

memorandum

Date: July 2013
To: Susan Loving, Transition Specialist, Utah State Office of Education
From: REL West Reference Desk Team
Re: Summary of research/resources on life skills courses for students with disabilities

Request: Are there any free/low-cost life skills courses for secondary students with disabilities?

Response:

REL West has developed an annotated bibliography of resources that are relevant to the request.

This memo is organized into three sections, followed by a description of our search methods:

1. **Meta-analysis and reviews of life skills curricula for youth with disabilities:** Reviews of literature on life skills curricula and instruction for students with disabilities, including definitions, categories/types, and terminology of life skills;
2. **Guides and case studies of life skills curricula for youth with disabilities:** Articles and reports on practices of specific life skills curricula; and
3. **Relevant Organizations and Free and Fee-based Curricula:** Organization websites that provide resources related to life skills courses for students with disabilities, and courses and curricula along with descriptions, links, and prices.

Citations are accompanied by an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the author or publisher of the article or resource. On occasion, we have included a “REL West note” with additional excerpted text or other relevant information. Citations either include a link to a free online version or have a full-text document in PDF format attached to the accompanying email.

We have *not* done an evaluation of these resources or organizations, but rather provide them to you for your information only.

1. Meta-Analysis and Reviews of Life Skills Curricula for Youth with Disabilities

Alwell, M., & Cobb, B. (2009). Functional life skills curricular interventions for youth with disabilities: A systematic review. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 32(2), 82–93.

Abstract: The relationship between functional or life skills curricula (the intervention) and transition-related outcomes for secondary-aged youth with disabilities is explored in this systematic review. A total of 50 studies intervening with 482 youth with (largely) disability labels of moderate to severe mental retardation were reviewed. The findings of this review provide tentative support for the efficacy of the use of functional or life skills curricular interventions across educational environments, disability types, ages, and gender in promoting

positive transition-related outcomes. These findings are discussed in terms of characteristic features of the literature set and competing trends in secondary education. Selected studies in a number of specific curricular areas are recommended. [Full-text PDF file attached.]

Cronin, M. (1996). Life skills curricula for students with learning disabilities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 29*(1), 53–69.

Abstract: This article presents a review of the literature on life skills curricula and instruction as they relate to students with learning disabilities. The review is organized into two sections: intervention and follow-up/follow-along studies. Based on the available research, several suggestions for designing research programs that address life skills curricula and instruction for students with learning disabilities are outlined. [Full-text PDF file attached.]

REL West note: In this article, life skills were defined as “those skills or tasks that contribute to the successful, independent functioning of an individual in adulthood” (p. 54). Table 1 below, taken from the article, lists terminology related to life skills.

TABLE 1
Select Terminology Related to Life Skills

Career education

- a curriculum designed to teach individuals the skills and knowledge necessary to have a career (Smith & Luckasson, 1995, p. 434).

Daily living skills

- those skills that individuals use in their personal self-care and occasionally in their interactions with others (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janse, 1990, p. 296).

Functional academics

- practical skills rather than academic learning (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994).
- basic academic skills taught in the context of real life activities. A curricular emphasis on academic skills that are meaningful and useful for daily living (Hunt & Marshall, 1994, p. 162).

Functional curriculum

- a way of delivering instructional content that focuses on the concepts and skills needed by all students with disabilities in the areas of personal–social, daily living, and occupational adjustment (Clark, 1994, p. 36).

Functional literacy

- ability to read (decode and comprehend) materials needed to perform everyday vocational tasks (Miller, 1973, p. 7).
- rudimentary social literacy—that is, those skills required by a prospective employer or institution that a student is deemed likely to encounter in adult life (Buchanan, 1975, p. 73).

Functional skills

- the skills that are useful in accomplishing some activity in important environments (Wolery & Haring, 1994, p.279).
- those skills required to operate in normal daily life (Bigge, 1988, p. 2).

