

# Starting Early to Build Success

**Building independence for elementary-age children focuses on play-based learning, simple home routines, and helping them express their needs early on.**

## **Teach Choice-Making and Early Self-Advocacy**

- Practice signaling needs: Ensure your child has a reliable way (speech, AAC device, picture cards, or gestures) to communicate when they need help, need a break, or want to stop an activity.
- Offer simple daily choices: Give direct choices between two items (e.g., "Red shirt or blue shirt?", "Apple or banana?") so they learn that their preferences matter and have impact.
- Name their strengths and needs: Celebrate what they enjoy or do well, and talk about accommodations (like noise-canceling headphones or visual timers) in a positive, matter-of-fact way.

## **Turn Play and Interests into Skill-Building**

- Explore roles through play: Use pretend play or dress-up to act out common community roles like shopkeeper, veterinarian, or librarian.
- Follow their special interests: If they have a passionate interest (like trains or animals), use it to practice turn-taking, counting, or visiting related spots in the community.



## **Build Simple Household Routines**

- Assign 1-2 step chores: Start small with daily tasks like putting dirty clothes in the hamper, wiping a low table, or feeding a pet.
- Use visual schedules: Create picture charts for morning, bedtime, and hygiene routines to build predictable habits without relying entirely on verbal prompts.

## **Expand Social and Community Comfort**

- Practice community outings: Take regular trips to low-pressure places like the local library, park, or grocery store to get comfortable in public settings.
- Look for structured peer activities: Seek out adaptive sports, sensory-friendly library hours, or short, structured playdates centered around a shared activity.

## **Lay the Groundwork Early**

- Include independence in the IEP: Ask school teams to write IEP goals focused on self-regulation, task completion, and self-advocacy alongside academic goals.
- Research long-term resources now: Look into state disability services, ABLE accounts, and Medicaid waiver waitlists early, as these programs often have multi-year wait times.