

Ask the Expert Q&A #2

Preparing for Independent Life

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Q What are the things to keep in mind or the important parts about getting ready for independent living and transition?

Independent living goes beyond housing, employment, and community engagement; it comes back to being able to be accountable for your own well-being. Things like choice-making and problem-solving are extremely important and are skills that we should be targeting in elementary and pre-school. High school is absolutely the time to really begin refining these skills. We start making choices as soon as we wake up in the morning -- whether to press snooze or to actually get up -- but it's critical that students are making these choices throughout the day independently or with minimal support. If a bad choice is made, that's alright and it's a learning opportunity; we learn how to deal, cope, and manage the choice appropriately. If we make a poor choice and engage in an inappropriate behavior in high school, we have a support system there to help, but if we engage in inappropriate behavior on the job, it gets a little bit more challenging. Additionally, learning to problem solve really helps a student navigate their independent life. This includes managing their medication, making decisions about their food, clothing, job, friendships and relationships, and being able to know what to do if something goes wrong -- if you make peanut butter toast every morning for breakfast and there's no peanut butter in the house, what will you do? Are you skipping work that day, or are you going to decide to have something else to eat? Working through those challenges and problems are a big part of being able to live independently.

Q When we talk about life skills and adaptive skills, we think about it as an either/or with academic skills. We still have to give good instruction that's academically focused in high school for all students. How do we do both?

Life skills and adaptive skills should be embedded throughout the school day. You make choices and you have to problem-solve, regardless of whether you're in a math class, PE class, or a social studies class. Instead of focusing on "I have to teach this skill," you simply help students practice it throughout the day, from the time they wake up to the time they go to sleep. Of course, you're at school most of the day, but having that support from caregivers at home as well can be useful.

Q Are there any tips for teachers who are new to incorporating life skills and adaptive skills to prepare students for transitioning to independent living?

Fading the adult support as soon as possible is very important for students. When we think about independence, we think about freedom, advocating for ourselves, and being able to do things on our own. This means that our students need to be taught how to navigate their own environment and how to make choices about how things affect them, their meals, housing, jobs, and so on. Providing these opportunities throughout the student's day is critical.

This Q&A has been taken from "Ask the Expert Series" which are short videos that discuss important topics for parents, educators, community members, and individuals with ASD and can be found on the VCU-ACE website: <https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/asktheexpert/>