

Advice sheet

Self-Care - Younger Children

Children and toddlers will gradually learn to do more for themselves from undressing to brushing their teeth. There are many different ways of supporting your child to develop the skills to take care of themselves:



Helping Your Child's Self-Care: Things to Do

Using Cutlery

Some toddlers may start wanting to use a spoon as early as 13 months, and most children have grasped this all-important skill by 17 or 18 months. By the time she's four, your child will probably be able to hold her fork or spoon like an adult, and she'll be ready to learn table manners.



What You Can Do

- Make sure your child's feet are supported, either on the floor, on a step stool or whilst sitting in a high chair with a foot support.
- Cut up your child's food into bite-size chunks and show them how to spear a piece on their fork
- Practise scooping with a spoon with bowls full of rice or sand. You can practise cutting with a knife and fork with playdoh.

Undressing

Children learn to undress before they can dress and may start to take off their own clothes somewhere between 13 and 20 months. For them, this is a big achievement which gives them some control and independence.

What You Can Do

- Allow plenty of time - do not rush. Choose a good time when you can dedicate your child your attention
- Get them started and then let them do the rest for each garment. Or alternatively, they start the task e.g. putting on the sock and you help with the last bit.
- Encourage them to sit down to undress so they don't lose their balance.

Dressing

They may be able to put on loose clothing as early as 20 months, but will need a few more months before they can manage a T-shirt and another year or two after that before they'll really be able to get dressed all by themselves. At 27 months, they'll probably be able to pull off their shoes and socks.

What You Can Do

- Use hand over hand techniques to help child initiate the action
- Make it fun - dressing up games, pyjama parties, dressing up dollies
- Lay the clothing out in correct order
- Ask the child "what's next?"
- Try backward chaining: Here, the adult begins the task with the child only doing the last step. Gradually the adult does less so the child has to perform more steps. The child always gets the reward of finishing the task e.g. adult picks up jumper, places over child's head, helps put arms through, but the child pulls it down. Always go at the child's pace and give lots of praise.

Brushing Teeth

They may start wanting to help brush their own teeth as early as 16 months, but they probably won't be able to do it on their own until somewhere between their third and fourth birthdays.

What You Can Do

- Take turns to brush so they get a chance to practise but you are happy they have been cleaned thoroughly
- Role model for your child and let them watch you brush your teeth
- Let your child choose their own toothbrush and toothpaste to motivate them
- Use an electric toothbrush
- If their hands seem weak, try strengthening activities on using two hands.

Buttons and Zips: What You Can Do

- Practice pre button skills with children
- Posting games like pennies in a piggy bank
- Threading games with cotton reels, beads and big buttons. Work with finer and finer sizes as child manages them
- Try to post pennies through a slit in a square of paper.
- Use large buttons or toggles
- Attach a key ring to the zip puller to make it easier to grasp
- Start to practice zips by allowing to play with purses and bags with zips
- Put toys, games and favourite things in pencil case zip lock bags or bags with zips.

Good Self-Care Skills: What You Can Do

- Follow your child's lead see what your child is interested in doing and go along with that, they may learn with less frustration if they have chosen to dress dolly, scoop sand in the sand pit, pour water at bath time or take shoes and socks off to go in the paddling pool.
- Don't step in too quickly to help it's important that they have enough time to master these things on their own and at their own pace.
- Don't pressure them before they're ready wait to practise a skill until you think they are ready to learn it.
- Keep encouraging them whether they are successful or not. If they get frustrated, try and make the task easier to keep their confidence to keep trying.
- Work on grasp and hand strength through fine motor activities; go to 'Using my Hands' advice sheet.