

TEACHING COMMUNITY AND LIFE SKILLS

GOAL

To help you teach your child essential life skills for greater independence in both home and community settings by using structured, evidence-based strategies.

BACKGROUND

Life skills—like getting dressed, following a routine, and navigating public spaces—are essential for your child's independence. These skills often require explicit teaching and practice.

Your child may struggle with life skills because:

- The task feels too overwhelming.
- They need more support to get started.
- They aren't motivated.
- Community settings add extra challenges.

By breaking tasks into steps, using reinforcement, and providing the right level of support, you can set your child up for success. With the right strategies, you can help your child build independence one step at a time.

KEY STRATEGIES

Teaching life skills isn't just about telling your child what to do—it's about breaking tasks down, providing the right support, and reinforcing progress.

Keep in mind:

- Break it down.
- Provide visuals.
- Use reinforcement.
- Practice in real-life settings.
- Adjust as needed.

Teaching life skills takes time and patience, but with a structured approach, you can help your child gain confidence and independence in daily routines.

BREAK IT DOWN

For many children, everyday tasks like getting dressed, brushing teeth, or preparing a simple snack can feel like too much to handle all at once. Instead of expecting them to complete the full task, breaking it down into small, manageable steps makes it easier to learn and practice.

HOW TO BREAK A TASK INTO STEPS

Think about the exact sequence of actions required to complete the skill. For example, putting on a pair of pants isn't one step—it's a series of smaller steps:

1. Lay the pants on the floor
2. Slide one leg in
3. Slide the other leg in
4. Pull pants up to the knees
5. Stand up and pull them all the way up
6. Fasten button or zipper if needed



Some children naturally begin filling in the missing steps, but others need to be taught every part of the skill explicitly. The key is breaking it down just enough so your child can succeed while still being challenged.

KNOWING HOW SMALL TO GO

If your child struggles to complete a step, break it down further. If they pick it up quickly, you can move faster through the steps. A BCBA® can help determine how detailed the steps should be for your child's needs.

USING VISUALS TO SUPPORT LEARNING

Many children benefit from visual step-by-step pictures or checklists showing each part of the skill.

When tasks are broken down and supported with visuals, your child is more likely to complete them with confidence and independence.

PROVIDE SUPPORT AND FADE IT OVER TIME

When teaching life skills, most children won't master them immediately. They need support at first, but the goal is always to gradually reduce help so they can do the task independently.

HOW TO PROVIDE THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Your child may need different levels of support depending on the skill and their experience with it. Here are common ways to help them succeed:



Physical Guidance – Gently guiding their hands or body through the motion (e.g., helping them zip a jacket).



Modeling – Showing them exactly how to do it first before asking them to try.



Gestural Prompts – Pointing or gesturing to guide them (e.g., tapping their toothbrush to remind them to pick it up).



Verbal Cues – Giving simple, clear instructions (e.g., "First, pull up your sock").

FADING SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE

Once your child starts getting the hang of a step, it's time to step back! Gradually reduce the level of help by:

- ✓ Using less physical guidance.
- ✓ Waiting longer before giving hints or cues, allowing them time to problem-solve.
- ✓ Using fewer words, shifting from full instructions to quick reminders.
- ✓ Encouraging them to try on their own first, then stepping in only if needed.

ENCOURAGING INDEPENDENCE

As your child becomes more confident, celebrate their progress! Even small steps toward independence are worth acknowledging. The goal isn't perfect performance right away, but rather steady growth toward doing more on their own.

REINFORCE SUCCESS

We all feel more motivated when we know our efforts are noticed. The same is true for children! When learning new life skills, reinforcement helps your child stay engaged and continue trying.

WHAT IS REINFORCEMENT?

Reinforcement means immediately rewarding a behavior to increase the chances that it will happen again. For life skills, reinforcement can be anything that is motivating to your child, such as:

- Praise – A simple, enthusiastic "Great job!" or "You did it!"
- High-fives, hugs, or smiles – Nonverbal encouragement can be just as powerful.
- Special privileges – Extra playtime, a favorite activity, or a preferred item.
- Tangible rewards – Stickers, tokens, or a small treat, if appropriate.

WHAT IF MY CHILD ISN'T MOTIVATED?

If reinforcement isn't working, consider:

- Are you using something truly motivating? What excites one child may not interest another.
- Is the task too hard? If frustration builds, go back a step and support them more.
- Are they getting reinforcement for other behaviors? Make sure the biggest rewards come from practicing the skill, not avoiding it.

Reinforcement is a powerful tool to help your child build independence and feel successful. When they associate life skills with positive experiences, they're more likely to keep trying!

HOW TO REINFORCE EFFECTIVELY

To make reinforcement work best, keep these key points in mind:

- Be immediate – Reinforce right after your child completes a step to strengthen the connection.
- Be specific – Instead of just saying "Good job," try "Great job putting on your shoes all by yourself!"
- Match the reward to the effort – A big accomplishment may need a bigger reward, while small successes may just need verbal praise.
- Fade reinforcement over time – As your child becomes more independent, gradually reduce rewards while still offering encouragement.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOUR CHILD?

PRACTICE IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS

A skill isn't truly learned until your child can use it in different situations—at home, at school, in public, and beyond. Practicing life skills in different places helps your child generalize what they've learned, making it easier for them to adapt when routines change.

START SIMPLE, THEN EXPAND

New environments can be overwhelming, so start small and gradually increase the challenge.

- Begin in a familiar place – If your child is learning how to wait in line, practice at home first, like waiting for a turn with a favorite toy.
- Use controlled environments – Try quieter, low-stress locations before moving to busier public spaces.
- Gradually increase complexity – Once your child is successful in one setting, practice in a slightly different environment.

