometimes it looks like being a competent adult.

If you have poor EF, people might mistake you for being disorganized, lazy, incompetent, sloppy, or just plain not very bright. Why? Because executive function encompasses so many essential areas of daily living. Nearly everything we do calls on areas of executive function. Cooking. Cleaning. Parenting. Work. School. Self-care.”

One of our contributors, Rebecca Moyes, described executive function this way:

“(Executive function deficits) can be likened to an employee who works for a company where the supervisor is unorganized and inefficient. Nothing seems to go right, things get misplaced, and general chaos seems to be the operational rule. It’s a lot like that for children with autism spectrum disorders. The executive in charge of their brain is not effective, and because of this, planning processes suffer.”

What are the aspects of our executive function

It’s important to know that not all people with ASD have issues with all the aspects of executive function. For instance, an individual might have the ability to plan but lack the initiation to follow through. They might be able to problem solve once they realize there is actually a problem, but are unable to verbalize it. Here is a list of our executive functions and their basic descriptions.

Planning:

Planning is the ability to forward-think and choose the necessary actions to reach a goal, decide the right order, assign each task to the proper cognitive resources, and establish a plan of action. Those on the spectrum can have difficulty formulating plans to get through their days and organize tasks into completable sections.

Problem Solving:

To problem-solve, an individual must identify a problem and then formulate a strategy to solve the problem. Problem-solving uses almost all the other executive functions including reasoning, attention, planning, initiation, working memory, and monitoring. Depending on which of the executive functions the individual struggles with, that is where the problem-solving chain will get broken.

Working Memory:

Individuals on the spectrum notoriously have specific memory deficits and strengths. They can seemingly remember every Jedi name, rank and serial number in all of the Star Wars movies, but have trouble remembering to eat, or what day it is, or what the order of the steps is when brushing teeth. Working memory is the ability to remember specific short term memories needed to execute a function or daily task.

Attention:

Attention is closely tied to working memory, and again those on the spectrum can show great strengths in some areas and severe challenges in others. Individuals with ASD often have a keen ability to focus, but directing that focus can be challenging. If the person with ASD has sensory issues, then it's possible all they will be able to focus their attention on is the sound of the lights buzzing or the smells of the other people in the room. An individual's ability to focus directly affects what they can keep in and recall from their short term memory.

Individuals with ASD often have a keen ability to focus, but directing that focus can be challenging.

Reasoning:

Reasoning, or verbal reasoning, is the ability to understand, analyze and think critically about concepts presented in words, and then relay them back or integrate them successfully. Many of those on the spectrum struggle with verbal acuity. Verbal reasoning can also be hindered by social meanings that are not obvious to those with autism.

Initiation:

Initiation is the ability to start an activity, plan, or task. For those with executive function difficulties with initiation, they may want to play a certain game, do their homework, or play an instrument, but unless the activity is initiated by someone else it doesn't happen. It has nothing to do with desire, or "want" – it is about lacking the function of "just doing it".

Inhibition:

Inhibition is impulse control; the ability to have emotional, cognitive or physical reactions that aren't acted upon in the moment. So when a person with ASD starts "information downloading" all the names and songs of their favorite 500 K-pop groups, this would be a lack of cognitive impulse control. Emotional outbursts, hand flapping, or stimming can be emotional and physical ways that impulse control isn't in place, (although [some](#)

[stimming can be soothing](#) and help concentration if controlled and non-harmful). Some children with ASD simply cannot control their impulses sufficiently to participate in structured situations.

Cognitive Flexibility:

Cognitive flexibility in simple terms is the ability to roll with the punches. Those with autism are well known to need structure and [predictability](#), and change can be very challenging. This can also lead to rigidity of thoughts and opinions, as well as schedules and routines.




