

A Practical Approach at
Home for Parents and Carers

Life Skills

(Teenagers)




Falkirk **Child**
Protection Committee



Falkirk Council
Children's Services

Children with Disabilities Team
Occupational Therapy



This is the second booklet which has been designed to help teenagers and families develop essential life skills. In the first booklet (Life Skills for Little Ones), the focus was on young children moving towards independence. This one focuses on another key theme - preparing for adult life.

Occupational therapists often meet with teenagers who have difficulties with ordinary daily life activities. In order to help them to gain the skills required for a particular activity, we offer practical advice and suggest a range of experiences which will enable them to develop these skills naturally. This booklet is not a teenagers' developmental guide, as there are many good books on the market with information on this stage of development. This booklet is simply a range of hints, tips and ideas, designed to be slotted in to busy family life, this booklet aims to encourage teenagers to think about the experiences and skills they may need to help them prepare for adulthood, and to help parents to think creatively about supporting their teenager. Its aim is to encourage the development of the necessary skills without it seeming to be a programme to be followed, or set of exercises or school homework.

We would hope teenagers and families will dip in/out of the ideas listed.

We all learn by experience. As parents, we seek to give our teenagers experiences which will provide them with the best opportunity to develop the skills required for activities that will be important in the future. This can be difficult for all parents, as it involves: letting go, taking risks and allowing teenagers to make mistakes. Parents of teenagers with specific difficulties may be naturally very protective and often find it harder to give their teenagers this level of independence.

Many of the life skills that teenagers acquire are often developed following repeated exposure to a range of activities away from the family home or school. Regularly skills are developed using information from subtle cues. This booklet aims to break down the skills to be practiced in a range of areas. This booklet promotes that activities be broken down into manageable chunks. Examples would be: understanding the unwritten rules of trying on clothes in a shop, queuing up for the changing room if the shop is busy, telling the staff the number of items of clothing they are trying on. Some of these tasks are so basic that we may not think of them as requiring specific skills but in fact they do.

General strategies for family life

As parents, we seek to give our teenagers experiences which will provide them with the best opportunity to develop the skills required for activities that will be important in the future.

Moving on from a children's routines to teenage routines

Developing independence in personal care:

- Ideas to promote choice and avoid conflict
- Bathroom etiquette
- Eating habits
- Sleep hygiene

Travel

- Car journeys
- Bus journeys
- Train & plane journeys

Thinking about moving out

- Social situations
- Moving on
- Technology
- Timetables and routines
- Social networking
- Using video recording to examine and assess your style of parenting

General strategies for family life

Each family has its own informal routines. They may use calendars with details of events, and work or school times will give structure to individual days throughout the week.

All families work differently. Some are highly organised; others describe 'organised chaos' as the daily round! But generally family life is busy, and teenagers can set the routine if you are not careful. If you are aware of this, you can avoid it by setting clearly what happens on particular days at particular times. This may enable your teenager to have a better understanding of what is happening. In due course, this may help to develop their routine as they get older, but it should be for the benefit of the whole family.

Each family has its own informal routines. They may use calendars with details of events, and work or school times will give structure to individual days throughout the week. Often each day is different, because of school activities, parents' work routines, clubs and leisure activities. Teenagers may not always know exactly what they are doing the next day, but they know that they enjoy some days better than others (because of what is happening or not happening that day). Observing this can help parents to organise and plan family life.

For teenagers who have difficulty with picking up cues, a clear routine or structure can be helpful. Just knowing what is going to happen next, or how long an activity will last, can be really useful in providing a sense of being in control. This is particularly important when teenagers move on from school forming the basis for Monday to Friday routine.

Ideas to try:

- Look at your weekly routines to see if they could be made clearer for the whole family.
- Use a family planner with only one week in view and a picture calendar for events. Let the family help you plan the week.
- Ensure morning or evening routines are clear visually, making it easy to see what is happening both now and later on.
- Set family meal times for each day (if you can).
- Mark in any appointments and set reminders
- Use mobile phone calendars, daily alarms, and reminders.
- In a central spot where everyone can see it e.g. fridge to display To Do Lists etc.
- Set times for family activities e.g. to feed/walk pets.
- Set times for specifically enjoyable activities which should not be interrupted (e.g. a family walk, time to watch something together or play a game).
- Organise rooms to get rid of clutter which can reduce visual overload and help keep everyone calm.
- Give everyone in the house somewhere to keep their own belongings, and label this with pictures or names.
- Use objects to remind everyone of something unusual happening e.g. big Easter egg before Easter or a case before summer holidays.
- Have a music slot at significant times (e.g. beginning of weekend)
- Have a designated chill out place and/or time at home
- Use visual timers or five minute count downs to begin or end particularly difficult activities.
- Get other family or friends involved in helping to plan your routine to give you the benefit of an onlooker's perspective.

