



Building Your Child's Life Skills: A Free Toolkit for Families

By Erik von Hahn, M.D.

Does your child need help learning everyday skills like following rules and routines? At school, many kids have plans known as IEPs to help them set goals and improve skills. This toolkit helps you create an “IEP for Home” that focuses on improving your child’s life skills.



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Introduction



Dear Families,

When it comes to building life skills, some children learn pretty quickly how to do things like follow rules and routines. But many kids need help developing these skills.

Over the years, I've worked with thousands of families who are trying to figure out why their child is struggling with academics and other issues. Understandably, many parents focus on getting more help for their child at school. But sometimes, they're so focused on school that they may miss opportunities to help their child build skills at home.

As a developmental-behavioral pediatrician, I've made it a habit to ask all parents and caregivers about sleeping habits, eating habits, following rules, and completing routines. These habits or skills have to be taught. And they aren't just important for home. They're important for success at school, too.

When children struggle at school, they may get what's called an IEP. It's a "blueprint" for setting goals and building important skills. That's why I developed this tool that I call an "IEP for Home."

Whether or not your child has an IEP at school, you can create an "IEP for Home." It has two main parts. The first is a worksheet that helps you take a look at your child's current skill levels. The second helps you set goals to improve skills.

You can use these tools to create a blueprint for building your child's life skills. This toolkit has lots of tips to help you get started.



Sincerely,

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At school, an IEP looks at a child's current skill level and sets goals for improvement. An "IEP for Home" does the same thing. It can also help you and your child measure progress and celebrate wins.

Assessing Your Child's Life Skills

An **IEP at school** includes details about a child's skill level. The assessment worksheet in this toolkit works the same way. It asks you to rate how often your child uses certain life skills and how much help your child needs to use them.

For example, think about your child's morning routine. Do you only need to give your child a reminder or two? Or does your child need to be told step-by-step what to do? Do you have to help out by physically completing the task with your child, like packing a backpack or getting dressed?

One goal of this worksheet is to make sure all of these skills stay on your radar. The worksheet is also designed so you can easily share it with your child's doctor and other professionals who can help you think about ways to build your child's life skills.

Why These Skills Are Listed in This Order

The skills in the assessment worksheet are listed in order of importance. Why is homework last? Well, you won't have as much success getting your child to sit down and do homework unless you first work on the other skills in this list.

Why is having fun as a family at the very top of the list? Because starting with a positive foundation will help you and your child work on the harder stuff together.

You might notice that, for each set, the skills are listed from easiest to hardest. When you're deciding which skills to work on, it's usually best to start with the easier ones.



To watch a video on which skills the "IEP for Home" focuses on and why, go to u.org/IEPforHome.



Setting Goals to Help Build Your Child's Life Skills

A school IEP sets goals to help improve skills. It also details what type of support a child will get in order to build those skills. This "IEP for Home" toolkit includes a goal-setting worksheet so you can do the same for improving your child's life skills.

Breaking goals down into smaller steps can help your child succeed. For example, you may want to work toward having your child complete the evening routine independently. Start by making a list of all the steps in this routine. Then think about how much support your child needs now for each step.

If you are currently telling your child step-by-step what to do, try posting a list or **picture schedule** for your child to follow instead. This could help your child work toward only needing a reminder or two.

Choosing Your First Goal

Take your time choosing the first goal. The best first goal is the one your child is most likely to succeed at. Starting with an "easy win" can help you get buy-in from your child about working on other skills together. Resist the urge to start with tough stuff like homework or the morning routine.

Brainstorm with your child about how to meet the goal. Working as a team can lead to better solutions. It can also help your child feel in control and empowered.

It's important for you and your child to agree on the goal. Make sure your child truly understands what you expect. Sometimes kids are unclear about where their responsibility starts and ends. If your child doesn't meet the goal, review the plan together and talk about what's missing or incomplete.

Steps to Success

The goal-setting worksheet includes steps you can take to help your child succeed:

1. Notice. Try to "catch" your child doing something good and then comment on it. For example, notice small successes, especially when you did not provide any reminders. You can say: "I noticed you put your shoes away. Thanks for taking care of that."

2. Praise. When you're starting to teach a new skill, it's OK to **praise your child** for partially meeting the goal. But after a while, let your child know that more steps need to be completed: "I'm glad you put away your shoes and toys. Remember to use our checklist to help you do the other steps, too."