Monitoring:

Monitoring is normally an unconscious process that kicks in when we are on autopilot doing normal tasks. For instance, if you are walking down the street and talking to someone at the same time, normally only a small part of your brain is engaged in walking. You already know how to walk, so the monitoring part of the brain takes over and keeps you from bumping into things while you have your chat. For someone with executive function issues, if they were tired or overloaded, they would suddenly have problems with the “autopilot” settings on basic activities, dropping or bumping into things, or simply not being able to pay attention in ways that could be hazardous like walking out onto a busy street.

How do we help individuals with autism overcome executive function challenges?

Executive function is something that most of us take for granted. We might have challenging areas here and there, maybe we aren’t as organized as we would like, or maybe we lack some initiative or self-control, but for those with executive function disorder, even the basics can be hard. So how can we help? We will go over some ideas on how to help in the next section.

For further reading:

-  [*Autism and Everyday Executive Function – A Strengths-Based Approach for Improving Attention, Memory, Organization and Flexibility*](#)
-  [*Executive Function “Dysfunction” – Strategies for Educators and Parents*](#)
-  [*Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom: A Practical Guide for Educators*](#)



SUPPORTING EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

As was outlined in the last section, executive function disorder affects many of those with autism in ways that can make tasks that most of us find quite simple, very challenging. Laura Munoz, an occupational therapist in Nelson, BC, supports many children on the spectrum to develop executive function (EF) skills. When asked what she thinks is the biggest learning curve, she said:

“One of the biggest things for people to realize is just how much of an effect EF challenges have on your day-to-day life and on your child’s day-to-day life. It crosses all kinds of domains: from getting out of debt to getting out of bed, getting dressed, managing school, managing your social life, being able to prioritize between things you want to do and things you need to do. It kind of feeds into everything we do in our days and weeks.”

Ms. Munoz points out that – like social skills – for many of us EF is something we “just sort of learn”. Like other implicit behavior skills (for instance, being able to read body language, etc...), EF is something that we “just kind of pick up” from being around people. “When you have EF challenges, you just don’t pick it up,” explains Munoz. “At that point, it needs to be explicitly taught and knowing how to do that is essential.”

The good news? Children are still developing their executive function skills [well into their 20’s](#). That means that there is a lot of time to help them grow and develop specific procedures they can use to help them in the areas they are most challenged.

How can parents help support their children with their executive function skills?

1) Use visual supports to teach organization

There are many great tools, and articles on this topic. [You can buy pre-made visual supports, or make your own](#). They can be printed out photographs, or drawings. Having some sort of visual representation of what things go where, and in what steps, so that the child has a clear image of where they are going, and what it is supposed to look like then they get there is incredibly helpful. When your child is getting ready to leave for the day, if there is a picture of what goes in the backpack that they can refer to, then they will know if they have packed their water, lunch, extra clothing, etc...

2) Break down tasks into smaller parts

For those with executive function disorder, getting ready to leave for school in the morning can be an overwhelming task. If you break that task down into parts, it’s much easier. Get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, go to the spot where your bag lives, pack the bag according to the visual aid that is next to the bag. Then shoes, then coat, etc... “With one family, the child felt confused when his mother wanted him to clean the kitchen,” explained Munoz. “He wasn’t sure what that meant, so we broke it down into sections and took a picture of what each space (cutlery drawer, sink, counters) looked like when it was cleaned the way Mom wanted.”

3) Have clear spaces where things go

“I was recently helping a teacher with a large class and many different kinds of children to organize her class” recounted Munoz. “The teacher was frustrated because the children didn’t have designated seats, so the water bottles the kids brought every day just went everywhere because they didn’t have a space. We made a box with a piece of tape with a picture of water bottles, and then we explained to the children it was the water bottle parking spot.” Have designated spaces with pictures above them: this is your basket where your hats and mitts go, here is where your shoes go, here is where the garbage goes. Eventually, it will become second nature.