Developing independence in personal care

Even something as simple as a motivating character on the toothbrush or a visual timetable with a motivating special interest on the border can make a difference.



Personal care

Think about how many daily tasks are done automatically or out of habit. For example, dressing, washing, brushing teeth and hair etc. Although you may have supported your child in doing such tasks from their childhood to teenage years, with the pressure of many commitments, it may have been quicker and easier for you to do things for them. As your teenager matures this may need to change.

Everyone has their own individual personal care routines. However, if a teenager has difficulties with following routines, understanding language and motor coordination, this can impact on the way in which the skills begin to develop. It can be hard for teenagers with difficulties to adapt to new routines. Resistance to change, and sometimes a deterioration in behaviour often seems to take place when they are under pressure in other areas of life. This might be apparent in personal/ intimate care e.g. refusing to shower.

The following ideas may enable them to develop more independence in general personal care activities:

- Use visual reminders, for example, pictures, objects, written notes etc. These are often used with children but removed when they become older and more independent. In times of change or when they are facing new situations, bringing them back in can be helpful and can be a means of removing anxiety. They provide a good support to any routine.

- Breaking down the skills used in every activity. (You will be surprised how many skills can be needed). Just try to let them master one skill at a time and build each skill up gradually. Remember that to achieve each individual step successfully is very rewarding. Make sure you find just the right challenge, not so difficult that they are put off, not so easy that it's not rewarding.
- This then this - All teenagers find it hard to be motivated unless they see the point of a specific task. If you can find out the motivator, this can make things much easier if personal care activities are not motivating. Providing an enjoyable activity or a positive sensory experience, immediately after a personal care task. Even something as simple as a motivating character on the toothbrush or a visual timetable with a motivating special interest on the border can make a difference.

Developmentally, the physical change during the teenage years can be difficult for those who are sensory sensitive. Everything feels different as the body is changing. Be mindful that the physical differences may lead to particular sensory likes and dislikes.

Be aware of sensory issues.

- There can be sensitivities regarding personal care activities. Touch, sound, visual stimulation, smell and taste can all play a part and new sensitivities can develop as we get older or old ones can re-emerge when we feel anxious. It is not always easy to adapt to new care routines involving new sensory experiences, for example, shaving or having sore skin as a result of acne. Some new products on the market can be helpful but teenagers might find it stressful when familiar products change and do not have the same smell or packaging. Do remember that sensory deep pressure activities might still be useful. How long an activity will take and when it will end can all be important. Counting to ten, or using a timer or the length of a piece of music, to mark the end of a task, may help to make things clearer for someone who may not have a sense of how long it will take, or if and when it will end. Imagine how you would feel if you thought you could not get out of the shower and you were there forever!
- Most teenagers are rebellious at times. Their behaviour is often more apparent as they grow up. Living with parents during this phase often leads to conflict. This is normal!

Promoting choice rather than conflict in personal care

- Teenage problems include: defiance, moodiness, being withdrawn and head strong. A parent who has a teenager, with the added complication of having difficulty in understanding, feeling confused about the world, or coping with physical difficulties, often finds this extremely challenging.
- Generally speaking, for most teenagers, part of this process involves some risk-taking behaviour for teenagers with additional needs. Risk taking is an essential developmental step towards greater independence. This might involve such things as not asking for help or being abusive to carers. A lack of awareness of danger and boundaries might affect the limit to which they might be allowed the freedom to take risks. Often young people know their rights but need support to understand the responsibilities that go alongside these rights
- Conflict most often arises from the issues around independence in personal care, or in using other life skills, as this is where teenagers with additional difficulties still need help but may resent it or become self-conscious and embarrassed.
- Being able to make choices for yourself is important. Try to negotiate on things like the colour of their face cloth, or the kind of shower gel they use. Making special trips to buy the items used in the bathroom routine and choosing their own care products can be helpful and motivating. Such aspects as the colour or smell of a product can be used positively to give a teenager more control but still get them washed!

