



**Skills for
FAMILIES,
Skills for
LIFE**

REVISED &
EXPANDED
EDITION

*How to Help Parents and Caregivers
Meet the Challenges of Everyday Living*

AMY SIMPSON, M.A., PAULA KOHRT, M.Ed., LINDA M. SHADOIN, M.S.W.,
JONI COOK-GRIFFIN, AND JANE L. PETERSON, M.H.D.

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Boys Town, Nebraska

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1 1

A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Living Skills to Families

CHAPTER 2 7

The Importance of Skill Teaching

CHAPTER 3 13

How the Skills in This Book Are Organized

PROBLEM AREAS

CHAPTER 4 19

Communication

Identifying Own Feelings • Active Listening • Expressing Feelings • Asking Others for Opinions • Apologizing • Being Assertive • Making a Request • Giving an Instruction • Stating Expectations • Saying "No" • Correcting Another Person • Responding to Accusations • Ending an Argument • Preparing for a Discussion • Negotiating • Writing a Contract • Holding Family Meetings • Showing Appreciation • Praising • Giving a Compliment

CHAPTER 5 31

Relationships

Strengthening the Relationship with Your Spouse • Seeking Marriage or Family Counseling • Improving Relationships with Your Children • Helping Siblings Get Along with Each Other • Helping Children Make New Friends

CHAPTER 6 37

Education

Checking on a Child's School Progress • Monitoring a Child's Homework • Using a Daily Assignment Book • Monitoring a Child's School Attendance • Getting Involved with a Child's School • Communicating with School Personnel • Visiting a Child's School • Cooperating with the School When a Child Breaks a Rule • Choosing an Education Program • Advocating for a Child's Education • Registering a Child for School • Hiring a Tutor • Enrolling in a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or Career Training Program

CHAPTER 7 47

Housing

Finding Housing • Signing a Lease • Getting Utility Services Started • Notifying Others of a Change of Address • Fulfilling a Lease or Rental Agreement • Using Temporary Housing • Handling Landlord Disputes • Being Prepared for a Landlord Foreclosure • Responding to a Landlord Foreclosure

CHAPTER 8 55

Medical and Mental Health Needs

Recognizing Medical Needs • Recognizing Mental Health Needs • Obtaining Medical or Mental Health Advice • Choosing a Medical or Mental Health Professional or Facility • Keeping Medical or Mental Health Appointments • Understanding Health Insurance or Medicaid Coverage • Keeping Children Healthy • Administering Medication • Keeping Track of Medications • Getting a Child Immunized

CHAPTER 9 65

Money Management

Prioritizing • Setting Up a Budget • Monthly Budgeting • Applying for a Job • Opening a Checking Account • Saving Money • Paying a Bill • Making a Late Payment • Paying Off a Debt • Shopping for Bargains • Accessing Public Assistance and Other Available Resources • Using a Food Pantry • Understanding and Using Credit Appropriately • Being a Wise Consumer

CHAPTER 10 75

Child Supervision

Monitoring a Child's Whereabouts (Older Children) • Pre-Approving a Child's Friends or Places to Go • Monitoring a Child's Activities (Younger Children) • Asking about a Child's Activities • Monitoring an Infant • Baby Proofing Your Home • Finding Child Care • Communicating with Your Child's Caregiver • Hiring a Babysitter • Transporting Children in a Car

CHAPTER 11 85

Informal and Formal Support

Making Friends • Establishing Relationship Boundaries • Deciding Who to Ask for Help • Offering Help • Developing a Social Support Network • Setting Up Exchange Systems • Getting Involved in Community Activities • Finding a Support Group

CHAPTER 12 93

Nutrition

Creating a Balanced Menu • Planning Ahead for Meals • Choosing Appropriate Foods for Babies and Toddlers • Shopping for Groceries • Preparing a Meal • Storing Food • Washing Dishes

CHAPTER 13 99

Preventing Abuse

Understanding and Avoiding Physical Abuse of Children • Understanding and Avoiding Emotional Abuse of Children • Teaching Children about Appropriate Touch • Setting Boundaries • Monitoring Children in the Presence of a Potential Perpetrator • Locating Registered Sex Offenders • Asking Children about Personal Safety • Responding to a Child’s Disclosure about Abuse • Reporting Abuse • Seeking Support When Dealing with Abuse • Establishing a Safety Plan • Understanding Domestic Violence • Responding to Domestic Violence

CHAPTER 14 111

Managing Stress

Managing Time • Recognizing Stressors • Engaging in Self-Care Activities • Choosing Relaxation Techniques • Getting Physically Active • Taking a Time-Out • Using Positive Self-Talk • Using Body Relaxation Techniques • Keeping a Journal • Asking for Help • Rewarding Yourself

