

Teaching Self-Help Skills

A guide for caregivers

What are self-help skills and why are they important?

Self-help skills are the skills required to live independently. These typically fall into the following three categories:

- **Daily Living Skills**
 - basic personal hygiene, dressing, toileting, eating, maintaining a clean living space, preparing meals, transportation
- **Communication**
 - expressing needs, requesting help, reciprocating in conversation, advocating, written communication
- **Socialization**
 - initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, participating in play and leisure time, using good coping skills

Many of these skills are important for independence in school functions, recreational activities, community integration, and eventual independent living and work involvement. Other skills, like dressing and good personal hygiene, are important for peer acceptance.

Many of these skills are not second nature to individuals with developmental disabilities (DD), and, therefore, they take much longer to learn!

Why are self-help skills difficult for children with DD to learn?

To gain any self-help skill, it has to be practiced first and then reinforced over time until mastered. Some children learn self-help skills by imitation of adults or being shown what to do only a few times. They master the skill because it is reinforced over time naturally with either positive reinforcement (such as being praised for finally brushing their teeth by themselves) or through natural consequences (for example, being made fun of for having stinky breath).

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Children with developmental disabilities (DD), however, have more difficulties learning self-help skills in this way. They need tasks broken down into **much smaller steps** and practiced regularly as part of a **routine**. Moreover, once they do learn a skill, they are less likely to maintain it even if reinforced in traditional ways. This makes it so much harder for caregivers!

How do I teach self-help skills to my child with DD?

Teaching self-help skills requires four initial elements:

1. Establishing a clear goal

- Brush teeth independently twice a day.

2. Breaking the task down into small steps

- Take out toothbrush and toothpaste,
- rinse toothbrush with water,
- put toothpaste on toothbrush, etc.

3. Routine performance

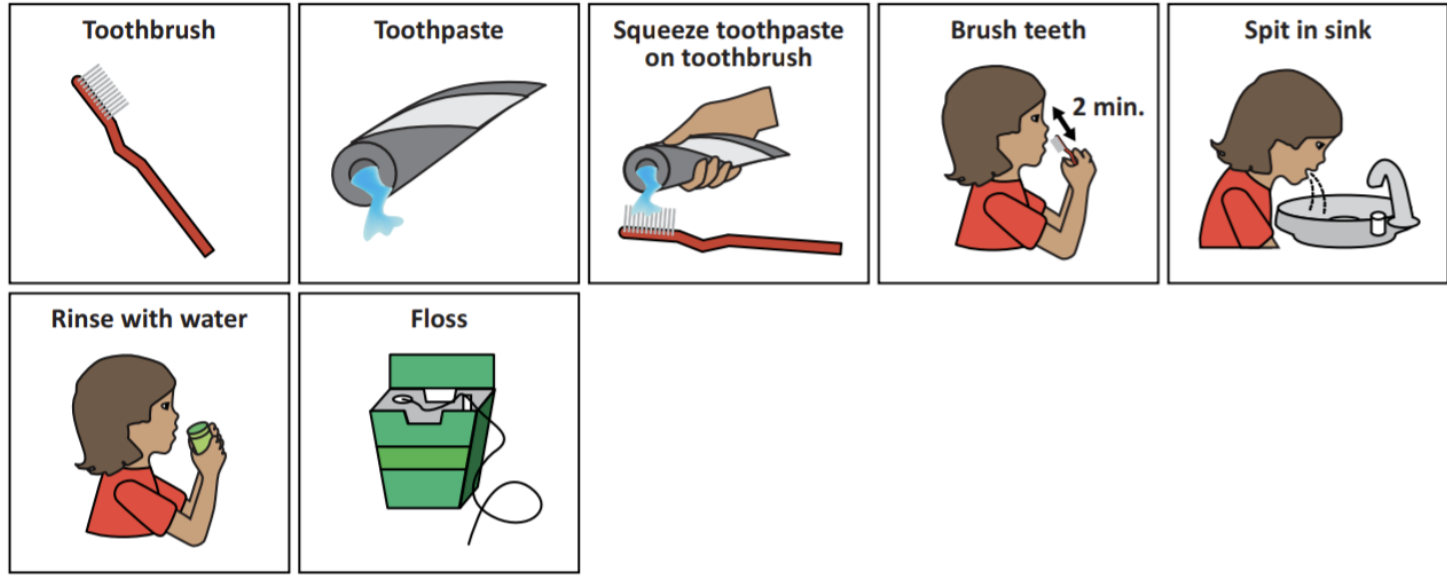
- Teach the skill in the same manner at the same time every day.