4) Don’t come to the rescue

Parents often develop and model amazing EF skills while they juggle kids, pets, jobs, and each other. Those parents often step in seamlessly when their kids are having trouble with a skill set that is so strong in the parent. Stepping in to organize your child’s bag, driving them to school with endlessly forgotten lunches or homework, and cleaning their room for them doesn’t help children learn to do these things for themselves. It does take more time to set up a learning process, to wait and give your child a chance to do it on their own first, but ultimately the only way to work on EF is to set up ways to help, and then practice doing it.

5) Set aside lots of time and lots of patience

How much time? Extra time - more time than it would take you to do it. For some parents and kids, this means doing it the night before. It will take longer than you think, but you want to give them the time to do as much of it on their own as you can so that they can learn. If you are really in a hurry at any point, choose a different time for learning skills. There are always opportunities and no need for extra stress if you are pressed for time.

Stepping in to organize your child’s bag, driving them to school with endlessly forgotten lunches or homework, and cleaning their room for them doesn’t help children learn to do these things for themselves.

Get help if you need it: executive function development is not only a parent's job

Munoz also wanted to express she's not advocating that parents do this entirely on their own. It's not just a parental responsibility to make sure our children learn skills around executive function. It's also teachers and child care or support workers; every adult that engages with that child has the responsibility for teaching those skills because, for a lot of kids, they are not just implicitly picked up. Seek help from an occupational therapist or other professionals when you need support or to get you started. It does take longer to set up processes to help our kids at the beginning. It can be especially challenging because trying to teach something you never actually had to "learn" is hard, but the rewards for a child's self-esteem and ultimately their further independence is worth it.

Even though [toilet training](#) Marc was a challenge, it was worth it. He gained a new level of independence and confidence. Marc was so proud of himself. As parents, we were relieved to have achieved this milestone, one that we are still celebrating fourteen years later.

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Late, Lost and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*](#)
- ☰ [*Smart But Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential*](#)
- ☰ [*Organizing the Disorganized Child – Simple Strategies to Succeed in School*](#)



7 HOUSEHOLD CHORES FOR A CHILD WITH ASD

While many of us learn to dislike our chores or household duties, we all like the feeling that we can help! Household chores can be loads of fun, especially for younger children who actively look for ways to participate. For those on the spectrum, household chores can be a way to improve or create self-esteem, and ultimately lead towards more independence in the future. They can also be a great activity to share with grandparents or family and friends who might not necessarily know how to interact with a child who is on the spectrum. Some chores may eventually be tackled on their own, and some may always need to be a shared experience with a parent or caregiver. Either way, your child will feel a sense of pride and accomplishment at being able to contribute and enjoy some time with you!

Next are some of my children's favorite household chores with some suggestions as to how to engage your child with autism or other disabilities.

1) Watering plants

This is a number one hands down crowd pleaser for all ages. Who doesn't love to pour water and keep plants happy at the same time?

Tip: For an older child or high functioning child, put a popsicle stick into each plant with a color code of how much or how little water they need. Fashion a juice container into your watering can, with different levels that match the different colors coded onto your stick.

2) Folding laundry

For some people, a perfectly folded item of clothing is sheer heaven. Making little neat – maybe even color organized – stacks of clothing can be very satisfying. One suggestion I read online was to use a [Flip-Fold](#) laundry folder. Some kids might find it fun to use a gadget and supposedly it makes it look professional. Other kids might just enjoy folding without the use of a potentially frustrating gadget.

Tip: It can be better to start with smaller items like socks and underwear, before you tackle that button-down shirt. Sometimes kids are more engaged when they are folding their *own* laundry first. Allow your helper to organize by size or color or by person, if that seems to be something they would like to do.

3) Emptying the dishwasher

I normally start this learning curve with the cutlery – after first removing any sharp knives. Sorting utensils can be fun and learning to deal with dishes is a good skill set for later in life. Slowly work your way into plates and then glassware once you can be sure that there won't be breakage. The key is to build on success and develop confidence.

4) Vacuuming

Mostly for older kids, vacuuming can develop into kind of a passion. Lots of children on the spectrum are fascinated with machines – but there are an equal amount that cannot stand the sound or noise. Suss out if your child would be interested, and then give them a small area, or area rug, to start with.

