

Supporting a Child with SEND to Develop Life Skills: A Support Snippet for Parents

What are life skills?

From a young age, parents typically support their child by teaching them important life skills. These can encompass a whole range of different skills, including:



Why might a child with SEND struggle with life skills?

For any child, life skills take a lot of practice and perseverance to develop. For example, learning to use the toilet is a major milestone in a little one's development that takes time and patience for all children to achieve. However, children with SEND may have additional challenges to overcome while developing life skills. For example, they may struggle with:

sensory sensitivities
(e.g. they may dislike certain textures when getting dressed, or they may dislike the smell of the food they are preparing)

interoception
(e.g. they might not know when they are hungry)

motor skills
(e.g. they might struggle to hold a knife and fork in their hands)

social challenges (e.g. they might struggle to understand instructions)

a physical disability (e.g. if they are in a wheelchair, they may struggle to go to the toilet without support or adaptive equipment)

learning difficulties (e.g. they might struggle to read a recipe)

emotional challenges (e.g. they might experience a meltdown when they find something too tricky)

cognitive difficulties (e.g. they might struggle with their memory)



Signs Your Child Is Struggling with Life Skills

If your child has SEND, they might struggle to:

engage in self-care without considerable support from others

understand what someone is saying to them, e.g. if they are being shown how to complete a task

follow daily or weekly routines

remember directions

deviate from a rigid routine, meaning they are reluctant to learn something new

process information when learning how to do something for the first time

work alongside someone to complete a task together

understand the concept of time

find the right words to communicate their own needs or to ask questions

remember all the various steps needed to do something

maintain concentration when completing a task

cope with sensory stimuli (e.g. they may be over- or under-stimulated by sounds, sights, touch, smells, temperatures or tastes)

detect their own bodily needs, such as when they are thirsty or need to use the toilet

complete tasks at a quick pace

make precise hand movements

move independently around their environment

complete a task without the use of adaptive equipment (e.g. mobility or visual aids)

regulate their emotions while attempting to learn a new life skill

read or understand a written set of instructions

remember where particular items are located, so that they can complete a task



Supporting your child to develop life skills:

- If showing your child how to do something for the first time, break down your instructions into **smaller steps**.
- **Speak slowly and clearly** to your child when explaining how to do something.
- Show your child how to do something more than once – **repetition** can help to aid their memory.
- Display **visual aids** to help your child complete a task, e.g. you could display a toilet routine chart in the bathroom.
- Help a child with a physical disability feel more independent by ensuring that they have the correct **adaptive equipment** (e.g. you could have grab bars and a raised seat in the bathroom).
- If your child struggles with precise hand movements, give them **motor tools** such as weighted cutlery to eat with or pencil grips to write with.
- Try **sensory aids**, e.g. a pair of ear defenders, if your child is distracted by background noises while completing an activity.
- If your child experiences sensory sensitivities, consider their home **environment**. Try to create a safe space for your child to help them feel calm and regulated.
- Provide your child with **communication aids** (such as a communication board) to help them express their needs.
- Find **fun ways** to teach your child about life skills, e.g. you could sing a song about how to wash your hands or read a book about learning to use the toilet.
- Give your child opportunities to **practise life skills through play**, e.g. they could learn to use a knife and fork by cutting modelling dough.
- Use **timers** to help your child complete tasks, e.g. use a three minute timer when they brush their teeth.
- Help your child to **find homes for all essential items**, e.g. you could organise and label your kitchen cupboards so they know where to find things.
- Introduce your child to household chores by doing them **together**. Once your child has built up their confidence, they can have a go by themselves.
- Encourage your child to practise life skills in **real-life settings** outside the house, e.g. by paying for something at the local supermarket or ordering a drink at a cafe.
- Display a **daily routine board** to help your child transition between different tasks (e.g. have your breakfast, brush your teeth, have a shower, get dressed, etc).
- Older children could try using **daily checklists** to help them remember all the tasks they need to complete.
- Explain the **purpose** of different tasks so your child understands why they need to do them.
- Be **patient and understanding** with your child, particularly if they take a long time to gain confidence with a new skill.
- Encourage your child to **ask questions** if they are unsure how to complete a particular task. Allow plenty of time for them to process the information you give them.
- Shower your child with **positive words of encouragement** – this will help to boost their confidence while learning something new.

These resources are those which we have generally found to be of benefit to learners with SEND. However, every learner's needs are different and so these resources may not be suitable for your learner. It is for you to consider whether it is appropriate to use these resources with your learner.

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

This resource is provided for informational and educational purposes only. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of professional research as of July 2025. This resource is not intended to be used in an emergency and should not replace professional training. If you require mental health advice, you should contact a suitably qualified mental health professional.