Independent living skills

- preparation to function independently as adults. Must include more than just attaining a particular vocational or occupational skill (Meese, 1994, p. 385).

Life skills

- those skills that are relevant to independent, day-to-day living (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1994, p. 320)
- those skills used to manage a home, cook, shop, and organize personal living environments (Smith & Luckasson, 1995, p. 421)

Survival skills

- everyday coping skills needed in adulthood (McClure, Cook, & Thompson, 1977, p. 26).
 - skills necessary to function effectively in an environment (Bullock, 1992, p. 552).
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(Cronin, 1996, p. 54)

Nietupski, J., & Hamre-Nietupski, S. (1997). A review of curricular research in severe disabilities from 1976 to 1995 in selected journals. *Journal of Special Education, 31*(1), 36–55.

Abstract: Examined 785 curricular articles pertaining to students moderate, severe, and profound mental retardation published from 1976–95 in 6 special education periodicals to identify trends in curricular research. Functional life skills articles were published most frequently, with 345, followed by communication with 164, interactions with 141, cognitive-academic with 71, other with 45, and sensorimotor with 20. Qualitative studies represented 1.2% of those published, only recently appearing in the literature. An analysis of these findings is presented along with a discussion of curricular areas in need of further research. [Full-text PDF file attached.]

REL West note: Functional life skills are generally grouped in five broad clusters: self-care and domestic living, recreation and leisure, communication and social skills, vocational skills, and other skills vital for community participation (p. 38).

2. Guides and Case Studies of Life Skills Curricula for Youth with Disabilities

King, G., Curran, C. J., & McPherson, A. (2013). A four-part ecological model of community-focused therapeutic recreation and life skills services for children and youth with disabilities. *Child: Care, Health and Development, 39*(3), 325–336.

Abstract: This article presents a four-part model of community-focused therapeutic recreation and life skills services for children’s rehabilitation centers. The model is based on 15 years of clinical and management practice in a Canadian context combined with evidence from the literature on community-focused service delivery. The model incorporates an ecological approach and principles from models of therapeutic recreation, community capacity building, and health promotion, as well as client/family-centered care. The four pillars of the model reflect a set of integrated services and principles designed to support the participation of children and youth with disabilities in community activities. The pillars involve providing community outreach services, providing community development services, sharing physical and educational resources with community partners, and promoting the organization as a community facility that provides adapted physical space and specialized instruction. The lessons learned in implementing the model are discussed, including the importance of ensuring the sustainability of community recreation programs. The model will be of use to managers and service organizations seeking to develop an integrated program of community-focused therapeutic recreation and life skills services based on a collaborative capacity-building approach. [Full-text PDF file attached.]

Meyers, S. (2011). Life skills training through situated learning experiences: An alternative instructional model. *International Journal of Special Education, 26*(3), 142–149. Retrieved on July 2, 2013, from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ959008.pdf>

Abstract: This article examines the value of situated learning as an alternative to the traditional college course instructional approach for pre-service teachers. The situated learning mode of teaching immerses students in the actual setting, practicing the skills and concepts emphasized in the curriculum. Through a partnership with a college, community agency and public school, graduate students in the special education program developed and implemented a life skills curriculum for individuals with developmental disabilities, while learning essential principles of delivering instruction. The school aged students who participated in the study were from an urban, racially mixed public school district and they attended the program at the end of their regular school day. Analysis of data from student surveys and focus groups revealed the effectiveness of the situated learning model.