4. Visual aids

- Use checklists and/or picture schedules.
- See the toothbrushing picture schedule on the next page.
- Other examples can be found at: <https://vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/>

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Make alterations to the routine as needed. You may find that your child can only master one step of the goal at a time. Work on that step first until it is mastered, and then try for two steps! If one of the steps seems too hard, it may need to be broken down even more.

Keep track of days your child is successful and not successful. This helps you remember what worked and what did not work.

Ask for help. Other caregivers of children with DD, professionals, and other community/online support groups will have resources to help you. A list of references is provided at the end of this handout.

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How do I encourage my child to stay motivated to learn these skills?

In order to keep your child interested in learning skills they need to be **reinforced over and over again!**

Reinforcers are rewards given when a behavior occurs to keep a child motivated. The more interested the child is in the reinforcer, the more likely they will stay motivated while learning a new skill.

There are all kinds of reinforcers, and some work better in some children than others. The simplest reinforcer is praise. Other reinforcers include tokens or stickers, which can be used to reinforce steps toward a larger goal. For example, tokens can be earned for every time a child brushes their teeth on their own. Once a certain number of tokens are earned for a given behavior, a larger reward is given (e.g., If he brushes their teeth for five days in a row on their own, they get extra time with favorite toy/game).

What should I do once my child starts to “master” skills at home?

There are two major steps to take once a skill is mastered:

“Fading” rewards

This refers to cutting down the number of times you have to reward or reinforce a behavior. You want a new behavior to become automatic without having to reward it every time it happens. For example, instead of earning a token every time your child finishes a task, give them a token every three times, then every five times, etc.

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Generalize the skill to other situations

Once your child has mastered the skill at home, it is important to generalize the skill to other situations. To do this it is necessary to encourage your child to complete the task under different conditions/circumstances than they are used to. For example, if your child has mastered washing hands at home after using the bathroom, now have them practice doing it in the community.

Call to Action!

Fill out the **transition skill checklist** included in this toolkit.

What are your child's strengths, such as what seems to come easier to them? Why do you think these tasks are easier for your child?

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What are your child's areas of weakness?

What makes these tasks harder? Are there too many steps? Is there no consistency? Are they not reinforced enough?

Pick two self-care tasks that your child can practice mastering over the following several months. Pick a time of day to work on these and break the task down into very small parts as needed. Jot down some thoughts on how you will work on these skills here:

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Who can give you and your child support and advice on how to work on self-help skills and improve overall independence? This can be a speech therapist, occupational therapist, school counselor, Board of DD contact, special education teacher, pediatrician, or psychologist.

What kinds of activities can you and your child do together to help foster their independence? Think of things like grocery or clothes shopping, going to the bank, paying bills, cooking, and cleaning. They may only be able to participate in minimal ways at first, and then gradually they can do more. For example, when grocery shopping, maybe they simply accompany you at first while you talk them through the process. Then when they are more comfortable you can assign them small tasks like helping you find an item on your grocery list. Then you can have them practice giving the money to the clerk or bagging the groceries. Jot down your own ideas here:

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Who can give your child opportunities to practice independence inside and/or outside of the home? Think of people such as family members, local businesses, friends and neighbors, community centers, and churches.

How can I learn more about teaching self-help skills to my child?

Books:

- *Life Skills Workbook for Teens with Autism and Special Needs: Activities to help develop Independence, Self-Advocacy and Self-Care* by Susan Jules
- *Life Skill Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs* by Darlene Mannix
- *How to Teach Life Skills to Kids with Autism or Asperger's* by Jennifer McIlwee Myers. Future Horizons, Inc. Arlington, TX
- *Self-help Skills for People with Autism: A Systematic Teaching Approach* by: Stephen R. Anderson, Ph.D., BCBA, Amy L. Jablonski, Psy.D., Marcus L. Thomeer, Ph.D., and Vicki Madaus Knapp, Ph.D., BCBA. Woodbine House, Bethesda, MD

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Other Resources:

- Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) Resource Gallery
 - https://www.ocali.org/project/resource_gallery_of_interventions
- A Day in Our Shoes
 - <https://adayinourshoes.com/free-printable-visual-schedules-for-home-and-daily-routines/>
- Do2Learn visual aids
 - <https://do2learn.com/picturecards/VisualSchedules/index.htm>
- Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities My Health Passport
 - <https://dodd.ohio.gov/your-family/all-family-resources/health-passport-form>