

Essential for Living: An Overview

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The mission of Essential for Living is to provide children and adults with moderate-to-severe disabilities, including but not limited to autism, a comprehensive life skills curriculum with social validity, along with evidence-based teaching and measurement strategies and procedures, that result in the dignity and quality of life these children and adults deserve

Essential for Living (McGreevy, Fry, & Cornwall, 2012, 2014) is a curriculum-based assessment (CBA) instrument, that is, a criterion-referenced assessment instrument that is also a curriculum. These instruments have an extensive history in special education, early intervention, and transition services for children and young adults with learning or developmental disabilities (Gickling & Thompson, 1985; Tucker, 1985; Deno, 1989; Shinn, 1989; Bagnato, 1997). These instruments are referenced against specific curricula and are used to inform and implement IEPs, ISPs, program plans, intervention plans, and behavior improvement plans.

Essential for Living (EFL) is a functional, **life skills curriculum-based assessment instrument designed for children and adults with moderate-to-severe disabilities, including but not limited to autism, who exhibit limited skill repertoires and problem behavior.** *EFL* is referenced against criteria, in the form of specific skills within the instrument, that are necessary for safe, effective, and high-quality participation in family, school, and community living, and which are reasonable and appropriate expectations of instruction for many of these learners.

Some curriculum-based assessment instruments are also referenced against age criteria associated with typical child development or typical language development and include language skills, social skills, and milestones that are acquired by typically-developing children between the ages of one and four. These developmental instruments include *The Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program [VB-MAPP, 2nd. Ed.]* (Sundberg, 2008), *The Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills [ABLLS-R]* (Partington, 2010), and *The Early Start Denver Model [ESDM]* (Rogers & Dawson, 2010). **These instruments, with these references, are designed only for young children with autism or language delays for whom expectations of 'catching up' to their typically-developing peers and acquiring pre-academic and academic skills are both reasonable and appropriate.**

The majority of children with autism and many children with language delays, even after intensive intervention, continue to have difficulty acquiring abstract concepts, complex [conditional] discriminations, and meaningful answers to questions [intraverbal responses]. These children seldom experience generalization [stimulus generalization], bursts of language [behavioral cusps], or the 'emergence' of new skills without instruction [response generalization, generative learning, or derived relations]. Even with additional, high-quality instruction, these difficulties will often continue to function as barriers to the acquisition of advanced language skills, along with pre-academic and academic skills. For these children, expectations that include 'catching up' to their typically-developing peers will no longer be reasonable or appropriate. Instead, expectations consistent with safe, effective, and high-quality participation in family, school, and community living should be considered and 'life skills' and *Essential for Living* should guide further instruction. This change in expectations will be difficult for the parents of many of these children and will necessitate thoughtful discussions over a period of time. But *these discussions must occur* or 'ignorance will become our curriculum' (D'Amelio, 1971) and 'what we have not considered, we will be unlikely to change' (Sagan, 1980).

Many children with named developmental disabilities, like Down syndrome, Tay Sachs syndrome, Angelman syndrome, or Microcephaly, and unnamed pervasive, intellectual or developmental disabilities also experience the difficulties previously described. In recent years, some of these children have also been 'diagnosed' with [categorized as having] autism. **Regardless of age or history of instruction, neither curricular references to typical development nor expectations for these children that include 'catching up' to their typically-developing peers are reasonable or appropriate.** Expectations consistent with safe, effective, and high-quality participation in family, school, and community living should be embraced, and 'life skills' and *Essential for Living* should guide instruction and habilitation.

Essential for Living includes over three thousand skills sorted into domains on *communication*, language, daily living, *social*, functional academic, and *tolerating skills*, along with a domain on severe *problem behavior*, which encompass *the core components of autism* and many other developmental disabilities. Skills within these domains are sequenced from must-have, to should-have, to good-to-have, to nice-to-have, relative to safe, effective, and high-quality participation in family, school, and community living. The *must-have skills* are also called *the Essential Eight*:

- 1- *Making requests* for access to highly preferred items and activities and for the removal or reduction in intensity of specific situations,
- 2- *Waiting* after making requests,
- 3- *Accepting removals* — the removal of preferred items and activities, making transitions, sharing, and taking turns,
- 4- *Completing brief, previously acquired tasks*,
- 5- *Accepting 'No'*,
- 6- *Following directions* related to health and safety,
- 7- *Completing daily living skills* related to health and safety, and
- 8- *Tolerating situations* related to health and safety.