Tip: Take a cup of baking soda, add some essential oils, and you have a cheap, toxic-free deodorizer that doubles as a clear place for your child to vacuum. Some kids find it hard to know *where* they should be vacuuming, but vacuuming up your natural deodorizer will make it easy. Mix the soda and a few drops of oils up, use a sieve to shake it out on your carpets, let it sit on your carpets for five minutes, and then away you go! It's easy to see where to vacuum, and easy to feel good about cleaning up the powdery mess.

5) Making the bed

All children can learn to enjoy the delights of climbing into a well-made bed... even if all they have is a comforter. You can either use visual aids, show them yourself, or use one of the [many videos online](#).

6) Simple food prep

This will be child dependent. Some children can slowly be taught to use knives and cut food. Others will be able to help with food prep like hulling peas or shucking corn. No matter the level, most children will be able to tackle part of the food preparation for a snack or meal. In fact, preparing food can be a great way to get a child interested in eating foods they might normally reject.

7) Feeding a pet

So much research has been done around the [benefits of animals](#) for those with autism or other disabilities. Feeding and caring for that pet is another way for a child with autism to bond and feel responsible for the animal. If the child is a bit fearful or uncomfortable with the pet, being a part of the food ritual is a nice way to connect without having to get too close.

Tip: Use a specific container and mark the line where the food is supposed to be filled up to. If feeding a dog, make sure the dog waits until he is given a signal before he goes ahead and eats the food that has been put down to minimize any stress.

Preparing food can be a great way to get a child interested in eating foods they might normally reject.



HOW TO TEACH MONEY MANAGEMENT FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING WITH AUTISM

Becoming an independent adult with ASD involves a large skill set that needs to be planned out over the lifetime of your child. Money management is no different. Being able to pay for items and stick to a budget is a barrier to successful independence. Many people – even those without autism- can't manage finances or handle money responsibly, directly impacting their quality of life and ability to live on their own.

A study, “[Financial Capabilities Among Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#),” was conducted through the University of Missouri and was intended to shed light on exactly this issue. The study was conducted by interviewing youth with ASD between 16-25 and found that most individuals not only recognized that financial understanding was an essential part of being independent adults, but also felt very frustrated with their money management skill-set, or lack thereof.

Money management is not seen as an important part of the curriculum for ASD children

While most of the early years for children with autism are spent in all kinds of therapy and lessons, most of those are around verbal or reading literacy and normalizing behaviors. For most children, no time is spent at all learning about money.

“Despite the importance of financial autonomy and the increased independence that comes from understanding money, financial management and decision-making often are seen as outside the purview of professionals working with young people with autism,” said Clark Peters, co-author of the study and associate professor in the [MU School of Social Work](#). “Educational programs that include financial literacy in both schools and independent living programs could increase autonomy and quality of life for people with autism.”

So how can we help those with autism learn to manage money?

As with learning anything when you have ASD the more ingrained, it becomes at an early age, the better. It would be excellent if educational institutions recognized the importance of financial planning and incorporated it into early education programs. Until then, parents can help by addressing money as early as possible, just like any of the other life skills you want to help your child develop.

[Regions Bank](#) in the United States has made 1500 of its branches autism-friendly. Along with employee training, each branch has a designated quiet area and sensory bags with items meant to help those feeling overwhelmed. There is a green stress ball and earbuds to help block out sound. Hopefully more banks in Canada and globally will adopt these kinds of measures, but in the meantime here are some things you can do to help your child improve their money management skills.

As with learning anything when you have ASD the more ingrained, it becomes at an early age, the better.

1) Have your child pay for items at the store

If you have a quick errand to run, this can be a good time to start allowing your child to pay for small grocery amounts.

Tip for success: make sure it is a store the child knows and feels comfortable in, preferably with a cashier that your child has already met. Choose a time when the store isn't busy so that neither your child or other shoppers get frustrated.

