Increasing Independence
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Increasing independence
“How can I help my son develop his independence?”

• Teens with autism are like their typically developing peers, often seeking independence and to get away from parents and carers on their own.
• Teens with autism will mature physically at the same rate as their peers, but will take longer to develop social, sexual and emotional maturity.
• Parents often worry about the ability of their teen with autism to look after themselves in the real world and want to shield them.
• To be able to be as successful and as independent as possible in the world as adults, the teen with ASD must build skills and understand their rights and responsibilities.
• Preparing the young person for independence will ensure they are more likely to be able to care for themselves in the future when a parent or carer is no longer able to care for them.
• Teaching basic skills and expecting the young person to participate in their share of household activities increases the sense of fairness in the family and lessens the burden on siblings and parents.

Things you can to increase independence

Self-care skills
• Often young adults with autism will struggle with hygiene and self-care if not prompted to shower. The young person with ASD needs to master these tasks and understand why it is important to be clean and well groomed each day.
• Teach and reinforce the basics of hygiene and self-care; toileting, showering, bathing, dressing and grooming.
• Visual schedules and sequences or electronic reminders can help prompt these tasks.

Caring for belongings
• Teach the young person to care for their belongings appropriately and to have a special place to put important things such as keys, wallets, watches etc.
• People with autism can sometimes be messy, disorganised and lose belongings if they do not have defined spaces to put things.
• Some people with ASD are big collectors or hoarders and have difficulty letting go of things they no longer need.
• Ensure the young person has an organised way to keep their collections and make regular bedroom cleaning part of the schedule at home.
Household tasks

Cooking and meal preparation –
Involve the teen in basic cooking to build food preparation skills and basic kitchen safety concepts. There are many great photographic step by step cook books available for people with disabilities/autism that can help. Social stories of visual prompts/reminders may be needed to support kitchen safety concepts.

Practice preparing breakfasts and school lunches (can be done the night before)
• Practice making basic packet cake or muffin mixes - this helps develop basic skills such as mixing, pouring, breaking eggs, and with following step by step directions.
• Get the young person with autism to take responsibility for one meal a week - planning, shopping for ingredients, cooking and cleaning up.
• Remember that practice makes perfect and sometimes mum or dad may need to get out of the way to let the person make a mess, experience failure and success in their own way.

Household chores/pet care
• Get the teen to assist with chores such as washing clothes, vacuuming, yard work and gardening. Give them responsibility for specific tasks such as feeding and walking pets or bringing washing in from the line.
• Often teens with autism will pick these skills up easily if they repeated often and visual aids are provided.
• Shopping - involve the teen in food shopping – shopping provides a great opportunity to practice maths skills such as weighing and measuring, counting and calculating prices.
• Changing sheets and making beds is also an important skill to learn. The young person with ASD may have difficulty with this task due to motor coordination difficulties, but it is important to keep practicing and for the person to do as much of the task as they can.

Banking
• It is important the young person has some concept of responsibility for their own money, including their pension/part of their pension to manage savings and paying for their own expenses.
• Open a bank account and teach the young adult how to make deposits and or withdrawals, and save up money for something they want. Reward money for helping with tasks can be banked.
• Internet banking may be a great skill for young people with high functioning autism to learn, but they will also need to know how to go into a branch, fill in a deposit or withdrawal slip and line up in a queue.

Using the Library
Ensure the young adult has their own library card and knows how to borrow, care for and return books or resources. Having your own library card, borrow books and caring for them teaches responsibility and develops a sense of self.
Public transport
Start teaching the teen about public transport including which bus or train to get to school or into the city if needed, how much it costs, how to read the timetable and which stop to get on and off at. What to do if the bus or train is late or isn’t coming, the best places to sit when using public transport and who and how to ask for help.

Using a phone
Often people with autism are not good at using a phone. This may be because they can’t see the person they are talking to and miss out on the visual cues needed for understanding. They may also find operating a phone/mobile difficult. Practice using a phone and calling the parent/carer, program in the numbers, identify situations when they may need to call.

Emergency services
It is important the young person understands
• The role of the emergency services
• Who they are
• What they do
• Emergency situations and when to call 000.
• Practice what they may need to say or do.
• Use a social story or visual reminder or script - have it on the wall near the phone
• Keep name, address and phone number details also by the phone

Fire drills
It is important to practice an emergency evacuation of your home with and identify a meeting place.
The person with autism may not know what the beep of the smoke detector means or automatically know to get out of the house if there is smoke or a fire. A visual strip or social story may be needed.
The young person needs to know to get out of the house and not to hide if the smoke detector goes off.

Road safety
Teach road safety in a variety of settings- as a pedestrian, as a passenger. Ensure the teen can use the traffic lights or pedestrian crossings and knows where to cross safely. Being able to safely ride a bike, scooter or skateboard with their peers is also important for a teen with ASD. Teach and enforce the importance of helmets and seatbelts.
• Some teens with autism may aspire to get their licence like their typically developing friends. Some people with high functioning autism can successfully gain their L plates/ P plates and learn to drive.
• This may not be a goal for all young people with autism but parents need to keep an open mind to the possibilities.
• Many young people with ASD pass the initial L plate theory based test quite successfully, but have issues with the coordination and concentration required to drive and gain a full licence.
• Understanding and keeping within rules and lines and obeying signals is easy for people with autism, dealing with sudden change in road conditions and the intentions and actions of other road users are not.
• See Vic Roads for further information relating to driving and people with disabilities or impairments.

Health and medical care
The teen with autism may want to take on some of the responsibility for their own health, well being and medical appointments. Arranging appointments, attending an appointment (or part of the appointment) on their own, having their own Medicare /health care cards is part of growing up and taking responsibility for their health. Knowing where to seek health services is also important.

Sexuality and relationships
It is important the person with autism has a reasonable and factual understanding of sex, masturbation and a concept of what their rights and responsibilities are in a relationship. The young person with autism will also need to understand how to know when someone is taking advantage of them to avoid being exploited sexually, physically emotionally or financially. For more information on sexuality see Sexuality health and hygiene.

Cigarettes, Drugs and Alcohol
A young person with autism may have many questions about cigarettes, drugs and alcohol and may even want to experiment with these substances. It is important that the young person with autism learns about

• What these substances are
• What they do
• What they look like
• Legal issues with using these substances
• Health issues that arise from using these substances.

It is critical the young person learns;
• NEVER EVER to take any pills, powders or liquids from people at school or in the community.
• They also need to know to tell someone if they are offered a substance or alcohol.
• Remember that young people with autism are easily set up by others and may not know they are in a dangerous situation and who they can trust.
Key reminders for teaching skills for independence

• Patience is critical. It can be exhausting at times but worthwhile.
• Break tasks down into steps
• Use visual prompts for each step if needed.
• Repetition is key.
• Encourage and reward desired behaviour
• Get out of the way and let the young person make mistakes and learn from them
• Let the person make a mess and clean it up again as part of the learning experience.
• It does not have to be perfect. It is the attempt that counts.
• Make participation in these tasks and learning part of the daily/weekly routine.