

AAIDD TEXAS CHAPTER ANNUAL CONVENTION

50 Years of Inclusion: Honoring the Past, Celebrating the Future

Building Independence for People with Autism

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What Do We Mean by Independence?

Independence does not mean doing everything alone.

- ✓ Make choices and express preferences
- ✓ Take part in everyday routines
- ✓ Manage increasing responsibilities
- ✓ Make decisions and solve problems
- ✓ Ask for help when needed
- ✓ Direct your own life and supports

The goal is not less support. The goal is the right support for greater choice, participation, and control.

(AAIDD & The Arc, 2023)

Why Start Early?

Adult independence doesn't begin at 18.

- ✓ Personal care
- ✓ Cooking and meal preparation
- ✓ Cleaning and laundry
- ✓ Household responsibilities
- ✓ Money management
- ✓ Transportation and community access
- ✓ Schedules and routines
- ✓ Work-related skills

Start early. Teach intentionally. Build over time.

What Happens After High School?

A longitudinal study followed 98 autistic individuals through age 26.

- Daily living skills showed modest growth before leaving school.
- After school exit, that growth significantly slowed, then plateaued and declined.
- Higher daily living skills were also associated with participation in postsecondary education.

Leaving school doesn't eliminate the need to keep building these skills.

(Clarke, McCauley, & Lord, 2021)

Independence Starts at Home

Home is where many of the routines of adult life begin.

- ✓ Personal care and hygiene
- ✓ Morning and evening routines
- ✓ Caring for belongings
- ✓ Cleaning and household chores
- ✓ Laundry
- ✓ Preparing meals
- ✓ Using schedules and managing time

Don't wait until a skill becomes necessary to begin teaching it. Start small. Build routines. Increase responsibility over time.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Families can successfully teach daily living skills. A 2025 systematic review examined caregiver-implemented interventions for people with developmental disabilities.

21

high-quality experiments analyzed

86%

showed improvements in daily living skills

- Most commonly used teaching strategies: Prompting, Reinforcement, Task Analysis (breaking tasks into smaller steps) (*Liu et al., 2025*)
- A 2026 study found that an online caregiver learning series increased caregivers' use of strategies for teaching daily living skills, with improvements in adolescents' individualized daily living skills (*Rentschler et al., 2026*)

Parents can be powerful partners in building independence.

Independence Skills Can Be Taught

Many skills that support independence need to be explicitly and systematically taught.

- ✓ Breaking complex skills into smaller steps
- ✓ Modeling and practicing the skill
- ✓ Using prompts when needed—and reducing them over time
- ✓ Reinforcing increasing independence
- ✓ Using visual and technology-based supports
- ✓ Teaching self-management
- ✓ Practicing in real-life routines and settings

The goal is not just learning the skill. The goal is being able to use it with increasing independence in everyday life.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

We have evidence-based practices for teaching these skills. The National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice reviewed intervention articles and identified evidence-based practices for autistic children, youth, and young adults.

972

intervention articles reviewed

28

evidence-based practices identified

- Practices relevant to independence: Task analysis, Prompting, Reinforcement, Self-management, Visual supports, Video modeling, Technology-aided instruction, Time delay

We know many of the tools. The question becomes: what skills are we teaching with them?

(Steinbrenner et al., 2020)

Help Without Creating Dependence

Prompts can help teach new skills — the goal is for the person to eventually respond to the natural cues of everyday life rather than waiting for someone to tell them what to do.

- ✓ Prompt dependence: the person knows how to do the task but waits for someone else to tell, show, or signal them to begin.
- ✓ Give enough help for successful learning.
- ✓ Provide opportunities to respond independently.
- ✓ Reduce unnecessary prompts as skills develop.
- ✓ Individualize support.

Ask: “Can they do it — or can they do it only when someone prompts them?” (Cengher et al., 2016; Gorgan & Kodak, 2019)

From Adult-Directed to Self-Directed

As skills develop, shift more control to the person.