Questions to consider

- Does it have to be done the way you have always done it? (You will have created the routine when they were small. Does it need to be this way?)
- Can a choice be given to help your teenager have more control?
- Am I able to step back and see when there is a need to compromise?
- What level of personal care is really necessary or is it my need to nurture them that is dictating this e.g. you may have assisted them to shower daily but they prefer to shower every other day?
- If I am too close to the situation to judge fairly should I ask for help to reflect from family or friends, or a professional, Am I willing and able to allow my young person to take risks?
- What is the teenagers' responsibility?
- What has changed since the teenager was at the pre- teens stage?
- What motivates them? What do they think independence is?
- What helpful strategies can they revisit or start?
- What agreements including visual or written ones would they work with?
- Have they ever experienced independent risk taking?
- Can you build on this to promote positive strategies?

These are questions you might like to discuss to see if they help you to allow the teenager work towards greater independence. It might help to explore with your young person what understanding they have of his/her abilities and strengths, what understanding of support he/she needs.

Bathroom Etiquette

private. However, many teenagers with physical challenges or with problems of understanding, have to share this aspect of their life. This is shared not only with parents and extended family, but even with school staff, carers, and befrienders. This may continue into adulthood. We need to ensure that using the bathroom is a safe experience, our teenagers are treated with the dignity they deserve, and feel secure at all times. Choice should be offered to the teenager at every suitable opportunity.

Remember that although independence and choice should be encouraged, balanced with their hygiene needs, health and wellbeing.

It is important to help build a teenager's understanding of what constitutes safe touching even in personal care. The bathroom experience provides the opportunity to talk about who can touch and what is appropriate. Help to build an understanding of the meaning of privacy and covering up to your teenager. This can be something they have less experience of than other teenagers, as they may require more help. Towels should be made available to encourage covering up discreetly. Consider how it would feel if discretion was not given during self care activities if you needed assistance. Using a towel to cover up the area of the teenager's body that they are not actively needing assistance to wash is a basic but very useful strategy. Discussions about the issue of privacy, perhaps using pictures, should take place to reinforce this. There are many resources available to guide parents in relation to this.

Basic hygiene to avoid spreading germs can be taught by using social stories, pictures or cartoons about ways to prevent germ transmission, such as washing the hands after using the bathroom. There are many social stories available online in relation to this. There are social story apps that can be personalised to make it more meaningful.

The bathroom routine for morning and or night can be visually supported with as many cues appropriate to the individual teenager as required.



Co-ordination problems can be minimised by avoiding the use of clothing with very small buttons, and shampoo etc with small lids. To help with motivation, parents should try to use a variety of smells and textures of washing products, clothes and towels, with a range of colours of bottles etc to provide pleasurable sensory feedback. An example would be to warm the towel which may make drying less stressful.

Managing toilet hygiene can be difficult to learn especially if a teenager relies very much on the sense of sight to support reduced hand co-ordination. If this is the case, parents could encourage the use of a small hand mirror for the young person to check themselves (to see if they are clean). Or, they could try using moist toilet paper to clean themselves after using the toilet. Alternatively, they could use a little water from a small plastic bottle poured at the back to wash themselves clean and a disposable cloth to be binned afterwards.

If hygiene remains an issue and independent toilet hygiene is not being supported by regular showering, consideration could be given to using home or travel bidet devices to encourage cleanliness. Specialist toilet equipment can increase independence at home even although there can still be difficulties when a teenager is out and about and it is not available.

Hair care

Hair care can be difficult as you are relying more on touch than what you can actually see. It can be hard to negotiate using a brush and reaching round the back of your head. Sensory sensitivities can make it feel unpleasant if someone else is touching your head and hair. Being able to care for your own hair may give your teenager a greater sense of control and promote positive body image.

