FUNCTIONAL SKILLS

What are functional skills?

Functional skills are the skills that are necessary for daily living and for establishing quality of life. These are the skills that if not done by an individual him or herself, others will have to do. They are skills that are useful and can be immediately applied to the individual’s environment.

Functional skills include:

- Communication – a way to make wants and needs known through language, pictures, signs, etc., including how to say “NO”
- Choice-making – choosing a preferred item or activity
- Safety – knowing what to do to keep oneself safe in a dangerous situation, such as in an accident, or in case of a fire, or when encountering a stranger
- Self-care – taking care of toileting, bathing, and other health and hygiene issues
- Leisure and recreation – relaxation and having fun
- Vocational skills – work skills

Why teach functional skills?

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often struggle to learn functional skills. It is important to develop these skills in order to increase an individual’s ability to achieve greater independence. Teaching functional skills also helps mitigate some maladaptive behaviors (for example, self-injury, aggression) by encouraging the individual to choose an appropriate replacement skill. For example, teaching a child to make choices and indicate what he wants gives him a way to express his preferences. This may reduce frustration and the likelihood of engaging in maladaptive behaviors.

How to select the functional skills to teach
It is important to select skills that are meaningful to the individual and your family and skills that will allow the individual to be as independent as possible. It is important to distinguish between skills that are necessary and skills that are helpful. For example, while it may be great that a child has a sight word vocabulary of over 100 words, if he or she cannot distinguish the men’s room from the women’s, what good is the sight word vocabulary? It would be helpful for the individual to be able to read the signs and know which rest room applies to him or her (and be able to use it).

How are functional skills taught?

Functional skills should be included in a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). IEP goals related to functional skills must specify the level of mastery required for the goal to be met and any adaptations that need to be made.

Some skills can be taught with 80% mastery and still be functional. For example, brushing teeth to 80% mastery may be appropriate, especially if a learner is taught to brush multiple times per day. Including tooth brushing more than twice per day may help compensate for less thorough brushing. However, safety skills, in most cases, should be taught to 100% mastery due to associated risks. For example, an individual may be taught his address and phone number. However, if he or she is not able to give a police officer this information, it is not useful.

There may be a need for adaptations. For example, if the individual is unable to repeat important information to an unfamiliar person, perhaps he or she can be supplied with a laminated card that has the information that needs to be communicated to a safety officer if the individual is lost. Another life skill that can be adapted is putting on shoes. For many individuals, shoe tying may not be necessary. There are many stylish shoe options including Velcro straps, bungee laces, and slip-on shoes that can be put on independently and worn comfortably and appropriately.

An effective way to teach functional skills is to use task analysis. A task analysis breaks down the skill or routine into its component parts and create routines. The routines should be consistent, but they need to be practiced across varying settings and with different people in order to teach the individual to apply the routine in any relevant situation. This leads to effective generalization. For those
who have difficulty with generalization, it is important to teach in context from the start. For example, when teaching the individual how to put on shoes, the individual should also learn that he or she needs to wear shoes when he leaves the house and that shoes stay on when out in public.

Make sure the individual has enough opportunity to practice the skills. Reinforcement is an important component of teaching functional skills. Following routines with motivating items and activities increases the likelihood that the learner will engage in the skill or routine at the next opportunity. Visual supports are a tool that can support the task analysis. These include picture schedules, video modeling, and choice cards.

Finally, after a skill is well-learned, don’t forget to work on flexibility with the individual. In the shoe example, while it is appropriate to wear shoes most places, there are exceptions. An emergency situation may necessitate leaving the house without shoes, shoes are not kept on in a swimming pool, and removing shoes before entering the house is customary for some families. While it is not usually possible to think of every exception, teaching flexibility will make the learned skills truly functional.

Related Articles:

- Speech, Language and Communication
- Teaching Your Child Hygiene and Grooming Skills
- Self-Injurious Behaviors

Additional Resources:

- Teaching Important Life Skills, from Autism Speaks®
- Strategies for Teaching Functional Skills Parent Training Program

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