2) Give your child an allowance and help them save up for special items

While there is some controversy around whether or not [your child should be “paid” for chores](#), most sources agree that giving your child a weekly allowance allows them to earn their own money and begins the idea of savings and budgeting. The key here is to enable your child to come up with a “dream buy”, and then help them save for that item or experience.

Tip for success: try not to judge or influence your child's choice of item that they want to save for. It doesn't need to be practical or what you would like. The key here is to give them the inspiration to *want* to save and then teach them the process of how to do it.

3) Set up a bank account for your child

Many banks have free accounts or special accounts for children. Helping your child set up an account at a young age allows them lots of time to become accustomed to how a bank account works. Even though many of us bank online, it's a good idea is to start taking your child at a young age to the bank in person. Get them used to the building, process, and even the individual tellers.

Tip for success: choose banking times or hours when there aren't many people in there. You can call the bank to find out when that might be. If your child has a favorite teller, ask if you can come in during that time.

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Life Skills Activities for Special Children, 2nd. Edition*](#)
- ☰ [*Teaching Math to People with Down Syndrome and Other Hands-On Learners: Basic Survival Skills – 2nd. Edition*](#)
- ☰ [*Steps to Independence – Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs*](#)



WHAT'S COOKING? LIFE SKILLS FOR KIDS WITH AUTISM!

Cooking can be loads of fun to do with your kids. It's a great way to teach some independence and give your child some control over their diet. For those of us with children on the spectrum, cooking can seem like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be! Teaching my kids to cook has been one of the more rewarding challenges in my life and offers some great quality time for all of us. I've also noticed that my kids are more likely to eat something if they had been involved in the preparation process.

In order to get the most out of the experience for both parent and child, it is important to understand the four main challenges when teaching cooking to kids with autism. These challenges were laid out for me by [Penny Gill from her website and lecture Cooking with Autism](#), and they were essential to our success.

1) Sensory challenges: touch and smell

Sensory challenges faced in the cooking realm are aversions to certain textures like a slimy texture – the feeling of raw meat or a peeled hard-boiled egg. Penny suggested wearing non-latex medical gloves because they are thin and still provide sensory input. Use an onion slicer with foods such as an egg to avoid having to handle the food item.

If your child is young, try exposing them to play situations with various textures such as Magic Sand or slime to de-sensitize them. There is a great book called [Fun with Messy Play](#) that has many ideas and recipes for making items to introduce textures.

Certain smells can also be challenging such as onion fumes. People with ASD are often more sensitive to smells. If onions are a problem, try using Vidalia or Sweet Colossus onions because they emit fewer fumes. Refrigerating an onion before cutting it cuts down on the smell too. Penny showed us onion goggles which look like swimming goggles but you can see perfectly fine out of them. They protect the eyes from onion fumes. My daughter wore these goggles in her culinary arts class at school. What a great idea!

2) Motor challenges

Motor challenges tend to be under-addressed and less obvious, but paramount to cooking. Lower muscle tone affects forearm strength which is needed for cutting. Underdeveloped fine motor skills affect how a person holds utensils. Problems with gradation impact how much pressure is needed for different activities such as slicing bread as opposed to a tomato, grating a lemon vs. cheese, etc... There is difficulty with modulating pressure, coordination of arm movements like for tossing a salad, and adjustment of movements for a task like peeling an apple. Adapting a movement can be difficult.

These challenges are not insurmountable. They can be addressed by how the skill is taught. One suggestion is doing a physical demonstration beside the person, not in front of them, using line drawings, and verbal prompts or cues on how to perform a task functionally. Hand over hand support can help with movement and gradation issues. Try different types of the same utensil because some work better than others. Don't remove hand over hand support too early because incorrect motor habits can result. Remember that hand over hand is meant to be supportive and not for forcing a person to do something.

An important note about correcting a person: By the time people with ASD reach adolescence, they are often discouraged by making mistakes because of their long history with them. It is better to provide the necessary support so the person performs the task correctly rather than letting them make a mistake, then correcting them. One to one support can really help with this.

