

Building independence

An introduction for adults with autism

Building independence can be a daunting and overwhelming concept, but it is also a positive outcome to achieve. This information sheet explains what being independent will mean to different people and how to achieve this.

What does being independent mean?

Being independent can mean:

- Making choices that suit you
- Living a fuller life with more control
- Understanding your options and important things that affect you
- Having a carer
- Managing your budgets
- Being in employment
- Accessing benefits
- Building self-esteem
- Being a member of the community
- Being more organised and predictable
- Being more grown up.

But remember, even when you are living more independently, people can still help, support and guide you. This may be your parents, other family members or a support worker. This does not mean you are not independent and you should do whatever suits you and your needs.

What makes you independent?

- **Employment** - Employment is an important step towards independence for many people. It is a way of earning money to allow you to pay for activities you enjoy as well as travel and possibly your own home. There are various services that can help you to find employment. This includes the Job Centre, which should have a Disability Employment Advisor that you can speak to. You may need to call the Job Centre in advance to book an appointment with this advisor.
- **Independent living** - Independent living means living away from your parents or a full-time care setting. This may mean that you live alone, with friends or another group of adults of a similar age. You may still receive support in your home but you will be independent of your mum and dad. You may live in a house or a flat which gives you more control over your own space and allows you to make more choices about how to spend your time.

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- **Getting out and about** - Getting out and about is very important to feeling in control of your life. It can make a big difference to your confidence to be able to go out into the community on your own, as well as opening up lots of interesting opportunities. For example, being able to use public transport allows you to visit new places and makes it easier for you to find work. Being able to manage your money means you can take part in fun activities, like going to the pub. This can give you more chances to socialise and meet new people, which in turn will build confidence.
- **Accessing benefits** - As somebody with a disability, you may be entitled to some benefits from the government. These are meant to help people who may earn a bit less because of their disability, or who are out of work. Part of living independently is understanding a bit more about these benefits, how to apply for them and what they are for. This can help to give you more flexibility as you will have some help with money, as well as giving you more control over your life.

Skills

Learning new skills might help you to become more independent, there are some important things to consider when learning new skills or trying to become more independent. The questions below are just some examples of the things you should ask yourself when you start trying to learn something new.

- What skills would I like to learn?
- What areas do I struggle most with?
- How might I improve on these things?
- Who could help me with this?
- Is the person supporting me doing so in my best interest?
- Am I being treated with dignity and respect?

Sometimes people may offer you help in return for something from you. If this is money in exchange for professional lessons or training, for example, then this is OK. But if someone offers to teach you something that they are not qualified to teach, or they ask for something unreasonable in return, then they are not supporting you in your best interest. For example, someone may offer to teach you more about socialising if you will give them money, but unless they are a qualified social skills instructor then you should not agree to this. If you are ever unsure about any of these questions, speak to someone you trust for their advice.

Decision-making

A very important life skill is problem solving. This is what will help you to make decisions about being more independent and about what skills you would like to learn. It will help you a lot in taking control of your life and decisions that affect you.

You should start by breaking down tasks into step-by-step sequences. Then you can complete each step one by one to complete the overall task. This will help you to stay focused on your task and experience a sense of personal achievement once the problem is solved.

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Cooking/cleaning

These are very useful skills to have, particularly if you want to live away from home. There are lots of ways to learn these skills but the most common way is to ask your family to teach you. You can also look on websites and in cookbooks for instructions on how to make different recipes.

Driving

To learn to drive, you need an instructor. This is sometimes a family member or family friend but you can also pay a qualified driving instructor to give you lessons. Once you have learned how to drive, you need to pass a test before you can drive on your own.

Budgeting/money

Your family, friends or support worker may be able to help you to learn this skill. You can also find information about money online from websites like moneysavingexpert.com. These sites help you to find cheaper bills, good rates for bank accounts, money saving deals and much more. Some people set up a spreadsheet on the computer, or make a list, to show their spending and income so they can plan how much money they have to spend.

Who can support me to be more independent?

- **Parents and other family members** - Living independently of your family does not mean that they are gone completely. Your family members may be the best people to help you to learn new skills and to support you to apply for benefits and other support. Even if you live in a different house to your family members, they may come round to visit and to help you keep on top of things like cleaning, paying bills and food shopping, depending on what you need.
- **Carers or support workers** - You may need some support from a carer or you may be able to apply for funding to pay for a support worker to come to your home to help you. This is usually paid for with Social Care funding that you need to apply for. These carers and support workers can help with everyday tasks as well as your individual care needs and emotional wellbeing.
- **Employment advice services** - Employment services can help you to find or keep a job. This may include help to write a CV, look for jobs to apply for or practice for interviews, as well as support once you are in work. Some employment services work directly with employers to make sure your job is suitable and they communicate with you properly.
- **Teachers/lecturers** - If you are still in education then you may know some teachers or lecturers who offer your advice and support around learning new skills. A good education and qualifications can also help you get a job more easily and for better pay. It can also build your confidence and self-esteem and give you a chance to go to university in the future.

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- **Other adults with autism** - You may know other autistic people who seem more independent than you feel and you could ask them if they have any advice that might help. There are also lots of blogs written by people with autism where you can learn about their experiences.

One of the most important parts of being more independent is taking responsibility for your own life and the decisions you make. If you need a lot of support to make decisions then you can still be more independent just by learning more about those decisions, what they mean and how they were made. This will give you more control over your life because you understand what is happening. You can also take responsibility by thinking about skills you would like to learn, and researching the ways in which you could develop these skills.