

# **PUPILS WITH AUTISM**

## **UNIT 20**

### **CURRICULUM: LIFE SKILLS**

#### **Learning outcomes**

Trainees will:

- Understand why life skills are an important part of the curriculum
- Be able to devise ways of teaching life skills within everyday contexts

#### **ONLINE RESOURCES**

The content and tasks throughout these PDFs are supported by online resources that are designed to facilitate and supplement your training experience.

Links to these are signposted where appropriate. The resources use graphics and interactive elements to:

- Highlight salient points
- Provide at-a-glance content summaries
- Introduce further points of interest
- Offer visual context
- Break down and clearly present the different stages and elements of processes, tasks, practices, and theories

The online resources offer great benefits, both for concurrent use alongside the PDFs, or as post-reading revision and planning aids.

Please note that the resources cannot be used in isolation without referencing the PDFs. Their purpose is to complement and support your training process, rather than lead it.

You should complete any learning or teaching tasks and additional reading detailed in this PDF to make full use of the Advanced training materials for autism; dyslexia; speech, language and communication; emotional, social and behavioural difficulties; moderate learning difficulties.

To find out more about the resources, how they work, and how they can enhance your training, visit the homepage at: [www.education.gov.uk/lamb](http://www.education.gov.uk/lamb)

The first resource for this unit can be found here:  
[www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/intro](http://www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/intro)

## Briefing 1 – life skills

A recent report, commissioned by the Autism Education Trust, reported on the need for the incorporation of life skills as part of the curriculum for pupil on the autism spectrum. Many of the people interviewed as part of the survey felt that<sup>1</sup>:

*in order to reach meaningful outcomes for pupils with autism they had to be creative in modifying the National Curriculum to the individual pupil's needs. Practitioners recognised the importance of academic skills but also voiced the need to broaden the National Curriculum to focus on social and life skill development, particularly in mainstream settings.*

Member of The Autism Education Trust research team consulted with a focus group of adults with autism who describe the following outcomes as important:

- Employment – the group felt that it was important that their employer accommodated their needs and that they would get support to be ready for the workplace. They also felt it was important to obtain career advice, not only initially but also for career progression and changing jobs
- Independent living, including living with someone else, in most cases with their (future) partner.
- Independence skills, including using money, going to the pub, using public transports, reading and writing
- Emotional well-being, including being able to understand/control anger, having a higher self-esteem, being less anxious or depressed
- Having their support needs met, including knowing how to access benefits
- Knowing about the possibility of good outcomes by meeting other people on the autism spectrum, from as early on as possible.

### See online resource:

[www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/outcomes](http://www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/outcomes)

Life skills are those diverse and practical abilities which support our access to life in our community. They may include dressing, personal hygiene, budgeting, planning a weekly menu and then shopping and cooking for it. It can include managing the living environment, keeping it clean, orderly, and secure. It will involve leisure options, travel skills, road safety awareness and many other elements. For Temple Grandin, an adult with autism, it is also about the ability to problem-solve for herself:

*A pivotal life skill: problem solving. It involves training the brain to be organised, break down tasks into step-by-step sequences, relate parts to the whole, stay on task, and experience a sense of personal accomplishment once the problem is solved.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Wittemeyer, K., Charman, T., Cusack, J., Guldberg, K., Hastings, R., Howlin, P., Macnab, N., Parsons, S., Pellicano, L., Slonims, V., (2011) *Educational outcomes and provisions for people on the autism spectrum*, London; Autism Educational Trust

<sup>2</sup> Grandin, T. (2008) *The way I see it*. Texas; Future Horizons

**See online resource:**

[www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/practical](http://www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/practical)

**Task 1 - life skills**

Imagine a week in your life and think of all the skills and understandings you need from being able to get up in time to get to work through to locking the house at the end of the day before bed. Now think about a pupil on the autism spectrum that you know and list the skills they already have and those that they may need to have in the future. How can you help to develop those skills and what are the obstacles that may hinder progress?

As you will have discovered from the above activity, the term 'life skills' can cover a myriad of skills so it can be difficult to prioritise which it is important for pupils with autism to learn.

Wittemeyer et al argue that life skills should enable choice and independence in other words:

*Enabling the person to have the same choice as a person without autism*<sup>3</sup>

The views of pupils with autism and their families should also be taken into account when thinking about how to develop life skills.