Patton, J. R., Cronin, M. E., & Wood, S. J. (1999). *Infusing real-life topics into existing curricula: Recommended procedures and instructional examples for the elementary, middle, and high school levels. PRO-ED series on transition.* PRO-ED, Inc. [A copy is available for the price of \$16 at] <http://www.proedinc.com/customer/productview.aspx?id=1491>

Abstract: This guide, part of a series designed to provide practical resources on topics critical to the process of preparing individuals with disabilities for adulthood, focuses on infusing real-life topics into existing elementary and secondary curricula. Chapter 1, "Teaching Real-Life Content," discusses the basic concepts and rationale for teaching life skills, approaches to teaching life skills, and practical guidelines for infusing life skills. Chapter 2, "Recommended Procedures for Infusing Life Skills Content," provides an organizational framework for implementing life skills in the ongoing instructional process. The last chapter, "Instructional Examples for Infusing Life Skills Topics into the Curriculum," provides 17 examples of the infusion technique. Seven of the examples are at the elementary level, five at the middle school level, and five at the high school level. Within each level, samples from several of the course content areas are given. Each example includes a page from a student textbook and an accompanying infusion planning guide. The infusion planning guide is designed to help organize and document the life skills topics presented in each class or subject. Appendices include a list of major life demands, Life-Centered Career Education subcompetencies, life skills infusion forms, and practical exercises.

REL West note: We try to provide resources freely available to the public. However, in some cases, we include resources that require a fee when particularly relevant. If you would like REL West to help you obtain a copy of this guide, please let us know.

The School Board of Broward County, Florida. (2010). *Instructional design: A resource guide for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities.* Retrieved on July 2, 2013, from <http://www.broward.k12.fl.us/studentssupport/ese/PDF/InstructionalDesigns.pdf>

Excerpt from the Introduction: One of the most frequently asked questions regarding the planning for educational services for students identified with cognitive disabilities is how to determine what to teach and where to provide the instruction. Students functioning in the mild to moderate range of cognitive disabilities are generally considered to be capable of achieving supported independence in adulthood. Students functioning in the moderate to severe range of cognitive disabilities might require supervision and support throughout their lives and can learn many skills to maximize their independence. This guide offers information on instructional designs for students with significant cognitive disabilities. It assists in determining what to teach and how to assess what students have learned. Quality instruction needs to be linked to assessment, IEP goals, and educational planning.

3. Relevant Organizations and Free and Fee-based Curricula

REL West note: Along with information on and links to relevant organizations in the special education and transition fields, we have included here some available life skills curricula, with brief descriptions, links, and prices (we found free resources from four organizations — The Council for Exceptional Children, Lesson Planet, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, and the Puget Sound Educational Services District).

We have not reviewed these resources to determine on what research, if any, they are based; rather we provide this list for your reference only.

Attainment Company

<http://www.attainmentcompany.com>

From the website: Attainment Company is an independent, family-owned business based in Verona, Wisconsin, that was founded in 1979. We are dedicated to helping people with cognitive disabilities succeed at school, work, and life. Don Bastian, founder and CEO, created Attainment's first product when he was a program coordinator at the Rock County Rehabilitation Services (now Kandu Industries) in Beloit, Wisconsin. The Work Skill Development Program, which used a task analysis approach to teach work behaviors to young adults with disabilities, is the foundation for our present Pre-Voc Tasks.

Life Skills Curriculum Series (Cost: \$279)

<http://www.attainmentcompany.com/life-skills-curriculum-series>

This series combines eight products. It includes five Instructor's Guides with corresponding Student Materials.

- The Instructor's Guides are self-contained spiral bound books with measurable objectives, lesson plans, assessment forms, and reproducible step-by-step activity illustrations.
- The Student Materials set is a classroom-ready, hands-on complement to the five Instructor's Guides. Features a total of 624 laminated cue cards and a handy Pocket Book.
- The redesigned multimedia Picture Cue Dictionary Software matches the card illustrations, combining text and speech with an easy-to-use interface. Ideal for developing functional vocabulary, reviewing lists of things to do, or printing out additional cue cards.

Life Skills Academics: MATH (\$29)

<http://www.attainmentcompany.com/life-skills-academics-math>

Life Skills Academics: MATH links everyday activities to five crucial math concepts relating to common situations for middle and high schools students.

Life Skills Academics: LITERACY (\$29)

<http://www.attainmentcompany.com/life-skills-academics-literacy>

Life Skills Academics: LITERACY links everyday activities to key literacy concepts relating to common situations for middle and high school students.

