

Interview with Dr. Daniel Steere

How early should a family begin to teach life skills?

As early as possible, starting with simple self-care skills, picking up toys, and so forth. As with any child, it is important to teach these skills longitudinally, that is, across their childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Because so many of these life skills are completed within the home, it is very important for the family to establish expectations early for the youngster in order to help create a sense of responsibility for the completion of everyday activities. If we do not establish expectations early, then it becomes more difficult later to teach these skills because the youngster is not used to having to do chores or fulfill responsibilities.

What are the challenges for teaching home-related skills at different ages?

The primary challenge is to make sure that the skills that you are teaching are appropriate for the chronological (actual) age of your child. It is important for skills that we teach to be age-appropriate, that is, appropriate to what someone of that age would or should do. For example, how we expect a six year old to dress is often very different from how a sixteen year old might dress.

Skills become more complex as children age, and these skills should reflect what other people of that same age are expected to do. It is often helpful to simply ask yourself: "What would I expect any young person of this age to do within the home, regardless of disability?" This will help in establishing high expectations for learning and for fulfilling responsibilities within the home. A second challenge is to teach the young person to fulfill their home living responsibilities with less and less supervision from parents and other family members. When children are young, they will need a lot of parent teaching and feedback on the completion of their responsibilities. As they age and mature, they should require less family assistance and should start to initiate and complete activities on their own. Simple checklists in written and picture form can help to develop these self-management skills.

Finally, we need to remember that most home living skills may be completed in varied ways, so we need to teach youngsters to handle these variations. For example, not all microwave ovens are the same. Because individuals with autism often have difficulty with generalization of skills, we need to directly teach them using a variety of materials that expose them to the differences in materials and how they are used.

What are the key areas that need to be taught as part of home living skills?

There are nine general activity areas around home living skills. They are planning and preparing meals, self-care, bathing and hygiene, cleaning and care of the home, cleaning and care of clothing, telephone use, leisure activities, safety procedures, time management and scheduling and negotiating with others and self-advocacy.

Should home living skills be incorporated as part of my child's IEP objectives?

Yes, definitely. Following are some examples of IEP objectives for elementary, middle and high school levels.

Elementary: Given two slices of bread, jelly and peanut butter, the student will correctly make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, without assistance, for 3 consecutive opportunities.

Middle School: During the preparation for gym class, the student will change into her gym clothes without assistance on 5 consecutive opportunities.

High School: Given a weekly menu planner, the student will develop a menu for each meal of the week. In addition, the student will make a checkmark next to those items for which he needs to shop. The completeness and accuracy of the menu planner will be assessed by his parents. Criterion will be met when 3 consecutive menu planners are completed to the parents' satisfaction.

Why is it important for my child to learn home living skills?

The stakes for learning home living skills are high. In recent years, a supported living approach, where individuals live where they want with necessary support, has developed an alternative to the traditional residential services. Supported living services are based on the presumption that individuals of differing needs can live where and how they want when supports are provided. Despite the development of the supported living environment, individuals with disabilities continue to enter restrictive residential programs . . . too often because of skill deficit. Those people who learn home living skills may have a greater chance to establish a home of their own in adulthood. When the development of these skills are neglected, students are more likely to spend their adult lives with little choice or control over where and how they live. Research also indicates that individuals who live in small, community-based settings of their choosing are more likely to be autonomous and to engage in more varied community activities of their own choosing.

Dr. Daniel Steere Bio

Dan Steere teaches in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. Prior to coming to ESU, he taught for two years at Montana State University-Billing. While at the Institute for Human Resource Development in Connecticut, Dan provided extensive in-service training and technical assistance to agencies and schools for the development of transition and/or supported employment services. He has also worked as a special education teacher of students with autism and as a manager of a community residence for adults with severe disabilities. Dan has published extensively in professional journals on topics related to employment of people with disabilities and transition to adulthood, and he co-authored the recent book *Growing Up: Transition to Adulthood for Students with Disabilities* (Steere, Rose, & Cavaiuolo, 2007, Allyn & Bacon). His particular areas of interest include ways to facilitate transition from school to adulthood, systematic instruction of people with severe disabilities, and person centered planning.