CHAPTER 15 119

Home Safety

Creating a Safer Home for Children • Setting a Schedule for Household Chores • Cleaning House • Doing Laundry • Attending to Children’s Personal Hygiene • Checking for Head Lice • Planning Fire Escape Routes

CHAPTER 16 127

Community Safety

Increasing Family Safety outside the Home • Monitoring Children’s Friends and Activities • Finding Community Safety Resources • Creating a Family Safety Plan • Protecting against Safety Threats via the Internet and Cell Phones

RESOURCES

CHAPTER 15 135

Finding Resources for Families

Skills-at-a-Glance Table 149

Bibliography 155

Index 157



CHAPTER 1

A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Living Skills to Families

John and Mary Smith are in trouble. John's monthly disability check is about to be cut, Mary is struggling to hold two jobs, and their oldest son needs to start taking an expensive medication. The family can't afford medical insurance. The couple's other two kids are struggling in school; teachers are sending notes home saying that the Smith children are disruptive and fighting with other students. The Smiths' landlord wants to raise the rent on their apartment, which is in a high-crime neighborhood, run down, and infested with cockroaches. John and Mary have no relatives in town and few friends whom they can turn to for help. In addition, the couple is having trouble managing money, working out solutions with the kids' schoolteachers, and figuring out how to seek assistance in the community. These family

caregiving challenges are making it hard for the Smiths to care for their kids. Every day, it is more difficult to hold things together.

We live in a pressure-packed world. As parents and caregivers, we must be able to tackle many different responsibilities in order to maintain a safe, healthy household for our children. Balancing a budget, preparing nutritional meals, providing housing, and making sure children receive a proper education and necessary medical care are but a few of the many day-to-day challenges every family faces. Many families are strong enough to survive tough times. Couples and single parents who have learned basic living skills know how to get things done and keep the household running somewhat smoothly. A strong spirit of teamwork and cooperation among family members also plays a big part in a family's ability to function, and oftentimes flourish, under pressure.

When parents and caregivers aren't skilled in these areas, or haven't had the opportunities to learn the skills that are necessary to perform these functions, it can be just as damaging to the stability of the home, and the well-being of the children, as more complex issues like child behavior problems, physical or sexual abuse, and alcoholism or drug addiction. Parents and caregivers who aren't meeting their children's everyday needs might even be labeled as "neglectful," even though they are trying to do the best they can with the skills they have.

In these situations, children often suffer the most. They are dependent on their parents, or other caregivers, for not only the love, affection, understanding, and sense of self-worth that are absolutely essential for healthy development, but also the everyday necessities of life. When any of these are missing, the child suffers, both physically and emotionally. Intervention then must focus on enhancing the strengths and abilities caregivers already have, and providing them with opportunities to learn new skills or strategies that will enable them to create a safe environment for their kids.

Families have the best intentions and try to do what is right. Parents like John and Mary love their children and want what's best for them. They want their children to succeed in school. They want to provide a safe, loving home. They want to have a happy family, but they

just don't know how to accomplish the tasks that will enable them to reach these goals.

For practitioners, working with these families can be a tremendous challenge. Some families may not trust professionals because of past experiences. Oftentimes, families have been criticized or have felt demeaned by helping professionals who have been forthright in telling the parents and caregivers what they are supposed to do to fix their problems. Repeated criticism and advice-giving sometimes leaves family members feeling resentful and wary. These feelings interfere with their motivation, making the practitioner's job even more difficult.

In addition, practitioners may not have learned specific techniques for teaching caregiving skills outside the realm of child discipline. For example, how many practitioners learned what to teach parents who can't or don't know how to provide their children with three nutritious meals a day? The bottom line is that there are very few resources that offer practitioners information on what daily life skills to teach when a family faces caregiving problems like arranging for transportation, meal preparation, and advocating for a child's education.

This book was written by Boys Town's In-Home Family Services staff in response to these challenges. The original edition offered treatment strategies for teaching 104 living skills in eleven caregiving areas. These areas were originally chosen because practitioners from across the country identified them as ones where families most often encounter difficulties. This second edition has expanded the caregiving areas by two to include Relationships and Community Safety, and now features a total of 132 skills. In addition, the section previously titled Social Support now includes both informal and formal supports, the Preventing Abuse chapter (formerly Sexual Abuse) addresses all forms of abuse including domestic violence, and the Medical Needs section offers skills for meeting families' mental as well as physical health needs. Practitioners will also find new family skills on applying for a job, solving landlord disputes, being a wise consumer, locating registered sex offenders, protecting against Internet and cell phone safety threats, creating a family safety plan, dealing with a landlord foreclosure, and others. Finally, a new chapter on Finding Resources for Families gives many suggestions on locating public and private, national as well as local, assistance for families in the caregiving areas.

