

Aspect Autism Advisor Program

Teaching self-help skills

What are self-help skills?

Self-help skills help your child to become more independent as they grow older. These self-help skills include:

- **Feeding skills**
Using utensils, drinking from a cup, preparing their own food, pouring their own drink and setting the table.
- **Dressing skills**
Taking off and putting on clothes and shoes, tying shoelaces, doing buttons and zips and choosing weather-appropriate clothes.
- **Toileting skills**
Doing a wee and poo on toilet, wiping their bottom, flushing the toilet and washing their hands.
- **Personal hygiene skills**
Wiping nose, washing face, washing and brushing hair and brushing teeth.

It is important to set reasonable expectations for your child that consider the following:

1. Their readiness to learn and your readiness to teach
2. Your child's motor skills development
3. Whether your child has any fine motor skills, or motor planning, difficulties (these may need to be addressed first)
4. Whether your child has any sensory differences that are affecting how they participate in these activities
5. Your child's communication skills and how to best support their understanding of what they are being asked to do.

Prioritise the self-help skills you want your child to learn based on their developmental age, abilities, needs and/or upcoming changes in routine or environment. For example, if your child is going to preschool, you can teach them to drink from a cup or drink bottle and to open their lunch box. If they are going to school, you can teach them how to do the buttons on their uniform and to pack their school bag.

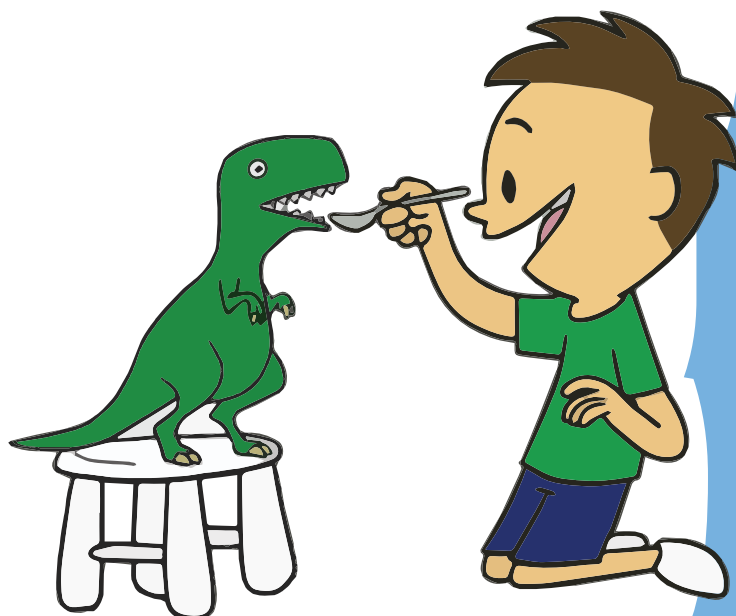
Tips to teach self-help skills

1. Break down the steps

Think about the number of steps involved in each skill. For example, brushing teeth could involve the following steps:

- Find toothbrush and toothpaste
- Open toothpaste
- Squeeze toothpaste onto brush
- Brush front teeth
- Brush back teeth
- Spit out toothpaste and rinse mouth
- Wipe face
- Put toothbrush away

This will allow you to teach your child the steps needed to complete the task using either backwards or forward chaining principles.



2. Backward or Forward Chaining

Once you have broken the skill down into a series of small steps, teach your child one step at a time, using backward or forward chaining. Backward chaining would start with helping the individual with each step of the process except the last step, which we encourage them to do themselves. Once the individual has mastered the last step of the skill, the individual then moves on to being helped with every step of the skill except the last two. Over time, the individual will learn the skills involved in each step and be able to independently complete the whole skill from start to finish. This means:

- Provide support to complete all the steps but after a while encourage the child to complete the last step independently.
- Once the child has mastered the last step on their own, move to the second last step and encourage them complete the last two steps themselves.
- Repeat the above until they can complete all steps independently.

To use the forward chaining approach, the first step is taught first and support is provided to complete the remaining steps. Then as your child learns to complete that step independently, work forward through all the steps until they can complete the whole task independently.

3. Modelling

Children learn many skills by simply observing someone else carrying them out. This means you can set the example that you would like your child to follow. While modelling each skill, verbally label each step involved.

4. Physical assistance

If your child is having difficulty learning the motor actions involved in carrying out a skill, provide them with gentle guidance by placing your hand over their hand and guiding how to carry out the skill.

5. Use a mirror

Completing self-help activities in front of a mirror allows the child to monitor and correct themselves.

6. Sitting down

Dressing is easier to practice sitting down as less balance is required. It's also easier to practice getting dressed if clothes are looser, and with short sleeves/legs rather than long sleeves/long pants.

7. Sensory considerations

If your child finds some of the sensory aspects of the task difficult to cope with, consider how you can change the environment or parts of the task so that it is easier for them to tolerate, e.g. some children dislike getting dressed as they find the sensations of the clothing irritating or being touched hard to tolerate. Consider finding clothes/socks with no seams, cut off tags, use well-worn or soft fabrics, and avoid collars and buttons/fastenings where possible. An Occupational Therapist can help you to identify and develop strategies to support any sensory differences or challenges your child might be experiencing.

8. Adaptations

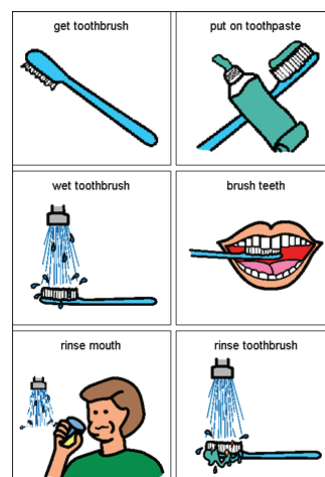
Consider the use of Velcro tabs vs. shoelaces, press studs vs. buttons, elastic waist vs. zipper, etc. to make the skill easier for your child to complete independently.

9. Have the right equipment

Use child size cutlery, have a non-slip mat on table, have a foot stool in the bathroom for toilet and sink child size toothbrush etc.

10. Visual supports

Visuals can facilitate the learning of self-help skills. You can sequence visuals of each step involved in a skill (e.g. photos of all the steps required to complete toileting or teeth brushing independently; or all the items needing to be put on in order to get dressed independently). You can also use video modelling (video's of other children performing these activities) or social stories that explain all the steps of the task.



11. Rewards

Using rewards can motivate children to complete each step of the task and also work towards being independent. Rewards can include verbal praise, sticker charts or favourite play activities e.g. First brush teeth → then read a story/play with bubbles.