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CONSIDERATIONS IN PROVIDING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Information provided for sharing and planning purposes only

People with developmental disabilities may not automatically have judgment about danger and dangerous situations such as heights, traffic, fire, falling, tools and implements, stairs, sharp objects, etc. Continuous supervision may be necessary to prevent injury. Identify, plan for and provide needed supervision. Goals and teaching methods used by staff and family should focus on teaching every person to identify dangerous situations and use related safety skills in all environments.

People with developmental disabilities may not be able to easily identify an internal state and find a way to describe it to another person. They may be sick or in pain and give NO typical indication, such as groaning, flinching or holding a sore part of the body. Behavioral changes may be a signal of internal distress, pain or illness.

People with developmental disabilities may not have a good feel for their own bodily temperature. They may want to wear heavy coats in the summer or try to go outside without shoes or socks in the winter. They may over exert during warm weather or stay out in the cold too long without enough clothing. Close supervision is necessary. Goals and teaching methods should focus on charts, lists, rules and other visual and memory devices to help the individual learn what clothes to wear for each weather condition and when to rest from exertion in the heat.

Children and adults with developmental disabilities may not be aware or able to describe physical comfort levels. Shoes may be too small and the person may not indicate any discomfort. Wristbands, neckbands and waistbands may be dangerously tight and the individual may not indicate discomfort or ask for help. Family/staff must look carefully at the bodies of people with developmental disabilities, checking for marks or redness that indicates that shoes or clothing may be too binding or uncomfortable.

People with developmental disabilities may not be able to tell the difference between food that is ready to eat and food that is dangerously hot. NEVER serve food to children or adults with developmental disabilities until it has cooled sufficiently and will not burn them. Keep hot foods and drinks away from people with developmental disabilities until they have safely cooled. Provide close supervision. Teach individuals how to check the temperature of food *before* putting it in their mouths. Teach them how to check the temperature of a bath or shower *before* getting in.

People with developmental disabilities may complain that food is too hot when it is barely warm from your point of view. They may complain that something is too freezing cold to drink, when it seems fine to you. Try to learn about the individual preferences and respect them. If the person thinks that the warm food is too hot, allow them sufficient time to eat so that the food can cool to the temperature the person prefers. Try to meet individual needs related to preferences as much as you can.

Do not think that because a child or adult with developmental disabilities has not ever done a particular dangerous thing that s/he never will do it. For example, if the child normally stays in the yard and does not go near the street, you cannot be sure that the child will *never* run into traffic. Provide intense supervision near traffic and in other dangerous situations, even if the child or adult has never stepped off the curb before.

Children and adults with developmental disabilities may not be able to read and anticipate the non-verbal signals of other people who intend to do them harm. They may fail to respond appropriately to a raised fist or an angry tone of voice. Provide careful supervision when people with developmental disabilities are in a group situation or in contact with people who can become aggressive or dangerous. Ask peers to help protect the individual.

9. Children and adults with developmental disabilities may not recognize items that are edible from items that are inedible. Provide careful supervision. Provide systematic training to enable the individual to learn what can and cannot be put in the mouth or consumed. Provide constant vigilance in the presence of an individual who eats or mouths inedible items. Provide edible snacks that the person can have in environments in which s/he may try to eat something inedible. Write social stories and make lists or charts about what to eat and what cannot be eaten in various environments.
10. Children and adults with developmental disabilities can become the target of bullying and may be unable to cope or respond appropriately. They can be victimized by others who prompt the child or adult with developmental disabilities to do something wrong in order to gain the "friendship" of others. It is very important for people with developmental disabilities to be properly supervised by adults whenever they are with groups of children or adults, particularly in places like a gym, the lunchroom, playground and break room. Creating a "Buddy System" of support for people with developmental disabilities in these situations can be very helpful but does not replace the need for attending adults.
11. Provide close supervision when using tools and implements like scissors even if the child or adult with developmental disabilities has never poked themselves or anyone else with an implement. Select goals to teach handling implements carefully and other safety skills.
12. Traffic areas can put people with developmental disabilities at high risk. Select goals and teaching strategies to teach stopping before the curb, asking for help to cross the street and other goals related to traffic. Be sure to teach entering and exiting a vehicle on the curb side and not in the street.
13. If possible, provide a safe fenced in outdoor area for play and relaxation for children and adults with developmental disabilities. Some local service organizations may help to provide the resources to create attractive and safe fenced in outdoor recreation and relaxation areas. Provide careful supervision outdoors.