PREPARE FOR SUCCESS

Because new places can bring new distractions, it helps to prepare ahead of time:

- Preview the experience – Show pictures, watch videos, or talk through what will happen before going.
- Use visuals – A simple checklist or picture schedule can remind your child of what to expect.
- Keep reinforcement consistent – Praise or rewards should match what they've experienced in practice.

BE PATIENT & CELEBRATE SMALL WINS

Some children take longer to feel comfortable with new environments, and that's okay! Every small success—whether it's waiting in line for 10 seconds longer or staying calm in a new place—deserves to be acknowledged.

The more positive experiences your child has practicing skills in different places, the more confident and independent they will become!

NAVIGATING THE UNEXPECTED

Even with careful planning, unexpected situations happen. A loud noise, a long wait, or a sudden change in routine can throw off even the best-laid plans. Teaching your child to handle these moments will help them feel more confident and adaptable.

STAY CALM & MODEL FLEXIBILITY

Children take cues from their parents. If you stay calm and patient, they'll be more likely to feel safe and follow your lead. If something unexpected happens:

- **Acknowledge the change** – "I know we were going to the park, but it started raining. Let's come up with a new plan!"
- **Use reassuring language** – Keep your voice steady and positive, even if things feel stressful.
- **Show them how to adjust** – If a favorite snack isn't available, model choosing a different option.

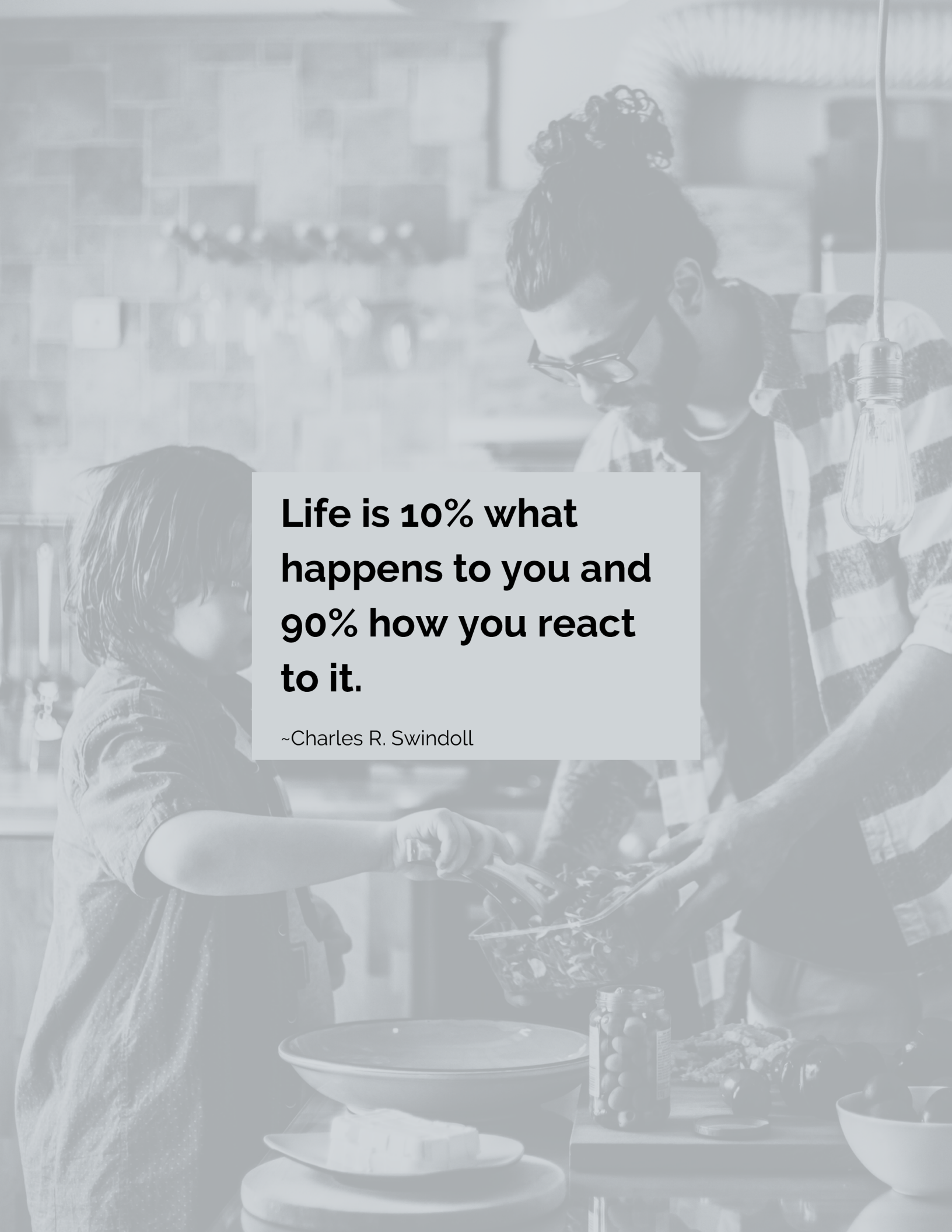
HAVE A BACKUP PLAN

Sometimes, having a plan B can make all the difference.

- **Bring familiar supports** – Visuals, a small comfort item, or a favorite snack can help ease stress.
- **Use "if/then" language** – "If we can't go to the library today, then we can read a new book at home."
- **Practice problem-solving** – Encourage your child to suggest solutions when things don't go as expected.

REINFORCE FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility is a skill, and like any other, it gets easier with practice. Praise your child when they handle changes well. Unexpected moments will happen, but by preparing, modeling, and reinforcing flexibility, you can help your child navigate them with greater confidence and less stress.



**Life is 10% what
happens to you and
90% how you react
to it.**

~Charles R. Swindoll