Be specific about the effort your child put in, and be sincere. Avoid overpraising. Instead of saying, "Wow, this is the cleanest room I've ever seen!" say, "Wow, your room looks great! I like how you used the checklist for tidying up. You completed each step!"



Steps to Success (continued)

3. Reward. Use rewards to reinforce positive behavior. Instead of new toys or more screen time, look for rewards that involve spending time together. This kind of reward can help your child feel loved and valued. (See the filled-in worksheet at the end of this toolkit for an example of how to set up this kind of reward.)

4. Use consequences sparingly. Consequences matter, but don't use them until after you've given your child an extra chance or two to reach the goal. For the best results, focus your energy on noticing, praising, and rewarding your child.

Learning From Failure

Looking back at what went wrong can help you think about how to develop better goals. Was the goal too big? Could you have split it into smaller steps? Did you communicate clearly with your child?

Changing behavior is hard. It takes time to build new skills, so try to stay positive. Find a mentor or even just a friend to bounce ideas off of. Reach out to your child's doctor, teachers, and the **Understood Community**. Talking to other people can help you set realistic expectations. It can also help you see successes and strengths in your child that you may have overlooked.

It's important to remember that almost everybody struggles to teach kids these skills. Many families have been where you are. You may be surprised at how willing they are to help. So speak up. Ask other people about their successes and setbacks. You—and your child—will benefit from the suggestions.

Keep us posted

We'd love to hear from you. As you're using this toolkit, please update us by filling out a short form at u.org/IEPforHome-feedback. Your feedback can make these and other resources better and help more families help more kids.



Assessing Your Child's Life Skills

Fill out and share with your child's doctor, teachers, other professionals, or parents to get suggestions on how to help your child build these important life skills.	Child's Name: _____ Age: _____ Date: _____						
	Frequency: <i>How often does your child use this skill?</i>			Level of Support: <i>How much assistance does your child need to use this skill?</i>			
Skills: These skill sets are listed in order of importance. Having fun as a family is the most important because a positive relationship will help you and your child work on the other skills. The skills in each skill set are listed from easiest to hardest. Work on easier skills first.	Always or very often	Sometimes	Rarely or never	No help needed	Needs 1 or 2 prompts	Told step-by-step	Physical support
1. Having Fun as a Family							
Spend time each day cuddling/relaxing with you							
Enjoy having conversations with you and as a family							
Enjoy doing fun activities together, like playing a game							
Enjoy doing household activities together, like cooking							
2. Sleeping							
Wake up at a set time at least five days a week							
Go to bed at a set time at least five days a week							
Get enough sleep (9–11 hours for most kids and teens)							
Get enough naptime (not usually needed after age 5)							
Sleep alone through the night, not co-sleep with you							
3. Eating							
Eat foods with different flavors and textures							
Eat on a schedule instead of snacking all day							
Eat healthy foods, like fruits, veggies, and whole grains							
Use good manners, like chew with mouth closed							



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	Always or very often	Sometimes	Rarely or never	No help needed	Needs 1 or 2 prompts	Told step-by-step	Physical support
4. Movement							
Play or exercise with family members or peers							
Play or exercise vigorously at least three times a week							
Do an organized activity, like join a team or take a class							
5. Following Routines							
Evening: undressing, bathing, brushing teeth, bedtime							
Morning: dressing, eating, brushing teeth, getting out the door							
Backpack: packing, putting in the same grab-and-go spot							
Tidying up: cleaning bedroom, clearing kitchen table							
6. Following Rules							
Respect safety rules at home (sharp objects, poisons)							
Respect safety rules in the community (crossing the street)							
Respect "first-then" rules ("First work, then play")							
Respect rules for privileges (playtime, screen time)							
Respect rules for special privileges (new toys, outings)							
7. Making Friends							
Use greetings and express interest in socializing							
Play successfully alongside peers (parallel play)							
Take turns and share toys with peers in board games and imaginary play							



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	Always or very often	Sometimes	Rarely or never	No help needed	Needs 1 or 2 prompts	Told step-by-step	Physical support
7. Making Friends (continued)							
Take turns with peers in conversations							
Resolve conflicts							
8. Homework							
Do homework for agreed-upon number of minutes							
Do homework without getting overly frustrated							
Try all types of homework (reading, writing, math)							
Finish all homework							
Spend time looking for and correcting errors							