Things to consider:

- Easy, yet up to date shorter hair styles may be a solution to let the teenager feel they are growing up. A discussion with the hairdresser might be a good idea and your teenager could be involved in this.
- Using suitable shampoos, conditioners and anti -tangle products to help with brushing difficulties, and involving a young person in choosing their own hair care products, will help to develop a positive attitude.
- Experiment with different brushes, thinking about such things as: handle length, soft or hard bristles etc. Letting your child become familiar with how the brush feels or looks will build confidence, give them a sense of control and help to overcome sensitivity.
- Front brushing is the easiest way to start. Brushing your hair from behind might be the next step. You can help by holding up a mirror for them so that they can see their hair better. A dressing table style mirror may give a few different perspectives to allow your teenager to see their hair from all angles.

With regard to washing hair, think about temperature, amount of water, and suitably fragranced shampoo. Is it easier to wash hair while having a bath or shower? How often is it necessary and how can this be fitted into the routine? Teenagers can be sleepy in the morning. Is night time better? Consider the use of dry shampoo on the days that hair washing is a challenge.



Remember visual routines, time limits on activity and the reward of an enjoyable activity after completion, if the teenager perceives it as a dull or pointless task.

If your teenager hates hair washing, build positive routines in to help. Before washing hair, try massaging the scalp or applying deep pressure to the head for a count of ten. The teenager can build in a routine of doing this for themselves.

Teeth brushing

Remember the importance of taste, smell and texture, and involve the young person where possible in buying a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Most people have a preference over the type/style of toothbrush and the flavour of toothpaste. This is no different for teenagers with additional needs.

Try using an electric toothbrush. Novelty toothbrushes can be motivating for some people, other people may like a visual timer so they know how long is left of brushing.

Think about how a toothbrush feels in your teenager's mouth. Brushing one's own teeth is definitely less stressful. (If you get someone else to brush your teeth you will feel this.) There are many varieties and solutions available e.g. finger toothbrush.

If possible, you should get your teenager's to brush your teeth and then talk about what you both felt about it.

Discuss or get your teenager to create a visual routine they are able to follow and tick off stages.

Try allowing your teenager to eat something very chewy or chew hard on the toothbrush before they brush.

Rubbing hands together to build up the sensation before brushing could also help.

Eating habits

Teenager's interest in fast food and snacking can pose difficulties for both health and positive family routines. Every family is different in how this is best managed. Eating out with friends/carers and eating out with family may be two very different routines. Eating out can be a real source of pleasure or a real source of stress for teenagers and their parents. It is worthwhile considering how to deal with this in your particular family.

Age appropriate eating strategies need to be considered. With modern eating habits, eating with fingers is less noticeable and is commonplace in many fast food chains. However, perhaps not in some restaurants or family occasions. Cutlery is something it is important to be comfortable with.

Some suggestions for using cutlery:

Issues to consider:

- Do you want to eat out as a family in a variety of different places?
- Do you consider meals a time for being sociable or would you prefer to keep the social time for later?
- What is the pattern for visiting relatives and friends and are you and your teenager happy with it?
- Is it harder for your teenager to eat meals at school or with friends/carers than at home?
- Is there an opportunity for a change, for example, eating with their befriender group?
- Can a relative or friend come on board to try something new and different?
- Revisiting styles, colours and shapes of cutlery with the teenager as it has probably been a long time since you did this. Moving on to more adult looking cutlery is important to many teenagers.
- Using camping cutlery with different designs and weight combinations might appeal to them. Similarly, the colours, shapes and design of camping plates, where there are sections which might help to separate food, might be attractive.
- School trips, activities, special events and befriending sessions can be an ideal time to introduce and try new things. For example, new cutlery and plates could be tried out when you are visiting a friend or relative then, if accepted and a positive experience, built up into other areas.

...it may be useful to add positive sensory experiences specific to eating out and environmental cues.

For teenagers who struggle changing routines and social understanding it may be useful to add positive sensory experiences specific to eating out and environmental cues. Try using a variety of environments with different smells, music, colours etc. This may have been something you have avoided in the past, however, you could prepare them by using pictures or social stories again, especially if they have strong preferences. Again tap into what is available online to make bespoke social stories.

