

Afterschool Activities & Independent Leisure Skills Tool Kit

The time after school can be a tough time of the day for kids and teens with ASD. Whether getting homework done, being productively engaged instead of self-stimming, or just blowing off steam and releasing excess energy, extracurricular activities can be key in helping your child learn important life skills while having fun doing an activity he or she enjoys.

Milestones provides coaching services to all family members, professionals, and self-advocates. Services include connecting participants to resources and providing general information and assistance. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at (216) 464-7600 or info@milestones.org.

1. How can I keep my child engaged after school?

Independent Leisure Skills

It is important to structure your child's day after school and to teach him/her ways to develop independent leisure skills.

Independent leisure skills are activities that your child can default to whenever he or she has down time. Puzzle books are a good choice, or reading a book or drawing in a notebook. These activities are compact, and can be taken anywhere. Your child will be able to keep himself/herself busy while waiting at a doctor's office, during a religious service, or at home while you are on an important phone call.

To start teaching independent leisure skills, create a schedule and teach your child how to use it. To learn about visual schedules, visit www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pageId=394. Offer a rotating list of activities, homework, exercise and chores with breaks interspersed throughout, and review it together with your child daily until he/she is familiar with it. Gradually fade out your verbal prompts until he/she is able to complete the schedule independently.

You may decide to offer a choice of activities to build up self-determination skills ("Do you want to paint a picture OR work on a crossword puzzle?").

Fun, Constructive Activities

Seek activities that provide a model to follow such as a photo or list of steps. For example, completing a Lego set, sticker books, Klutz books, and tangram puzzles have easy-to-follow steps to completion. Crossword puzzles, word searches or "I Spy" picture puzzles are good because they have a set list of items or words to find.

Cooking and baking are good choices for an activity, since step-by-step directions are built into the recipe. Young children can help you complete a recipe with stirring, pouring in premeasured ingredients, or decorating a cake or cookies. For older children, recipes help with math skills, fine motor skills, and life skills.

Homework

Completing homework assignments can be a challenge for a child's focus and flexibility. Decide on what time homework will be done and make sure to stick to that time every day, as best you can. Keep in mind that some kids need to decompress after a long school day so taking a walk or other physical activity is ideal. Others might enjoy a fun activity for a short time before tackling homework. Still others may benefit from doing homework right away, while still in "school mode." Experimentation will help you determine what works best for your child. Make a list of all assignments to be worked on. It may be helpful to estimate how much time each will take, or how much time you will spend on it before moving on. Allow your child to pick the order and discuss wise choices. Finally, check off each assignment when it's done.

Once homework time has started, offer simple rewards such as a drink of water, a piece of gum, or even doing jumping jacks to keep your child on track. Using a Time Timer gives your child an idea of how much time is left until the next break. For more information on these, visit www.timetimer.com. Or, simply offering a break after successfully completing 5 math problems could keep him/her focused.

- Review the "Homework Strategies for Children with Autism" list from www.autismtherapies.com
- Review this list of other suggestions to help make doing homework a successful task: www.autismtherapies.com/uploads/media_items/homework-strategies-for-children-with-autism.original.pdf.
- Try these 10 steps to foster homework organization skills from Michelle Garcia Winner: www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/autism-homework-beyond.

Chores

Household chores are just as important as leisure skills. Incorporating chores into your child's afterschool routine will teach him/her responsibility and self-help skills for the future.

To start, choose chores that your child can be successful at right away. Having a sense of accomplishment at the very beginning boosts his/her self-esteem. Add to the chore list slowly, being patient with any inefficiencies at the beginning. Your patience will pay off!

- Make sure to give chores that are appropriate. This website has a list of suggestions and how to start: www.squidoo.com/chores-for-kids-with-autism.
- There are many benefits for children with autism to do chores around the house. To learn about these benefits, read this article: www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/10/24/the-ten-benefits-of-chores-for-your-child-with-special-needs/.

Social Activities

Give your child the chance to work on social skills, whether one-on-one with a peer, or in a group activity. Review our list of Social Skills programs (milestones.org/resource-cat/social-skills-programs/) and Social and Recreation opportunities (milestones.org/resource-cat/social-recreation/) in our Resource Center for structured classes and unstructured activities.