- ✓ Visual schedules and checklists
- ✓ Phone reminders and alarms
- ✓ Timers
- ✓ Calendars and planning tools
- ✓ Apps and other technology
- ✓ Self-monitoring progress toward a goal

The goal isn't to eliminate supports. The goal is to reduce unnecessary dependence on another person. Using a support independently is independence.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Self-management is an evidence-based practice for autistic learners, identified as one of 28 evidence-based practices in the NCAEP review.

- A review of 16 studies of technology-based self-monitoring with autistic adolescents and adults found it supports: skill acquisition, on-task behavior, and socially relevant behaviors.
- The authors identified self-monitoring as a promising approach for increasing independence across settings, including employment.

(Steinbrenner et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023)

Money Management in a Digital World

Managing money is more than counting cash.

- ✓ Understand money — income, expenses, balances, needs and wants
- ✓ Plan money — budget, save, and prepare for expenses
- ✓ Spend money — use debit cards, digital payments, and online purchasing
- ✓ Monitor money — track balances, transactions, and what remains after a purchase

Tap. Swipe. Click. Buy. Completing a transaction is not the same as managing money.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Money management skills can be systematically taught.

- Electronic banking: four autistic young adults learned spending, saving, and purchasing with a simplified electronic banking system — and generalized the skills to a community setting. (Wheeler et al., 2026)
- Debit cards: three autistic adolescents learned to use chip debit cards and generalized the skill across unfamiliar payment terminals. (Milata et al., 2020)
- Online purchasing: three adults with IDD were taught to make informed online purchasing decisions; skills generalized to unfamiliar shopping websites and maintained for up to six weeks. (Adams et al., 2025)

Digital financial independence can be taught — but it requires more than learning how to click “Buy.”

Building Skills for Employment

Getting a job is only one part of employment.

- ✓ Manage time — follow schedules, arrive on time, manage breaks
- ✓ Complete work — follow routines, finish tasks, build stamina
- ✓ Communicate — ask for help, clarification, or needed support
- ✓ Manage yourself — use schedules, reminders, checklists, or other supports
- ✓ Adapt — respond to feedback and changes in tasks, people, or routines

Work readiness begins long before the first job.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Early work experience matters.

90%

worked in early 20s if paid work in HS

40%

worked in early 20s with no HS work

- About 90% of autistic youth who worked for pay during high school also worked during their early 20s, compared with only 40% of those who did not. (Roux et al., 2015)
- In a randomized trial of 156 autistic young adults ages 18–21: 73.4% who participated in Project SEARCH + Autism Supports obtained competitive employment within one year of graduation, compared with only 17% of the control group. (Wehman et al., 2020)

Start building work experience before school ends.

Building Community Mobility

Independence does not necessarily mean driving. The goal is being able to get where you need and want to go as independently as possible.

- ✓ Driving
- ✓ Walking or biking
- ✓ Public transportation
- ✓ Paratransit or specialized transportation
- ✓ Rideshare or arranged transportation
- ✓ A combination of options

Plan the trip → navigate the route → manage time → handle changes → ask for help → get home safely.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Transportation and employment are connected. A study of 1,120 autistic adults found:

45%

of employed participants drove themselves

21%

of unemployed participants drove themselves

- Employed autistic adults also reported fewer barriers to public transportation and were less likely to rely on rides from others. (Pfeiffer et al., 2024)
- Research reviews identify transportation barriers across driving, public transit, and community navigation, with consequences for participation in employment, education, and social activities. (Kersten et al., 2020)

Community mobility should be part of transition planning — not an afterthought.

Building an Exercise Routine

Physical activity is part of independent adult living.

- ✓ Choose an activity that is enjoyable and accessible
- ✓ Plan when and where to exercise
- ✓ Prepare clothing, equipment, and transportation
- ✓ Follow a workout, route, class, or activity
- ✓ Monitor time, repetitions, or progress
- ✓ Maintain the routine over time

Walking. Swimming. Biking. Dancing. Sports. Strength training.

The goal is a routine the person can access, enjoy, and sustain.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Exercise and Movement is one of the NCAEP's 28 evidence-based practices for autistic children, youth, and young adults. (Steinbrenner et al., 2020)

22

studies reviewed

763

autistic young adults, ages 19–30

- The strongest evidence was for improvements in: Physical fitness → Motor skills → Psychological functioning → Quality of life. (Shahane, Kilyk, & Srinivasan, 2024)

Exercise isn't only an intervention. It can become part of a self-directed adult routine.