If your child is having issues with your regular tools, think about using alternative utensils to ones you know: use a garlic twist rather than a garlic press, use a microplane for zesting rather than the big square grater, peel an orange with a [Tupperware Orange Peeler](#).

3) Following directions

Processing information is difficult for people with ASD so recipes need to be broken down into manageable parts.

- First, list the utensils and appliances needed.
- Then list the ingredients in their full form, not the way they need to be put into the recipe (ex. rather than say diced, peeled, sliced, etc., say one carrot, one apple etc.)
- Now list the instructions and break them down into manageable steps. Yes – there may be 3 pages for a recipe, but there is also the chance for cooking independence which is the goal.

4) Be creative with food aversions

How do you handle food aversions and other eating challenges? Find something similar to something they already like. If a child likes spice cake then try carrot cake. Often an aversion is not to the taste of the food itself but to some other aspect such as presentation or texture. I love eggs but will not eat them poached or soft-boiled because I hate the texture of a soft yolk. I do enjoy them scrambled.

Cooking and sharing a meal is a great way to develop social skills

Learning how to cook is a skill that can lead to greater independence and possibly a job within the food industry. It can also be a way to make community and family connections. Churches, clubs and organizations have pot lucks, communities have bake sales for fundraisers, and families have get-togethers and are often asked to bring a dish. What a sense of accomplishment to be able to contribute in a meaningful way!

Learning how to understand and target these challenges made me feel empowered and motivated to get my son and daughter more involved with the cooking at home. Children are more apt to try a new dish they've made themselves, thus expanding their food repertoire. By including them in meal preparation, they have a greater connection with what they are eating and it gives them one more step towards independence.

Visit Penny's website at www.cookingwithautism.com to learn more about her cooking school, buy her cookbook, or try some of her recipes. Any community could get a program like this going with the right instructors. Penny is also very open and willing to share her ideas.



GETTING SUMMER WORK EXPERIENCE FOR THOSE WITH AUTISM

When summer vacation approaches, it's time for some older children with autism to contemplate getting summer work experience. Creating independence for a child with autism and helping them become [successfully employed later on in life](#) can be dependent on how much early experience they can get. Finding a proper fit can be challenging, especially when you have two children on the spectrum like I do. When they were still in their early teens, I found an opportunity for my children, Marc and Julia, to volunteer at our local weekly farmer's market.

Volunteering is a great way to start

While the farmer's market volunteer opportunity wasn't paid, Marc and Julia learned a variety of skills that served them well as they moved towards adulthood.

Responsibility:

The kids were assigned specific jobs that had to be done at certain times. Marc learned pylons have to be set up first in the parking lot, otherwise vendors don't know where to put their stalls. Julia understood that the pop and water coolers had to be filled first and ice put in so that the drinks would be cold enough by the time the market started.

Punctuality:

You have to be there at the job on time and ready to go. We needed a few minutes to gather ourselves so we arrived early each week. You have to allow time to prepare before the shift actually starts.

Wearing a uniform/dressing appropriately:

Although the market dress code was casual, the kids still had to come with clean, pressed clothes, hair and teeth brushed, and faces washed. This is a habit every time we leave the house. Marc and Julia had to wear an apron that identified them as market volunteers. It wasn't their favorite piece of clothing, but one that was essential to the job.

Manager's role:

We learned what a manager does on a job site. We go to the manager with questions and follow her requests. We seek her out when problems arise. We ask her what needs to be done next if we aren't sure.

Coping with new things:

The market was different each week because new people came to the market each week, vendors changed, and weather could be unpredictable. Marc has an intense fear of dogs but was able to cope with them being at the market on a leash. Julia kept him calm and he wasn't able to run away on the job site.

Manners:

We learned how important manners are in keeping people happy and customer service at its best. Julia worked up to asking vendors if they would like anything to drink, bringing their order to their stalls, and then collecting the money.