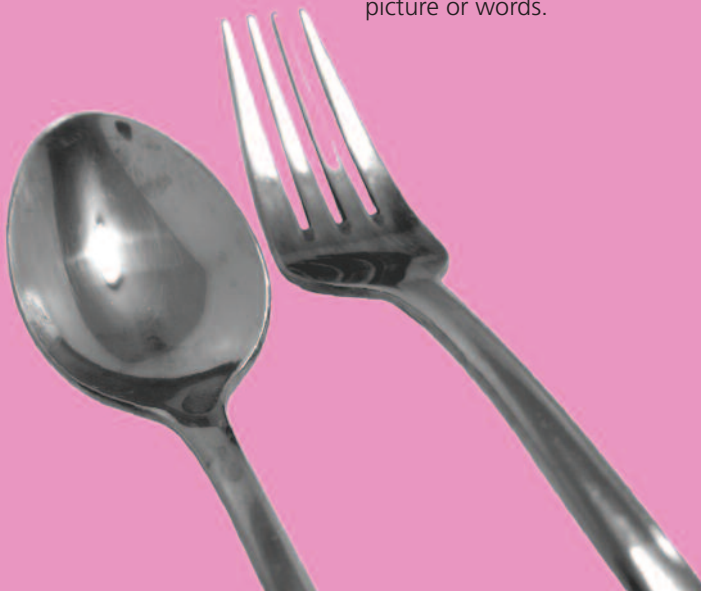
Try buying clothes that are only worn when eating out which the teenager can pick out for themselves.

Devise strategies to use while waiting for the food to be served, for example, smart phone games or small fidget toys. This may help the teenager to feel they are growing up but still keeps them occupied. Having headphones with favourite music to listen to may be helpful for some.

Structure the event taking into account:

- the time
- number of people coming
- how you will get there
- how long you will be there for.

Try using a smart phone with all the details to allow the young person to go over this themselves in picture or words.



Sleeping hygiene

Teenagers' sleep patterns are often very different from those of children. They may need more sleep at times, yet develop a pattern of being up later than you feel is healthy. Watching TV, playing with gaming consoles, social networking and using mobile phones, sometimes encourage habits to develop which disrupt sleep routines. Changes may be required.

Here are some suggestions for a better sleep pattern:

- Let your teenager help design a bedtime routine which is teen friendly. Think about using an age appropriate sleep chart.
- Make sure nothing is worrying or upsetting them. Encourage them to try using emoticon texts to see how they feel each night.
- It can be helpful to ensure the bedroom environment at that time is suitable for sleep, for example, the television is turned off and there are dark curtains if it is summer time.
- If sleep is a major difficulty minimise clutter/distraction in the bedroom, try out specific designs with not too much colour to reduce any distractions. Prepare a calm quiet area where the young person can relax, possibly using a rocking chair or hammock chair to provide gentle movement.
- Keep the environment and routine exactly the same, to help the teenager clearly link it to time for sleep.
- Before bedtime, allow time for calming activities such as: listening to music or an audio book, drawing, reading. Soaking in a hot bath with a calming fragrance, rubbing on body creams etc may help. Avoid stimulating activities such as watching television or playing with games consoles at this time.
- Include an element of choice of activity in the bedtime routine. Your teenager will cope better with the routine if involved in creating it.
- Pick night wear that the teenager likes, thinking of texture, colour, trendiness etc.

Keep the environment and routine exactly the same, to help the teenager clearly link it to time for sleep

- Use heavy blankets to provide positive deep pressure.
- If they can't sleep, build in an activity outside the bedroom, then encourage them to go back and try again. For example, they could go to the kitchen for a drink of water. This might help them to associate wakefulness as something that happens outside the bedroom.
- Encourage a habit of switching off mobile phones, or putting them on silent, screen down, to charge at night, to prevent sleep getting disrupted. If doing this, keep them away from the bedside.
- Make sure they exercise during the day, even for a short time, rather than later at night which might increase alertness.
- Prepare a mini routine the young person can follow if or when they wake in the night. This is something we all do but we don't often teach this to young people.
- Use timers, alarm clocks etc to clearly signify when it is time to get up.

A photograph showing the lower legs and feet of a person wearing brown suede loafers. The person is standing on a dark, textured surface, possibly asphalt or concrete. A horizontal bar with a rainbow gradient (purple, red, orange, yellow, green, blue) is positioned at the top of the image. The word "Travel" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font in the upper left quadrant.

