

## HMS Functional Life Skills

### *An Opportunity for Personal, Interpersonal and Community-Focused Growth*

By Diane L. Gallagher, PhD

At HMS, we know that functional life skills are vital to ensuring our students reach their potential. As they transition from childhood to adulthood, we have our students participate in our Functional Life Skills (FLS) program to help them develop key skills that will allow them to maximize their independence.

HMS's Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant Millie Connelly oversees the FLS program. She explains, "It's about small gains that over time can make all the difference. As our students grow, we encourage them to develop personal independence and take initiative. **Our goal is to promote self-advocacy, encourage community living, foster the development of meaningful choices, and inspire self-confidence in our students.**" As a result, the program focuses on four topical areas that promote social and emotional development: sharing feelings and emotions, interviewing and social interaction, party planning, and community engagement.

*Feelings* allow our students to make choices and develop preferences. *Interviewing* gives our students a chance to participate in routine conversation by asking questions, waiting to hear others' responses, and sharing their own thoughts in return. *Planning a Party* provides students with basic social coordination skills, as well as a chance to make choices that will directly impact a fun, positive experience. Finally, *Community Outings* allow students diverse experiences where they can decide where they want to go, what they want to explore, how they want to navigate within a space, and how they want to communicate their thoughts and needs while in an unfamiliar setting. For Skyler, *Community Outings* allow him to take on a leadership role while fulfilling steps towards independence.

Skyler cannot use his voice and hands in a traditional sense. He activates switches in a head array to drive his power wheelchair, speak through his communication device, and access a computer mouse to research community places for his FLS group to vote on and visit. During these outings, Skyler has the opportunity to drive his power wheelchair in the community and navigate public transportation. He uses his device to communicate and make small purchases, sharing the specifics of what he wants with unfamiliar store clerks. These outings allow him the opportunity to become an active participant in his community by dynamically engaging with others.



*An excited Skyler uses a SEPTA bus to get to 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station*

The FLS program isn't just an opportunity for our students to learn, it's an individualized, unique program that we have cultivated for over two decades. We work with students to help them reach their potential in a way that meets both their wants and their needs, focusing on choices, experiences and communication. **Supporting HMS and programming means helping students like Skyler maximize their independence, develop self-confidence, and become active members of their communities!**

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