Chantal Sicile-Kira (the mother of a 19-year old man with autism) interviewed a wide variety of adults on the autism spectrum to discover what they thought were the most important life skills they had learnt and, therefore, what it would be essential for her son to learn. The skills most mentioned were:

- Sensory processing
- Communication
- Safety
- Self-esteem
- Pursuing interests
- Self- regulation
- Independence
- Social relationships
- Self-advocacy, and earning a living.<sup>4</sup>

**See online resource:**

[www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/others](http://www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/life-skills/others)

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<sup>3</sup> Wittemeyer, K., Charman, T., Cusack, J., Guldberg, K., Hastings, R., Howlin, P., Macnab, N., Parsons, S., Pellicano, L., and Slonims, V. (2011) *Defining good outcomes for people on the autism spectrum*. Autism Education Trust

<sup>4</sup> Sicile-Kira, C. (2008) *Autism Life Skills: From Communication and Safety to Self-Esteem and More—10 Essential Abilities Your Child Needs and Deserves to Learn*, London: Penguin

It can be a dilemma for mainstream teachers to know how to build life-skills work into the curriculum. A common thread through feedback from practitioners taking part in the Outcomes Study<sup>5</sup> was that life skills and social skills are seen as priorities in educational planning, but in mainstream there is not enough time to teach them.

It could be argued, however, that as life skills are the skills that enable choice and independence, they should be a priority within any curriculum.

The question is, therefore, how can schools ensure that pupils on the autism spectrum are given opportunities to gain essential life skills?

Primary and secondary Personal and Social Development (PSD) courses can be a valuable source of input for life skills. However, delivery differs greatly across the two sectors. Primary input can often be tailored more easily to individual needs. For example, playground skills can be taught in a small group and then transferred with support into the playground. In secondary schools, there is often less flexibility as PSD is taught as a course rather than as a programme of skills. The danger here is that without a personalised approach some pupils with autism can misunderstand content and develop confused ideas about relationships and the world around them, e.g. the boy with autism in year 8 who became anxious because he had not yet started his periods. It is vital, therefore, that PSD teachers are aware of the specific needs of pupils on the spectrum – especially their literalness.

It is best if life skills can be taught in context. Ros Blackburn, an able woman with autism writes:

*People with autism cannot learn by generalising, or by learning rules and then applying them to different situations. They need to learn from applying very specific rules to very specific situations. Although role-play is a very valuable tool, nothing can beat the real scenario, so use it to teach the person with autism the appropriate way, the real-life way, rather than the artificial or 'autism -friendly' modified way. I have had to learn everything from table manners to keeping my clothes on in public, to visiting people's houses, greeting people appropriately and so on. I have got it wrong on numerous occasions. I cannot help getting it wrong. That is all part of being autistic, but it is no excuse. If I am to exist and get along in the real world, I will have to learn to obey the ways and conventions of the real world, whether I understand them or not. This may seem rather harsh and unfair on the person with autism but reality is harsh and quite often unfair. Surely it is even more unfair if parents, teachers, support workers etc. do not prepare the person with autism for reality, but shelter them from it.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Wittemeyer, K., Charman, T., Cusack, J., Guldberg, K., Hastings, R., Howlin, P., Macnab, N., Parsons, S., Pellicano, L., and Slonims, V. (2011) *Defining good outcomes for people on the autism spectrum*. Autism Education Trust

<sup>6</sup> Blackburn, R. (2000) *Within and without autism*, Good Autism Practice Journal, 1, 1, 2-8,

She goes on to say:

*Parents and staff need to tell us what we are doing wrong – when we get it wrong – it is not nagging – it is necessary if we are to learn the conventions and to be socially acceptable.<sup>7</sup>*

## **Task 2 – Life skills in the school setting**

- Conduct an audit of any teaching of life skills that is taking place in your school
- List the skills that are being taught and link them to the subject areas in which they are taught
- Identify any areas which you feel need addressing
- Work with the SENCO and other key subject specialists to map out a life-skills curriculum which can be addressed through existing subjects and also through the school PSD programme
- Agree a system and timeline for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the programme

The following resources may help with this task:

## **References**

Clements, J., Hardy, J. And Lord, S. (2010) *Transition or Transformation*, London; Jessica Kingsley

Lawson, W., (2003) *Build Your Own Life: A Self-Help Guide For Individuals With Asperger Syndrome*, London; Jessica Kingsley

McIlwee Myers, J (2010). *How to Teach Life Skills to Kids with Autism or Asperger's*, Texas; Future Horizons

Sicile-Kira, C. (2008). *Autism Life Skills: From Communication and Safety to Self-Esteem and More*, New York, Perigee

Wrobel, M. (2003). *Taking Care of Myself: A Hygiene, Puberty and Personal Curriculum for Young People with Autism*. Texas; Future Horizons

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<sup>7</sup> Blackburn, R. (2000) *Within and without autism*, Good Autism Practice Journal, 1, 1, 2-8,