Travel

The actual
experience of
travelling to an
activity
is just as important
as the activity
itself.

Modern living can involve frequent travel and visiting lots of places away from home. It can be rather frightening for teenagers to be away from familiar settings and everyday routines. The actual experience of travelling to an activity is just as important as the activity itself. Teenagers with difficulty tuning into new experiences may feel confused if they go by a different route than normal, or pass a familiar place where they usually stop but don't on one particular occasion. This can cause alarm and may then lead to difficult behaviour.

We want to enable teenagers with additional needs to reach the stage where they can travel independently, without parental support. To achieve this, they should be given experience of travel, and the opportunity to develop the appropriate skills, using as many forms of transport as possible. For some teenagers there is technology that can help build skills in this area e.g. GPS in phones.

Walking

When our teenagers were children, they may have had an experience of walking in the midst of crowds that they found overwhelming, or they may not have been motivated to walk at all. It might be a good time to revisit this now, as walking as a form of exercise is beneficial for their health and can be a calming activity.

The following are some suggestions for parents to try:

- Going on a short walk with a clear purpose. Building independence by making short journeys, for example, to a neighbour's house, local shop etc. (perhaps with you shadowing them, rather than walking with them - a few steps behind).
- Using crossings and practising a good road crossing routine (at various places, at various times of the day and night).
- Planning routes which specifically include crossing roads at designated crossings (judging the distance of cars and crossing roads safely at other places may never be a skill that can be achieved). Not unusual for many people.
- Using smart phones with a route planner or putting instructions into notes.
- Increasing independence by going with the teenager, then getting them to meet someone at a specific point, as this can increase their awareness of the time it takes. Thinking ahead about the routes they might need to use when they leave school and go to college.
- Travelling by bus might be a part of this, but walking to and from the bus station to college etc might be involved too.

Bus

Generally teenagers may have more experience as a car passenger than a bus passenger. Teenage years are a good time to build this skill. Experience of bus journeys may be very limited for many teenagers. However, bus travel may provide the best opportunity for independent travelling so it is important that they are familiar with it.

The following are some suggestions about how to do this:

- Make sure you use the bus regularly with the teenager (or even better from pre-teen). Ask befrienders or wider family to use the bus with them.
- Practice going on bus routes which might be important when they leave school.
- Make sure that each step of the journey is taught clearly to them, as bus travel has its own skills and social rules.
- Prepare them for what you do if you miss the bus or it does not turn up. Meet them at a bus stop, or get on at the next stop, or at the end of the journey.
- Practice what you say to the driver, how you pay for your fare, or show your bus pass. Make sure you don't do each stage for them. Do with them, then support them to be actively involved with your supporting, not doing.
- Ask the wider family to meet them getting off the bus at a stop near them.
- Think about using a smart phone locator for safety as they travel so you know where they are.
- Build social stories about what might happen on the journey perhaps using pictures.
- Make sure they have an emergency plan to follow, for example, if they are frightened they should speak to the bus driver or show a card with emergency details. There are many bus travel scheme passes.
- Have emergency contacts in easy to find place on phone e.g. on home screen.

Car

A teenager may cope with standard seat belts as they become older and get more familiar with car travel, however, the use of additional harnesses may still be required.

Weighted lap blankets on their knees gives sensory feedback while they are sitting in the seat. This may help if your teenager finds deep pressure calming.

Specialist vehicles may be required when the teenager gets bigger, if access to seats or wheelchair access becomes an issue.

Clear information about the journey or any changes to the journey will help them to understand what is happening. The use of visual information using their familiar visual preference is recommended (e.g. pictures/words/symbols).

Distractors such as DVDs, tablet apps or music may help to keep the teenager calm if they are travelling for long distances



A surprise card could be used for route changes or road cues on the motorway.

Distractors such as DVDs, tablet apps or music may help to keep the teenager calm if they are travelling for long distances. Fidget toys, or an object that reminds them where they are going, (e.g. a swim bag for swimming) might also be worth using.

A Sat Nav can be helpful for teenagers who need to know where they are and when they will arrive (there are many sat nav apps on tablets and mobile phones).

Train Travel

The teenager should be made familiar with their local train station and the railway staff.