Postsecondary Education: More Than One Path

College and postsecondary education can look different for different people.

- ✓ Traditional College/Training: degree, certificate, or technical program
- ✓ Regular admission requirements; disability services and accommodations
- ✓ Additional supports when available
- ✓ IPSE (Inclusive Postsecondary Education): college-based programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- ✓ Inclusive academic and campus experiences
- ✓ Employment, career prep, independent living, and self-determination skills

The goal is to find the pathway that matches the person's goals, strengths, and support needs.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Postsecondary opportunities can support adult outcomes. A study of an inclusive postsecondary program for students with IDD found participation was associated with increases in self-determination and postsecondary readiness. (Zhang et al., 2023)

34.7%

of autistic young adults attended college within 6 years post-HS

50%+

were in neither employment nor postsecondary ed. within 2 years

Postsecondary planning should begin before high school ends.

(Shattuck et al., 2012)

Texas College Options: Degree-Seeking Students

Some students pursue a traditional college degree with disability and neurodivergent supports.

Disability Services

- Colleges provide reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities enrolled in regular academic programs.

Texas State — NeuroCats

- Academic success and executive functioning
- Time and task management
- Career development
- Social connection and community engagement
- Well-being and independent college life

Receiving support does not make college less independent. Learning to identify, request, and use appropriate supports is part of independence.

Texas State University Disability Services

Texas IPSE: Bobcat RISE

Texas State University — Bobcat RISE: a 4-year residential Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

- ✓ Independent living
- ✓ Financial literacy
- ✓ Self-advocacy and self-determination
- ✓ Career development
- ✓ Academic and campus participation
- ✓ Non-degree seeking

Important: Bobcat RISE is not currently an approved Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP).

Texas State University, Bobcat RISE

Other Texas Postsecondary Pathways

UNT — ELEVAR

- 4-year IPSE program for young adults with intellectual disabilities
- Academics
- Employment
- Community engagement
- Health and independence
- Federally approved CTP

Lone Star College — lifePATH

- OLSA — 4-year Associate of Occupational & Life Skills degree
- Foundations — 2-year noncredit program focused on independence and employment preparation

Different students need different pathways.

University of North Texas; Lone Star College

Texas 18+ Transition Services

For some students, transition services can continue beyond the traditional high school years.

- ✓ Employment and vocational skills
- ✓ Transportation and mobility
- ✓ Independent living
- ✓ Self-determination and self-advocacy
- ✓ Community participation
- ✓ Adult routines and schedules

The focus is individualized preparation for life after public school.

Texas Education Agency / Texas SPED
Support

What Families Need to Know

Transition planning starts early. In Texas, transition planning must be addressed in the IEP by age 14 — or earlier when appropriate.

- ✓ 18+ services are individualized and determined through the ARD/IEP process.
- ✓ There is no statewide requirement that a student have been served in a self-contained classroom to receive 18+ transition services.
- ✓ Continued services depend on the student's special education eligibility, graduation pathway, IEP, and individual transition needs.
- ✓ Graduation rules matter, so families should discuss the student's pathway well before senior year.

Ask early: What skills and services will this student need to reach their postsecondary goals?

*Texas Education Agency / Texas SPED
Support*

Preparing for Adult Living

Independent living does not have to mean living alone.

- ✓ Living with family
- ✓ Living independently
- ✓ Living with a roommate or partner
- ✓ Supported or shared living
- ✓ Residential settings with ongoing support

Daily routines • Meal preparation • Cleaning • Laundry • Money management • Transportation • Safety • Asking for help

What Does the Research Tell Us?

There is no single picture of “independent living.” Housing outcomes vary considerably with the population studied and level of support needed.

1,429

autistic adults, mostly average or above-average intellectual abilities

79%

lived independently

- Factors that can affect independent living: daily living skills, financial management, transportation, employment and financial resources, access to appropriate housing and supports.