While this book does cover Child Supervision, it does not include skills for managing child behavior and disciplining children. Boys Town's approach to parenting skills can be found in the books, *Common Sense Parenting* by Ray Burke, Ph.D., Ron Herron, and Bridget A. Barnes, and *Common Sense Parenting of Toddlers and Preschoolers* by Bridget A. Barnes and Steven M. York, M.H.D. Both books are also available as audio books on CD. Parenting techniques are demonstrated on video in the *Common Sense Parenting Learn-at-Home DVD Kit* and the *Common Sense Parenting DVD Series*. All of these resources are available from the Boys Town Press (**BoysTownPress.org** or 1-800-282-6657).

The skills in this book can be taught to parents and other caregivers in a variety of settings, and instruction can be adapted to many different family-oriented programs. Since intervention might occur in situations where children's safety and well-being are at risk, this information can be used in conjunction with treatment programs that have varying theoretical approaches in order to improve conditions in the family. The ultimate goal is to teach parents and caregivers how to make the home and family safe and how to adequately meet children's needs.

New to the second edition of this book is a CD-ROM that allows practitioners to print off copies of each of the skills and use these sheets to customize and track their skill-teaching work with individual families. Each skill page includes extra blank lines for practitioners to use if they wish to make notes, add additional steps to the skill or list local resources, phone numbers, or websites useful to their families.

Helping children and families in need is what Boys Town does. Founded in 1917 by Father Edward J. Flanagan, the home at first took in wayward or orphaned boys, providing food, shelter, schooling, and a solid foundation on which they could re-start their lives. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the problems of youth became more serious and complex, Boys Town developed what is now known as the Boys Town Teaching Model. Rooted in social learning theory, the Model has three components – building relationships, teaching social skills, and empowerment through self-direction. The Model is at the heart of all Boys Town programs, which offer direct care and training in the areas of education, treatment foster care, residential care, mental health care, parenting, and family preservation. While Boys Town has expanded to

help boys and girls, parents, families, and child-care professionals through a wide system of services, its mission has remained essentially the same – saving children and healing families.

Boys Town's In-Home Family Services has been a leader in developing effective intervention for families in need since the program was developed in the late 1980s. In addition to providing direct care for troubled families through sites and locations around the country, the program offered training for consultants, therapists, school counselors, and other practitioners who work with families.

It was through this training that practitioners from across the country expressed their need for a guide to teaching basic (cooking, doing laundry, making appointments) and complex (managing finances, seeking assistance from community resources, providing proper medical care) life skills that parents, caregivers, and even older teens can learn. Not only did their desire for a set of skills that could help address problems in those areas prompt Boys Town to develop this living skills handbook, but many of their ideas were included in the book. For the insight and experience of these dedicated professionals, Boys Town is deeply grateful.

We hope you find this book to be a useful resource as you take on the challenge of helping troubled families. Children deserve to be healthy and safe, and by teaching useful skills to parents and other caregivers, we all move closer to achieving that goal. Boys Town knows these treatment strategies work, and by sharing them with you and others, our hope is that more and more families can find the help they need.

CHAPTER 16

Community Safety

PROBLEM: Family lives in a high-crime neighborhood.

At-risk families can be vulnerable to many dangers when they are out in the community. Families may live in high-crime neighborhoods where gun violence, gang activity, home break-ins, and drug traffic are common occurrences. They may have trouble trusting public safety officials. Identity theft, cyber bullying, or pornography that may arrive electronically via the Internet or cell phone can also be threats to a family's safety. It is important to help these families realistically assess the dangers they face outside their home and decide how they will address them.

Families need to identify and prioritize their risks. When and where do they feel unsafe? What risks are greatest in their immediate neighborhood? Families then must locate the resources and support services that will help keep them safe or they can turn to in times of need. Does the police department have a community relations officer who knows the area? Is there a local neighborhood watch program? Are there safe and sponsored after-school, weekend, and summer activities available

for their children? Finally, parents should create a safety plan that outlines how family members will address areas of concern. The plan could include things such as how to keep children off the streets, what to do if threatened by someone carrying a weapon, or how to decrease the chances of a home break-in.

The following skills suggest steps that practitioners can teach families to take to keep adults and children safe from dangers that threaten them out in the community.