Train travel is generally more predictable, provided there are no cancellations, and may be a good way of supporting a teenager who wants to embark on longer journeys. The ability to get up and walk on a train and the regular movement may make this a positive experience for some teenagers who do not have issues with mobility. It also enables an adult to give support without the distraction of driving .

The teenage stage can be a good time to teach train travel as it is a new, grown up, and motivating environment in which to learn new skills.

For the teenager with physical disability, learning how to notify the train station of the need for assistance or a ramp (and what to do if there is a problem with it) would be a valuable skill. Train timetables present effective information which provides visual support. Information about times, destinations etc can be interesting and motivating to a teenager.

The teenager should be made familiar with their local train station and the railway staff.

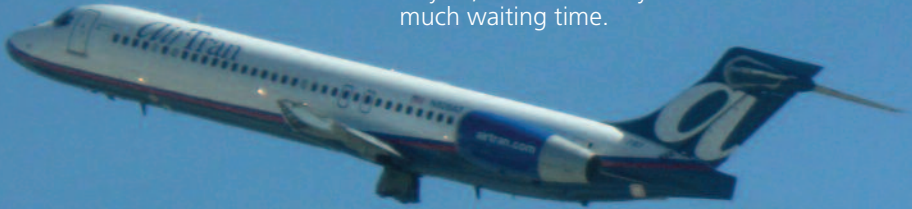
They should have an emergency plan in place (e.g. if frightened, talk to conductor or use phone with emergency contacts.)



Plane Travel

There are a number of things which could be helpful (for the teenager with communication and understanding issues):

- Providing information on what is happening, when it is happening, and who is travelling.
- Using visual supports, such as a calendar, to show how many days there are until the holiday or until they come home.
- Pre- planning for the journey with pictures of planes etc. Visits to the airport in advance to give them experience of being there.
- Organising travel at the less busy times of day or year, to limit sensory overload and avoid too much waiting time.



- Preparing for delays, using social stories or waiting time activities, possibly related to airports.
- Consider the use of handling slings for plane journeys, the use of continence products to avoid toilet access issues in confined spaces. Have a discussion re your teenager's preferences. Many airports have dedicated teams to assist if pre booked. For those with physical difficulties thinking around access issues and creative solutions is a worthwhile exercise.

The Social Scene

A photograph of an outdoor cafe or restaurant setting. In the foreground, several black metal chairs and tables are arranged. In the middle ground, a man and a woman are seated at a table with a red tablecloth, viewed from behind. They are wearing light-colored shirts. The background features a body of water, a wooden railing, and a blurred boat. Large blue and yellow umbrellas provide shade over the seating area.

Before a teenager leaves school it is good to introduce them to places which they can continue to visit once they have left behind the familiar routine of school.

The following ideas are worth thinking about:

- Parents may have different opinion on the benefits of social activities for teenagers e.g. adults can perceive the social scene as an essential way of developing social skills that teenagers need. However teenagers may only be interested or not in whether they are feeling happy or not with the activity.
- Teenagers may find that their experiences at school will affect the access they have to friends and leisure outwith of school. Teenagers with greater difficulties may find this more of an issue if activities involving friends are not actively planned for them. They may find social experiences stressful, therefore, structuring events in advance, using visual supports, and perhaps practising what to do at an event beforehand, can be useful preparation.
- Often both parents and professionals view inclusive leisure as a means of learning life skills, increasing independence and building self-esteem. However, the teenagers themselves are more likely to be simply thinking about friendships and having fun. In fact, a balance of both views is needed.
- Although teenagers might enjoy participating in normal, mainstream leisure activities, they may also welcome the opportunity to meet with others in a similar situation, in order to share their mutual experience. For example, wheelchair users might enjoy comparing the speeds of their power chair .
- A lack of appropriate support (such as transport, personal assistance, and help with communication) may prove to be a barrier to participating in ordinary leisure activities. Careful planning with these issues in mind is required.

Before a teenager leaves school it is good to introduce them to places which they can continue to visit once they have left behind the familiar routine of school.