Life Skills Academics: HEALTH (\$29)

<http://www.attainmentcompany.com/life-skills-academics-health>

Links everyday activities to key health concepts. Covers five health concepts relating to everyday situations:

- Risky Behaviors
- Personal Hygiene
- Mental Health
- First Aid
- Illness

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

<http://www.cec.sped.org>

From the website: The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of individuals with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. CEC advocates for appropriate governmental policies, sets professional standards, provides professional development, advocates for individuals with exceptionalities, and helps professionals obtain conditions and resources necessary for effective professional practice.

Life Centered Education (LCE) (Cost: Free)

<http://www.cec.sped.org/Publications/LCE-Transition-Curriculum/Curriculum>

From the website: LCE identifies three critical domains for adult living in the 21st century - daily living skills, self determination and interpersonal skills, and employment skills. LCE further divides these domains into 20 competencies and 94 sub-competencies, further broken down by objective. Within each objective are at least three lesson plans that follow an Awareness, Explanation, Preparation (AEP) learning sequence to ensure true content mastery. Many lesson plans have accompanying fact sheets, worksheets and other activities to provide additional engaging and meaningful learning activities. View the entire LCE Curriculum Matrix to see the depth and breadth of the curriculum as a whole.

James Stanfield Company, Inc.

<http://www.stanfield.com>

From the website: For over 30 years the James Stanfield Company has been producing award-winning programs to promote Social Competence and Transition Readiness in students with cognitive, learning and/or behavioral disabilities. Its President, Dr. James Stanfield, is a nationally recognized authority in Special Education and Instructional Design. He's been a classroom teacher, directed federally funded research programs and was a Professor of Special Education before starting his own organization. ... The Stanfield Library currently includes over 60 research-based video DVD programs to teach:

- Social Skills
- Work-Related Social Skills
- Conflict Management Skills
- Relationship Skills
- Transitional Skills necessary for Independent Living

Social and Life Skills programs (n=7)

<https://www.stanfield.com/products/social-life-skills/>

The social and life skills programs in this category are all about helping individuals make it on their own in the real world. Students will be taught about good hygiene, appropriate dress, grooming, attitude and what it takes to make a good "First Impression," as well as how be "Lifesmart."

LifeSmart Curriculum (Cost: \$499)

<https://www.stanfield.com/products/social-life-skills/lifsmart-curriculum/>

The complete LifeSmart video curriculum concentrates on five major categories of life skills: workforce behaviors, relationships, intimacy and abstinence, personal finances, and personal safety. It provides over 18 hours of video instruction and includes programs that teach social skills in the areas of dating, money management, safety, friendship and work. The focus of LifeSmart is teaching the "top10" core skills in areas crucial to life adjustment. LifeSmart uses the Stanfield Comedy Players to model both incorrect and appropriate behaviors in real-life situations.

Transitions Curriculum (Cost: \$499)

<http://www.stanfield.com/products/school-to-work-skills/transitions-curriculum/>

The Transitions Curriculum deals with three areas of competency critical to independent living: Personal Management, Career Management, and Life Management. Lessons are filled with highly motivating, hands-on activities. Topics presented are highly relevant to the real-world orientation of young adults today.

Life Skills Teacher Resources at "Lesson Planet" (Cost: Free)

http://www.lessonplanet.com/search?keywords=life+skills&type_id%5B%5D=1&gclid=COavxICwoLgCFW1yQgodpl8Awg

From the website: For over a decade, Lesson Planet has provided a convenient way for teachers to discover and share innovative lesson-planning resources. The Lesson Planet solution helps teachers find lesson resources, correlate them to standards, and organize curriculum. Our tools provide a time-efficient way to inspire teaching with fresh ideas.

The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC)

<http://www.nsttac.org>

From the website: The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) is a national technical assistance and dissemination center funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. NSTTAC provides technical assistance (TA) and disseminates information to State Education Agencies, Local Education Authorities, schools, and other stakeholders.

