

Building the Skills Adults Need for Life

A Guide for Practitioners



We all need a set of **core life skills** to manage work, family, and relationships successfully. **These include:**

PLANNING	Being able to make plans, carry them out, and set and meet goals
FOCUS	Concentrating on what's most important at any given time
SELF-CONTROL	Having the ability to control how we respond to our emotions and stressful situations
AWARENESS	Noticing people and situations around us and how we all fit into the picture
FLEXIBILITY	Being able to adapt to changing situations

No one is born with these skills, but we can *all* learn them over time. The brain's architecture begins developing before birth, and the experiences and relationships we have in the first few years of life affect how well the different parts of the brain connect and communicate. Positive, healthy experiences and responsive, “serve and return” interactions with caregivers help build strong connections in the brain that serve as a sturdy foundation for all the health, learning, and behavior that follow.

Although it's much easier to learn core life skills when you've had a strong foundation early in life, it's also never too late. **Brains continue to develop into our teen and adult years, which means adults can still learn and strengthen skills.**

How Can We Help?

Our core life skills develop over many years, which means adults can continue to build and strengthen them through **coaching** and **practice**.

NEXT:

5 Ways to Help Adults Build Their Core Life Skills

How Stress Affects Our Core Life Skills

4 Ways to Deliver Services That Reduce Stress

5 Ways to Help Adults Build Their Core Life Skills

Tips for Practitioners



Practice with real-life situations.

Encourage adults to imagine and prepare for relatable stressful situations (for instance, trying to cook dinner while a toddler is demanding attention and the phone is ringing).

WHY? Adults see how the skills are relevant to their lives and learn simple, everyday ways to practice them.

SKILLS: Focus, Flexibility



Spot and stop triggers.

Help adults recognize what triggers their intense emotions (for example, a baby crying, a supervisor shouting) and learn to take preventative actions—taking a deep breath, stopping to think, focusing on long-term goals—when those triggers come up.

WHY? This empowers adults to become more self-aware and develop coping strategies for the heat of the moment.

SKILLS: Focus, Self-Control



Take a second look at stressors.

Prompt adults to think of someone they admire and imagine how that person would handle a stressful situation. Or, have them practice looking at challenging tasks in a different light. As one example, the daily battle over getting dressed for school could be turned into a chance for the child to play “grown up” or “dress up.”

WHY? Viewing things in a new way diffuses anger, frustration, and fear. Adults learn to avoid responses that are out of proportion to the situation.

SKILLS: Awareness, Self-Control



Focus on personally motivating goals.

Ask adults, “What type of job would *you* like to have and how can we help you get it?” Once they can imagine themselves achieving a goal, they’ll begin to see potential for the future. They’ll also find it easier to create steps for reaching their goals—and a plan for dealing with obstacles.

WHY? This makes your relationship one of collaboration and support and empowers adults to think long-term.

SKILLS: Planning, Flexibility



Recall positive memories and build on small successes.

Adults who have experienced adversity may believe they lack control over their lives. Help them recall positive memories (such as a proud parenting moment when they or their children did something well) to see that their actions—even the smallest ones—can make a difference.

WHY? This gives adults a positive place to start from to change their self-image, view challenges as less threatening, and plan for the future.

SKILLS: Planning, Awareness

Learn More

This material is derived from the Center on the Developing Child’s report, *Building Core Capabilities for Life*.

For more information on the science behind core life skills, what affects their development, and how practitioners can support adults, please see the full report on our website at <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>

How Stress Affects Our Core Life Skills

Insight for Practitioners

Some stress in life can be positive, but **extreme, ongoing stress can wreak havoc with our health, behavior, and ability to use our core life skills.**

WHY? Stress and adversity trigger automatic self-regulation in the brain—the immediate (and at times necessary) “fight or flight” response that spurs us to act first and think later. When that response is triggered repeatedly by extreme stress, however, it can overload the brain’s capacity for more reflective, intentional responses. If this occurs during early childhood, the brain actually overdevelops the ability to perceive and respond quickly to threats, instead of the ability to assess and respond to situations thoughtfully.

That’s why experiencing a pile-up of adversity—such as violence, illness, unemployment, homelessness, addiction, or abuse—can cause adults to struggle to keep track of the problems in their lives, find solutions for dealing with them, and follow a plan for moving ahead. And why, **despite our best intentions, the programs and services we provide—with their complicated forms, multiple appointments, and chaotic environments—can further undermine adults’ core life skills.**



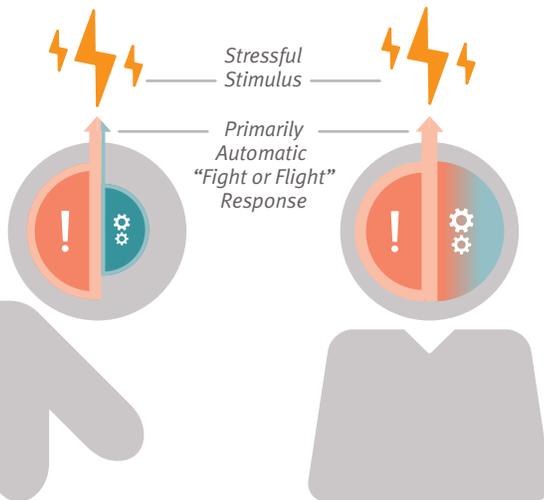
How Can We Help?

To help adults use their core life skills, practitioners can **make sure that accessing services does not unintentionally add more stress to adults’ lives.**

NEXT:

4 Ways to Deliver Services That Reduce Stress

Excessive stress affects how well we develop and use core life skills.



Early Childhood

Extreme stress redirects brain development away from core life skills toward automatic rapid threat responses.

Adulthood

Excessive stress overloads our ability to use core life skills, leaving us to rely primarily on automatic responses.

4 Ways to Deliver Services That Reduce Stress

Tips for Practitioners & Systems Leaders



1

Meet basic needs first.

Reduce the burden of stress caused by what ever is scarce in people's lives—child care, transportation, or crucial staples like food and diapers. A mother who has no clean diapers for her baby won't be able to focus on her own mental health, for example.

WHY? This enables adults to shift their focus from basic survival to longer-term programs like education and training, budgeting, and goal-setting.



2

Streamline and simplify.

Streamline applications, forms, and processes within and—whenever possible—across agencies. Make materials widely accessible by producing them in a variety of formats (printed, online, mobile-friendly), using clear language, providing multiple translations, and breaking down required tasks into simple steps.

WHY? This ensures that services designed to help adults do not inadvertently become additional sources of stress, which may cause adults to give up accessing them altogether.



3

Be a coach, not a boss.

Use your understanding of the effects of stress to approach adults with respect, truly listen to them, and build on what they do *already* that's positive. Also, create a consistent format for your interactions to provide them with predictability.

WHY? This will reduce the stress and potential threat of your interactions and avoid triggering adults' threat response system. Providing feedback in positive ways also helps adults become more open to new opportunities.



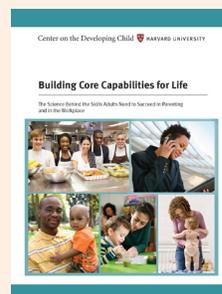
4

Use accessible, familiar tools.

Ask adults what helps them stay organized. Checklists, apps, and other tools may help them manage life's many demands and break down tasks into incremental steps. Let adults sign up for text message reminders about upcoming appointments, deadlines, or classes.

WHY? This puts the power to solve problems back into adults' own hands and gives them the familiarity of tools (for example, a cell phone) that they already rely on.

Learn More



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