

Best Practices for Teaching New Skills

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for all of us to learn new skills, like handwashing and wearing masks. For individuals on the autism spectrum, learning new skills can be hard. This resource includes tips for teaching new skills to people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

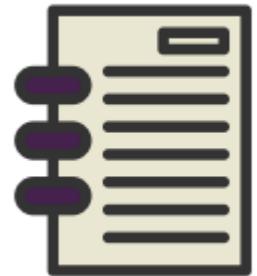
BREAK UP NEW SKILLS INTO SMALLER STEPS OR PIECES

It can be helpful to break up the skill into steps or smaller pieces. For example, if you are teaching someone to wash their hands for 20 seconds:

- First, teach how to pump soap and turn on water.
- Next, teach how to scrub palms of hands, fingers, back of hands, then under fingertips.
- Then, teach them to sing 'Happy Birthday' twice while washing hands.

USE VISUALS OR LISTS

- Many with ASD learn better when using a visual aide or list. When teaching something new like wearing a face mask in public, it can be helpful to use a social story or short cartoon to explain why they should wear a mask, when they should wear a mask, and even how to properly put on a face mask.
- A checklist or list of instructions for completing the skill can be used. For example, before leaving the home, a person with ASD could have a checklist that reminds them to wash their hands, get their keys, wallet, and to put on their face mask.



BE CREATIVE/FLEXIBLE

- When it comes to new skills related to COVID-19, you may need to be especially creative or flexible. For example, people with ASD may resist using alcohol-based hand sanitizer because of the strong smell.
- You may need to find alternative types of liquid hand sanitizers, hand wipes, or washing hands more with soap.
- Due to sensory differences, some people with ASD may also struggle with wearing a face mask.
- Face shields (if you can get one), sewing buttons onto a cap or using a device to keep the mask from wrapping around a person's ears, wearing a costume mask that the person likes instead, or making a mask from preferred fabrics.

GIVE CHOICES

To teach a new skill, it is important to make learning enjoyable. Oftentimes, it can help to provide a choice. For example, when learning to wear a face mask, let the person choose if they want to a.) hold the mask to their face for a few seconds, or b.) try putting the elastic band on an ear for a few seconds.

PAIR WITH PREFERRED ACTIVITIES

Lastly, when teaching a new skill, it is important to reward the person for learning and trying! Praise them and make sure that they know that they get to do a favorite activity after a short learning session.