***Living arrangements should reflect the person's goals and support needs
— not a single definition of success.***

(Scheeren et al., 2022; Ghanouni et al., 2021)

Texas Vocational Rehabilitation

Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) helps eligible people with disabilities prepare for, obtain, keep, and advance in employment.

- ✓ Career assessment and counseling
- ✓ Education and job training
- ✓ Work experiences and job placement
- ✓ Supported or customized employment
- ✓ Assistive technology and workplace supports
- ✓ Transportation or vehicle modifications
- ✓ Post-employment services

VR services are individualized around the person's employment goal.

Texas Workforce Commission, 2026

Start Connecting With VR Early

For Students: Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) can help students begin preparing for adult employment.

- ✓ Job exploration
- ✓ Work-based learning experiences
- ✓ Workplace readiness
- ✓ Postsecondary education counseling
- ✓ Self-advocacy instruction

Students may also receive other VR services based on eligibility and need, including job placement, supported employment, assistive technology, and transportation assistance. Don't wait until after high school to make the connection.

Texas Medicaid Waiver Programs

Supports for Life in the Community — Medicaid waiver programs help eligible people receive long-term services and supports in home and community settings.

- ✓ HCS — Home and Community-based Services
- ✓ TxHmL — Texas Home Living
- ✓ Supports may include: Daily Living, Employment, Respite, Therapies, Behavioral Support, Adaptive Supports

Services and eligibility differ by waiver program.

Texas Health and Human Services

Don't Wait to Learn About Waivers

Texas uses interest lists for several waiver programs. HCS and TxHmL have interest lists.

- ✓ For these two programs, the Local Intellectual and Developmental Disability Authority (LIDDA) can help families request placement on the interest list.
- ✓ The person's interest-list request date is recorded; services are offered as program resources become available.
- ✓ You do not have to wait until services are urgently needed to learn about the programs.

Learn about waiver options and interest lists early.

Skills Have to Work in Real Life

Learning a skill in one place is not enough. Independence means being able to use skills across:

- ✓ People — parents, teachers, supervisors, unfamiliar people
- ✓ Places — home, school, work, stores, community
- ✓ Situations — familiar routines and unexpected changes
- ✓ Materials — different appliances, payment systems, schedules, tools
- ✓ Time — continuing to use the skill after teaching ends

Teach for real life. The goal is not performance during teaching — it's performance in everyday life.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Different skills may matter for different people. A longitudinal study followed 230 people from childhood into adulthood, examining daily living skills from ages 5–18 and adult outcomes at approximately age 33.

- Community living skills showed the least growth from childhood through adolescence.
- Specific daily living skills predicted later employment and well-being.
- For participants with IQ below 70, personal skills such as bathing and health had the greatest predictive value.
- For participants with IQ above 70, community skills such as eating out and pre-job skills had the greatest predictive value.

Teach the skills that matter for that person's adult life.

(Clarke & Lord, 2025)

Teach for Generalization

Learning a skill is only the first step. To help skills transfer to everyday life:

- ✓ Vary the people — family, teachers, coworkers, community members
- ✓ Vary the places — home, school, work, stores, community
- ✓ Vary the materials — appliances, payment systems, schedules, tools
- ✓ Use real-life cues — practice with what will actually signal the skill
- ✓ Practice in natural settings whenever possible
- ✓ Check the skill later — don't assume it generalized or maintained

Don't “train and hope.” Plan for the skill to work where it will actually be needed.

(Stokes & Baer, 1977)

The Big Picture

- ✓ **Start early.** Build skills and responsibilities before adulthood.
- ✓ **Teach intentionally.** Provide the support needed to learn — and opportunities to become more independent.
- ✓ **Teach what matters.** Home • Money • Work • Transportation • Health • Education • Community
- ✓ **Practice for real life.** Build skills across people, places, and situations.
- ✓ **Keep the person at the center.** Their goals. Their choices. Their supports. Their life.

*Independence is not doing everything alone.
It is having greater choice, participation, and control.*

(AAIDD & The Arc, 2023)

Questions?

What does meaningful independence look like for the person you support?

What is one skill you could begin building now?

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