Next Steps	
<p>Use the goal-setting worksheet in this toolkit. When choosing your first goal, hold off on the hardest stuff. Focus on a skill you and your child both agree would be easy or fun to work on.</p>	<p>Aim to reduce your level of support. Use checklists and other tools or strategies as you move away from physically helping your child do certain tasks or providing step-by-step verbal support.</p>
<p>Break tasks down into smaller steps. For a strong start, help your child focus on doing two or three steps really well, and then build up from there.</p>	<p>Be patient. Start out by giving your child lots of time to complete a task. You can work on speed later.</p>



Setting Goals to Help Build Your Child's Life Skills

<p>Use this worksheet to help develop skillbuilding goals. Ask for suggestions from your child's doctor, teachers, and other parents.</p>	Child's Name: _____ Start Date: _____ Review Date: _____
<p>Skill: Focus on one skill at a time. This will help you and your child stick to the goal and reduce the chances of feeling overwhelmed.</p>	Skill: _____ _____
<p>Goal: Work with your child to develop the goal and be sure to start small. The smaller the goal, the greater the chances of meeting it.</p>	Goal: _____ _____
Steps to Success	
<p>1. Notice: Notice and comment on your child's small successes. This includes noticing when your child partially reaches a goal. This kind of positive attention can help reinforce your child's positive behavior.</p>	Things I can do or say: _____ _____ _____
<p>2. Praise: Focus on the effort your child put in and/or on each part of the goal your child completed. Be specific and be sincere. Avoid overpraising or comparing your child to other kids.</p>	Things I can do or say: _____ _____ _____
<p>3. Reward: Use rewards when your child reaches or exceeds the goal. Work with your child ahead of time to develop rewards that involve spending time together—this can help your child feel valued and loved.</p>	Things I can do or say: _____ _____ Agreed-upon reward: _____ _____
<p>4. Use consequences sparingly: If you're sure your child understood the expectations and you gave your child an extra chance or two, then consider giving a consequence. Work with your child ahead of time to come up with what the consequence will be.</p>	Things I can do or say: _____ _____ Agreed-upon consequence: _____ _____



Setting Goals to Help Build Your Child's Life Skills (Example)

<p>Use this worksheet to help develop skillbuilding goals. Ask for suggestions from your child's doctor, teachers, and other parents.</p>	<p>Child's Name: <u>Jamie Rodriguez</u> Start Date: <u>June 1</u> Review Date: <u>June 30</u></p>
<p>Skill: Focus on one skill at a time. This will help you and your child stick to the goal and reduce the chances of feeling overwhelmed.</p>	<p>Skill: <u>Enjoy doing fun activities together as a family.</u></p>
<p>Goal: Work with your child to develop the goal and be sure to start small. The smaller the goal, the greater the chances of meeting it.</p>	<p>Goal: <u>During Movie Night, Jamie will keep his emotions in check. If he has an outburst, he will try to calm down as quickly as possible.</u></p>
<p>Steps to Success</p>	
<p>1. Notice: Notice and comment on your child's small successes. This includes noticing when your child partially reaches a goal. This kind of positive attention can help reinforce your child's positive behavior.</p>	<p>Things I can do or say: <u>If Movie Night begins smoothly, I will thank Jamie for starting out successfully: "You were able to let your sister pick the movie. I really appreciate that you stuck with our agreement."</u></p>
<p>2. Praise: Focus on the effort your child put in and/or on each part of the goal your child completed. Be specific and be sincere. Avoid overpraising or comparing your child to other kids.</p>	<p>Things I can do or say: <u>"You did such a good job calming down quickly. It was great that we were able to start watching the movie again. Nice work. Thanks for helping us finish the movie tonight."</u></p>
<p>3. Reward: Use rewards when your child reaches or exceeds the goal. Work with your child ahead of time to develop rewards that involve spending time together—this can help your child feel valued and loved.</p>	<p>Things I can do or say: <u>"Wow, you kept your emotions in check for three Movie Nights in a row! I'm going to give you a reward."</u> Agreed-upon reward: <u>Making ice cream sundaes together.</u></p>
<p>4. Use consequences sparingly: If you're sure your child understood the expectations and you gave your child an extra chance or two, then consider giving a consequence. Work with your child ahead of time to come up with what the consequence will be.</p>	<p>Things I can do or say: <u>"You knew what was expected. I gave you extra chances to calm down. Now I have to give you a consequence."</u> Agreed-upon consequence: <u>You won't be able to finish the movie tonight.</u></p>