

Areas that Promote Independence - "I can do this!"

This article was initially written for interventionists working with children with ASD. We believe that parents could learn from it as they would be able to apply concepts and strategies presented in their family and daily life.

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Last week, we discussed the importance of developing independence in our learners (Independence Among Learners with ASD). Today, we highlight five areas that will promote independence in children with ASD.

1. Develop Communication

Developing communication skills is the very first step to accessing independence. In the case of Dominic (Independence Among Learners with ASD), the boy's limitation in verbal communication led to problematic behaviours caused by frustration when he could not express what he wanted to eat. When his parents started to use the communication system used by school staff, there was a decrease in both frustration and in challenging behaviour. Teaching how to request using written words, gestures, technologies or images can help a learner take initiative and fulfill their needs.

Note: This document does not constitute clinical advice, but rather serves as an example of an effective practice for a particular student. Intervention plans should be based upon assessment, and evidence-based teaching strategies should be carefully selected according to the child's needs, and learning profile.

2. Encourage Personal Care and Chores

Tasks related to personal care and chores can be integrated into daily routine from an early age. These tasks can be adapted as the child gets older. To show a child how to do a specific task with the least help, you can use a variety of tools that have shown to be effective:

- A sequence of images that illustrate the steps to follow
- A video modelling
- A checklist (with images or texts)
- A visual planning
- A timer to encourage the completion of the task within a reasonable time period

A list of age-appropriate chores can be found on the Internet. Periodically review the kind of tasks that are required from a child to make sure it is adapted to the his/her development and also to prevent boredom. Dominic's parents, for example, showed their son how to set the table using placemats that illustrate where each utensil goes.

3. Introduce Leisure Activities

Individuals with ASD can have restricted interests and exhibit stereotyped behaviours (i.e. when Dominic jumps from furniture over and over again).

An increase in communication combined with access to rich environment of leisure activities can reduce stereotyped behaviours. However, children with ASD often need help to learn how to play. You can prepare a list of the child's preferences. To do so, expose the child to a variety of toys and activities and observe whether or not he or she shows an interest. You can teach how to play using modelling, either by an adult or other child. Some children quickly get bored with an activity, so it would be a good idea to have a good number of different activities available to the child. That could prevent boredom. The more you improve a child's play repertory, the more he will be able to get busy on his own during his/her free time. For Dominic, an independent play program had been integrated into the school day. New games were sent home so his parents could redirect Dominic to these activities whenever they needed to prepare meals.

4. Be Patient

It may be difficult to refrain from helping a child who is experiencing challenges. It is fine to help a child who is starting to learn a new skill and to show him/her how to do parts of the task. To encourage independence gradually reduce the assistance provided. Give the child the opportunity to complete the task by waiting before providing help. Try not to repeat instructions. Too much help and verbal instructions can create what is called prompt dependency. Prompt dependency may look like a child is reluctant to start a task or activity without an adult. You can prevent this dependence by systematically reducing the number of supports and verbal instructions.

5. Celebrate Success

For quite some time now, scientific research has shown that positive reinforcement greatly contributes to learning in children with ASD. You can encourage independence using reinforcement in a strategic way. Simply congratulate the child explicitly when he or she performs a task or engages in a leisure activity. This can increase the chances that he or she continues to try later. For some children, reinforcement may be more efficient when it is more structured. At home, Dominic's parents use a reward chart where they added a sticker anytime their son completed a targeted task alone, such as evening routine. When Dominic earned five stickers, he could access one of his favourite activities, like borrowing a toy from his brother for the day. Remember to set realistic goals to ensure that the child can access his/her reward!