Skills within *Essential for Living* do not require response generalization or derived relations for children or adults to achieve safe, effective, and high-quality participation in family, school, and community living. In addition, skills within *Essential for Living* often inform the appropriate setting for instruction, by specifying the context in which these skills will be required in everyday living.

Unlike other life skills curricula (cf. Killion, 2003 [*The Functional Independence Skills Handbook — FISH*]; Partington & Mueller, 2012 [*The Assessment of Functional Living Skills — AFLS*]), *Essential for Living* emphasizes *communication and pragmatic language skills* and is especially designed for learners with limited or no spoken-word repertoires. A substantial portion of the instrument is devoted to helping users *determine if a non-verbal or minimally-verbal child or an adult needs an alternative method of speaking*, which methods would be consistent with his sensory, skill, and behavioral repertoires, which methods would be continuously available to him, which methods would permit him to effortlessly 'say' what he wants and needs to say, and *which methods are more likely than others to last a lifetime*.

Essential for Living emphasizes interactions and discriminations that tend to occur in *concrete situations*. Many children and adults with moderate-to-severe disabilities can learn to perform *specific skills in these situations* fluently, even beyond performance levels typically exhibited by persons without disabilities (Lindsley, 1964; Sacks, 1970, 1985; Gold, 1978; Barrett, 1979).

IDEA [the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] requires that students with disabilities who have reached the age of 16 are required to have a *transition plan*. For students with moderate-to-severe disabilities whose previous IEPs have been largely guided by the Common Core State Standards, *Essential for Living* can easily be used to develop functional, life skills transition plans.

Essential for Living is the only life skills curriculum that is based on *B. F. Skinner's analysis of the function of language as a speaker and a listener [verbal behavior]* (Skinner, 1957; Catania, 1998; Michael, 2004; Sundberg, 2007; Greer & Ross, 2007), along with the pragmatic implications of this analysis for language intervention with children and adults with limited repertoires (Sundberg & Partington, 1998; Sundberg & Michael, 2001; Greer & Ross, 2007; McGreevy, 2009). In the context of this analysis, *Essential for Living* is also the only life skills curriculum based on the radical behaviorism of Skinner (Skinner, 1974), specifically addressing private events, that is, thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and how you might teach functional verbal responses when these events occur or compensate for the lack thereof. An understanding and implementation of *Essential for Living*, however, requires neither prior knowledge of these elements, nor previous experience with their application.

Essential for Living is also the only life skills curriculum that permits the measurement of small increments of learner progress from problem behavior in the context of skill acquisition — to prompts and prompt-fading — to fluency — to generalization across settings and people — to maintenance over time. Each of the boxes used to record learner progress represents a visible improvement in their quality of life.

And, *Essential for Living* is the only life skills curriculum that includes a range of skills and skill repertoires specifically for children and adults with severe, multiple disabilities, medically-fragile or terminal conditions, or severe aggressive and self-injurious behavior. *Essential for Living* is also the only life skills curriculum that specifically encourages users to fade prompts, unnecessary supports, and continuous forms of reinforcement that do not typically occur in everyday interactions.

Many skills within *Essential for Living* are required in frequently-occurring, everyday situations. Hence, with respect to their importance as instructional goals, these skills have social validity (Wolf, 1976; Kazdin, 1977; Wolf, 1978). Empirically-validated teaching procedures that are part of *Essential for Living*, along with the measurement of fluency and generalization across people and settings as outcomes of instruction, also address this important issue and continue to 'help behavior analysis and special education find their heart' (Wolf, 1978).

Essential for Living encourages users, who record the occurrence of problem behavior, to display these data on an adaptation of the Standard Celeration Chart (McGreevy, 2012, 2019), which insures an interpretation that is not influenced by the dimensions of the display itself. *Essential for Living* also permits the measurement of problem behavior and the supports these behaviors may require over months and years.

Essential for Living is currently used in public school classrooms. The communication, language, and functional academic skills of *Essential for Living* are linked to the Common Core State Standards, permitting the development of IEP objectives that are functional and individualized, and yet, to some degree, related to these standards. *Essential for Living* is also used in private schools and centers for children with autism, along with day activity and vocational settings for adults, and residential and hospital settings for children and adults.

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