Lesson plan starter: Life skills (Cost: Free)

<http://www.nsttac.org/content/student-development-0>

From the website: Life Skills Lesson Plan Starters are based on high or acceptable quality intervention studies, in which secondary students were taught a new skill. Lesson Plan Starters were developed based on the description of the intervention and data collection procedures provided in each study. Each lesson plan starter includes:

- Lesson objectives;
- Setting and materials;
- Lesson content;
- Teaching procedures;
- Evaluation methods; and
- Citation for article from which lesson plan was developed.

Teaching Functional Life Skills to Youth with Disabilities (executive summary)

http://www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/pdf/life_skills_executive_summary.pdf

Excerpt: This practice-based systematic review summarizes the scientifically-based research studies that have been produced in the past two decades focused on the effects of interventions associated with domestic/self-help life skills curricula, community participation life skills curricula, and recreation/leisure life skills curricula, on secondary-aged youth with disabilities.

The Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Program (Cost: \$95 for high school or middle school curriculum; Can apply for free curriculum through the Gifting Initiative)

<http://overcomingobstacles.org/>

From the website: Community for Education Foundation created the Overcoming Obstacles Life Skills Program to provide educators nationwide with the curriculum materials, teacher training workshops, and ongoing support services they need to provide life skills instruction to their students.

The Overcoming Obstacles curriculum provides educators with an entire year of engaging instruction and is available in both middle school and high school levels. Its modular format gives educators the flexibility to select lessons based on theme, teaching time, student needs, and learning environment. Each level of the curriculum includes over 500 activities and 180 hours of instruction, engaging activity-based lessons, extension activities, stimulating discussion prompts, activity sheets, and journal writing assignments.

The curriculum covers over 20 important topics including: Communication, Decision Making, Goal Setting, Confidence Building, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Conflict Resolution, Study Skills, Service Learning, and Respect & Tolerance.

Puget Sound Educational Service District (ESD)

<http://www.psesd.org>

From the website: Puget Sound ESD #121 is one of nine serving regional school districts and state-approved private schools in Washington state. ESDs function primarily as support agencies and deliver educational services that can be more efficiently or economically performed regionally. Puget Sound ESD develops and delivers a wide selection of services that provide instructional and administrative support to PreK-12 schools and direct service to students and families.

PreK-12 life skills curriculum guide (Cost: Free)

http://www.psesd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=297&Itemid=448

From the website: Special Services facilitated a series of meetings between 2003 and 2006 with individuals concerned about services for students with developmental disabilities and autism. As this process unfolded, this "DD/Autism Group" decided to create a curriculum guide to be used for students with severe disabilities that builds on a variety of resources. The curriculum guide is the work of many thoughtful and hard-working individuals from the Bethel, Highline, Issaquah, Northshore, Renton, Shoreline, and Tahoma school districts and Puget Sound Educational Service District. We hope this guide will help teachers and other educators (nurses, OTs, paraeducators, psychologists, PTs, SLPs) as they approach programming for students with severe disabilities.

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Search

"Life skills" AND ("course" OR "curricular/um") AND "students with disabilities" AND ("secondary education" or "youth").

Search of Databases

ERIC, EBSCO, JSTOR, ProQuest, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, Google, and Google Scholar.

Criteria for Inclusion

When REL West staff review resources, they consider—among other things—four factors:

- **Date of the Publication:** The most current information is included, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- **Source and Funder of the Report/Study/Brief/Article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols.
- **Methodology:** Sources include randomized controlled trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, and policy briefs. Priority for inclusion generally is given to randomized controlled trial study findings, but the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: numbers of participants (Just a few? Thousands?); selection (Did the participants volunteer for the study or were they chosen?); representation (Were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?).
- **Existing Knowledge Base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is limited or nonexistent. In these cases, we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, and other sources.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the Western region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd. This memorandum was prepared by REL West under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-12-C-0002, administered by WestEd. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.