Different people on different shifts:

One week, our regular market manager was on holidays so we had a different one whose style was not the same. The kids had to work with different volunteers on each shift. This experience helped them realize that each shift isn't the same even though the job site is in the same place. Things change from week to week.

Expectations increase with experience:

As Marc and Julia became more familiar with the market, their job responsibility increased. We did put a cap on it, though. Predictability is key to keeping anxiety levels in check. Adding one new thing to the job roster each week was plenty.

Delaying gratification:

The kids wanted to work for certain items. Marc wanted 2 DVD's and Julia wanted a Playmobil Pool. Since the pool was more expensive than the DVD's, Julia had to work 4 shifts to get the pool. Marc got a DVD after every 2 shifts. Both learned that a more expensive item takes longer to earn.

The importance of a job well done:

Because there were no behavior problems, the kids followed instructions, were cooperative, polite and hard workers, they were able to continue volunteering every summer. They really wanted to have the market experience again.

*Predictability is key
to keeping anxiety
levels in check*

Ensuring success with first summer work experiences

What I think made this experience such a success was preparation before the job started:

- We used **visual supports** so they knew what to expect: seeing pictures of the market, watching a clip of it on YouTube, visiting the website. We also added a visual schedule at the market that was divided into time slots. Marc carries a little clock with him everywhere so he was in charge of announcing the time for certain job tasks.
- We created **predictability** through knowing the other volunteers through the skating club and by rehearsing expected tasks and through task repetition.
- **Job tasks were assigned based on each child's strength.** Julia was interested in the drinks and enjoyed selling them. Marc's visual memory strength made setting up pylons a breeze. He also liked going around and collecting them once the vendors had set up their stalls. Marc had difficulty speaking to the vendors, but liked to make the rounds with us. Julia could speak to vendors so she took their drink orders.
- **Finding motivation was key too, just like it is for anyone.** Money doesn't mean much to the kids but things do. Working towards something tangible and having a chart to show their progress really worked. They knew when they would receive their earned items and didn't ask for them early, nor did they ask for more than what was pre-arranged.

Volunteering is the way to go to introduce the world of work. All the skills Marc and Julia learned during this experience helped them in school, home and in the community. This was a win-win for all involved. It gave our market volunteers and vendors the chance to work with people with a disability and realize how able they are.

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism – Updated and Expanded Edition*](#)
- ☰ [*Teaching Pre-Employment Skills to 14-17-Year-Olds*](#)
- ☰ [*The Wonderful World of Work: A Workbook for Asperiteens*](#)



Maureen Bennie

Maureen has co-authored books and written over 200 articles and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newsletters and on websites throughout North America and the UK.

Maureen Bennie created the Autism Awareness Centre in 2003 to address what she saw as a gap in support, information, resources and advocacy for those struggling with [autism spectrum disorders](#). For Maureen, education and knowledge brings positive change to the lives of those affected by autism spectrum disorders.

Maureen is the mother of two young adults with autism – Marc and Julia. For 8 years, she managed an at-home Intensive Behavioral Intervention Program which involved working with speech pathologists, child development specialists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists.

Maureen has written over 200 articles and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newsletters, and on websites throughout North America and the UK. She is also an active presenter throughout Canada on autism topics.

Maureen presents on book resources and how to use them, topics in autism, creates book lists for various audiences, writes book reviews for publishers, assesses libraries at organizations and tells them what areas they are lacking up to date information in. She was a contributing author for the SAGE Handbook of *Autism and Education* published by SAGE, in September 2019.

[Maureen's weekly blog](#) post topics range from her personal experience as a parent of two children on the autism spectrum to detailed coverage of top news stories, events, and resources concerning autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

Maureen's writing provides peer-to-peer support and information for educational and advocacy purposes only. As she is not a medical professional, Maureen's writing should not be seen as providing medical advice.

Signup for our Newsletter



[Click here](#)

Connect with us on:



[Facebook](#)



[Twitter](#)