A Practical Approach at Home for Parents and Carers

- Leisure activities can involve meeting other people. They could also be activities which can be done alone, yet provide an opportunity to meet other people, without the commitment of a friendship. Examples of this would be: going to the gym, or swimming. It is helpful to give thought to what suits a teenager best in terms of their social needs.
- It is also worth exploring how much exercise the teenager would like to have, as this may be beneficial for their general mood and feeling of wellbeing.
- Before a teenager leaves school it is good to introduce them to places which they can continue to visit once they have left behind the familiar routine of school. Think about whether they could use the local sports centre instead of the school gym, or the local swimming pool for PE in their final year of school. This would build up a familiarity with new environments and people, and provide leisure activities which would remain after they leave school. It would require making links with the school but could be worth investigating.
- Other lone leisure activities worth considering are: a weekly visit to a cafe, or a library with wifi, where the teenager could get to know the staff and develop a familiar routine which would be age appropriate. It could be transferred to an adult befriender or become an independent activity.



Moving on

All parents want to plan for their children's future and enable them to develop the skills to survive in the adult world. However, there is often a lack of time in which to practise these new skills in advance, in new environments with new people, to allow parents and teenagers to feel confident that they are ready to move on. It's therefore important to start early!

The following are some suggestions to help with this:

- Thinking about the college or placement the teenager might attend, so that you can start making the journey there a part of your outings and trips early on in their teenage years. (It does not matter if this does not turn out not to be the one they attend in the end, as bus experience will still be helpful and it is always useful to familiarise them with specific routes.)
- Discussing work experience and finding out about what they might like to do. Doing voluntary work together, or asking wider family or befrienders to accompany them to help in a local setting, might help to widen their experience and build confidence and communication skills.
- The school environment and all that it involves will have become very familiar to the teenagers but when they come near to the time of actually leaving school, you could try using other local, newer services which they might continue to use in the future, for example, the library, sports centre, community centre and maybe some new clubs or cafes.
- Suggesting to friends, family, or befrienders that they try visiting new places when they take them out. It is best to keep these trips local so that they fit into life easily and could potentially become a regular activity once they leave school.
- Giving them more choice and independence with regard to going to local shops to buy such things as food, clothes, care products, or to get their hair cut. You may need to plan a specific trip for each individual item but it is gradually building up independent skills.
- Self Help Skills/Domestic Chores
- Introduce concept of responsibility in your home so your teenager now contributes to the running of the family home. This is a good way of increasingly independent living. The chore could be daily (setting the table/clearing the table) or weekly - helping with the shopping.

Technology

We live in an age of technology and our teenagers will already be familiar with it and use it on a daily basis. Assistive technology, specialised to the needs of young people with difficulties, will be used both at school and at home to aid communication and control the environment. However, there are some more low key ways of using what is already at our finger tips to give more independence unobtrusively.

The following are some examples:

- Emoticons - young people are familiar with such as smiley faces could be used to check mood/feeling.
- Texting with simple emoticons for teenagers who would love to text but find it hard.

If the teenager likes texting but has complex social understanding issues, making up a list of texting rules could be helpful, for example, appropriate times to text (not 3am!) and an acceptable number of texts if they are texting too much to one person. Set the rule list in notes or in pictures.

- Use pictures saved on phones to store visual routines, waiting time, or social story.
- Watch the clip of the conversations you have with the teenager. Ask yourself if you are letting them grow up and make choices for themselves or making the choice for them out of habit.
- Watch the clip of the teenager interacting with friends or family with them, and chat about what was good in the way they acted and what showed maturity in conversation or actions. Resist pointing out any negatives!
- Ask yourself if you are making full use of timers, calendars, and alarms.
- Switch on safe location on smart phones to check where teenagers are; or if they are anxious, to let them check where you are.



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Specific advice regarding the use of tablets with complex teenagers.

Tablets are very predictable for teenagers and even many of those who have very complex difficulties and limited motivation for other things, really enjoy using them. This can be used to advantage in the following ways:

- You should maintain control over how much time they get to access the tablet so you can negotiate what is required to be done, and reward and support other activities.
- The tablet could be used to give simple, predictable cues. For example, you could set a photo album for a routine they do not understand.
- The tablet can be a familiar object which they can take with them to new environments to provide a predictable, safe and familiar activity.
- You could use the album to support a simple routine and share at bedtime.



Notes:

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**If you would like this
information in another
language, Braille, LARGE PRINT
or audio, please contact
Children with Disabilities Team.**

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