Increasing Family Safety outside the Home

- Identify the unsafe areas outside your home for you and your children.
- Create a plan for when family members must be in unsafe areas (for example, bring a friend, plan to go only during the day, carry pepper spray or a personal alarm).
- Teach your children to be aware of their surroundings and other people, the potential danger of approaching strangers, how to call 911, and which homes and shops in the neighborhood are safe places to go if they feel threatened.
- Teach children the dangers of being around someone with a gun or other dangerous weapon.
- If you or your children are threatened with violence, give the person what he or she is demanding such as a purse, wallet, cell phone, or jewelry.
- Follow the steps to staying calm when you find yourself in situations of conflict or confrontation. Learn to walk away.
- Have family members wear light-colored clothing outside after dark.
- Install motion detector lights outside your home.
- Repair broken windows and door locks immediately.
- If there is a pool or any sort of water (well, river, pond, culvert, etc.) near your home, install door

alarms so you know and can monitor your children when they go outside. In-ground pools should be fenced and entrances or ladders to above-ground pools should be blocked.

Monitoring Children's Friends and Activities

- Invite your children's friends into your home in order to meet and get to know them.
- Make an effort to meet the parents of your children's friends by attending school events, neighborhood block parties and gatherings, recreational and sports activities.
- When your children are invited to attend parties, sleepovers, or activities in their friends' homes, contact the parents to confirm the arrangements and that there will be adult supervision.
- Occasionally check on your children to be sure they are where they said they would be.
- Teach your children to ask your permission before leaving home.
- Have your children write where they are going, who they will be with, and when they will return on a chalkboard, dry erase board, or calendar that you post in the home.

Finding Community Safety Resources

- Check with local cell phone companies or stores to see if they have donated phones that can be used for emergencies or look into purchasing a prepaid cell phone.
- Locate after-school and other recreational programs for children offered by organizations like the United Way, Girls and Boys Clubs, the Salvation Army, the public school, and local library and enroll your children in one or more of them.
- Introduce yourself to neighbors. Consider joining or helping to organize a neighborhood watch program.

- On your own or with neighbors, contact the local police's community relations department to discuss neighborhood safety issues and what police can do to help.
- Seek information from local youth safety, community action, gang awareness or prevention groups on other measures you can take to keep your family safe.
- To locate any of the above organizations and agencies, check your telephone directory's front section or yellow pages for listings of Community Service numbers or call 211 (in many communities) to speak with a local referral agency.

Creating a Family Safety Plan

- List one or more of the most immediate and threatening safety issues you feel endanger your children or the family.
- Select and specify which safety goals your family wants to achieve.
- Identify what changes need to be made to reduce the family's risk.
- Determine what actions each family member will take to reach the goals. Discuss these with your children and ask for their ideas.
- Explain to children the reasons why working toward the safety goals is important to them and the family as a whole.
- Establish a timeline for completing each of the actions.
- Write up the plan, have all family members sign it, and post it in an area of the home where all can see and refer to it.
- Review the safety plan regularly (daily, weekly, monthly) and follow up with all family members to check on their progress toward the safety goals.

Teaching Families Safe and Healthy Living Skills

Whether you work with families in a school, agency, clinic, shelter, or home setting, this guide can help you identify a family's goals, build on its strengths, as well as meet the needs each family sees as most important.

If you work as a family service practitioner or consultant, you know that families in crisis usually are dealing with more than just parenting issues. Not only are parents having trouble with child behavior and discipline at home, but they may face problems

such as substandard housing, loss of a job, a high-crime neighborhood, or a chronic health concern. Abuse, domestic violence, substance use, or mental illness may impact these families. Even accomplishing routine tasks such as keeping a clean and safe home, preparing nutritious meals, paying bills, and getting children to school may be a struggle for parents.

To make such homes safe and healthy for children, parents may need to learn many new skills in order to solve their daily living problems. This revised and expanded edition of *Skills for Families, Skills for Life* can help professionals incorporate the teaching of life skills into the assessment of and treatment planning for the families they work with. More than one hundred thirty basic to complex skills in thirteen caregiving areas are outlined in step-by-step detail. An enclosed CD-ROM allows you to print skill sheets to use as checklists, make notes, and list resources as you counsel individual families. A new chapter also helps you locate public and private, local and national sources of assistance for families.

132 SKILLS OFFERED IN THESE AREAS

Communication
Relationships - **NEW**
Education
Housing - **EXPANDED**
Medical and mental health needs - **EXPANDED**
Money management
Child supervision
Formal and informal support
Nutrition
Abuse - **EXPANDED**
Stress
Home safety
Community safety - **NEW**

NEW TO THIS EDITION

CD-ROM of skill steps
Finding resources for families

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