Schools often offer enrichment activities on school grounds that begin right after school. These are often very affordable, and can be a great way to involve your child in a fun activity. Your city recreation department is another good resource. Ask if your child can "try out" one activity session or class before officially joining to make sure it is a good fit.

One-on-one play dates with friends can be a positive way to work on social skills while in the comfort of your own home. Having a visual schedule for the play date will help your child prepare for the length of time a friend will be visiting, as well as manage expectations of what they will do. Learn more about visual schedules with our Visual Supports Kit at milestones.org/personal-planning/visual-supports/. Use social stories prior to the play date to review expected behaviors, proper manners, and other potentially difficult situations (i.e. sharing toys). Pre-teach games or play scenarios. Be actively involved in a play date for young children while encouraging turn-taking and interactions. Learn more about social stories at www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories/what-are-social-stories.

Games

There are many games that help kids with autism work on social skills along with fine motor skills, learning numbers and colors, or taking turns. This chart gives you some ideas:

milestones.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/gamestoplay.pdf.

- Computer games can work on not only school-related skills but also social and life skills. For a helpful game list, visit www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/resource-library/toys-games.
- You can also see a list of autism-friendly apps in our Resource Center at milestones.org/resource-cat/apps/.
- Visit your local library for many good game books.
- Visit this website for some good ideas for board games and iPad apps: www.aba-therapy.com/info-for-families.html
- Check out this website for lots of different games, for all ages and development levels: sites.google.com/site/autismgames/home.

Volunteer Opportunities

For teens and young adults, volunteering might be a great way to build social skills, transition into their community, and develop relationships. There are organizations such as YouthAbility, www.jfsa-cleveland.org/ascentia-youthability.asp, that offer volunteering and job training opportunities.

2. How do I structure afterschool time?

Use visual schedules and supports to create a schedule for afterschool time, just as you would for the morning or bedtime routines. Keep the routine as similar as possible, including regular activities and chores around any afterschool activities. If necessary, make a different schedule for each weekday.

Using visual supports to create that schedule will help articulate the routine so it will be easier to follow. For further information on visual supports and how to create and introduce them, review Milestones' Visual Supports tool kit at milestones.org/personal-planning/visual-supports/.

Remember to incorporate brain breaks during activities that require dedicated attention, such as homework or reading. You can use a Time Timer or a simple kitchen timer to signal the breaks.

Activity Schedules for Children with Autism, Second Edition: Teaching Independent Behavior by Lynn E. McClannahan and Patricia Krantz is a great book with useful information.

3. How should I use rewards?

Using a reward system can be an important tool in helping your child. Use rewards when he/she completes an assigned chore or to encourage homework completion. The reward does not have to be extravagant, and it should not be something that could lead him/her off task, such as watching TV or video games. Stickers or other inexpensive collectible items such as pencils or gum are good choices, or special time with you after the work is done.

Using a reward chart or jar can be powerful – if your child fills the jar with marbles, or the chart with stickers, he/she can earn a more powerful reward of their choice. A token board can be another way to accumulate rewards toward a larger prize. Read this “Using A Token Board System article: starautismsupport.com/using-token-board-system-during-non-preferred-activities.

4. My child needs to get more exercise. What are some ways to build fitness into our routine?

Sign your child up to participate in afterschool sports or a community sports league. See if your child can “try out” a team before officially joining to make sure it is a good fit. Check out Milestones’ Resource Center for adaptive sports organizations listed under Social and Recreation (milestones.org/resource-cat/social-recreation/). You might try your community rec center for other sports opportunities, or the Milestones calendar, milestones.org/calendar/, under Social and Recreation.

Get your child a gym membership and enroll him/her in classes offered that you think your child would enjoy.

If you have a Wii or Xbox console, there are age-appropriate dance games and sports.

Get exercise videos or DVDs from the library. Incorporate time for independent exercise at home or at the gym into your child’s schedule.

Additionally, these websites offer different exercise plan ideas and the importance of incorporating exercise into everyday life:

- Live Strong: www.livestrong.com/article/523192-physical-therapy-exercises-for-autistic-children/
- Family Fitness: familyfitness.about.com/od/gettingkidsmoving/a/Autism-and-Fitness.htm
- Autism Speaks: www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/health-and-wellness
- autism after16: www.autismafter16.com/article/12-09-2011/winning-match-fitness-and-autism