

Daily Hygiene

This review will discuss how you can teach basic daily hygiene skills to a child with autism. Although personal hygiene involves many different aspects of self-care, we focus on washing hands, brushing teeth, showering and brushing hair.

Introduction

Teaching a child with autism to care for themselves and their personal hygiene is an important step in getting them to be more independent. A child's ability to manage their own personal hygiene will vary greatly, depending on their age, and dexterity.

Before you teach these skills, keep in mind that a child with autism may need you to break down a task into individual steps. For example, if you ask a typical five year old to brush their teeth, they will know that brushing their teeth consists of a number of smaller steps, such as opening the toothpaste and applying it on the toothbrush. A child with autism, however, will need to learn each step and then link the steps together, so that they can complete the entire task themselves.

Before you begin teaching a new hygiene skill, you should spend some time breaking the skill down into smaller, specific steps. Think about what your child will need to complete the activity. You can also use visual cues with your child. Here's an example.

Hand Washing

There are a number of specific steps that children need to complete to wash their hands properly. We will review one way in which you can teach handwashing. A technique called "chaining" is also used by therapists to teach many different skills -- we will review this technique in a separate module. To begin with, a child will need access to soap and a sink. Next, they need to do the following:

1. Turn on the cold water.
2. Use the soap bar, or pump the liquid soap dispenser into their hands.
3. Scrub their hands.
4. Rinse their hands.
5. Turn off the faucet.
6. Dry their hands.

When you teach a child to wash their hands, you will need to teach them each of these steps and then link them together. Begin by telling the child "wash hands." Then teach them to turn the faucet on. Initially you can put your hand over theirs to guide them through each step. Next, you can teach them to apply soap and then scrub their hands. Next, teach them how to rinse off the soap. Then teach them to turn the faucet off and finally to dry their hands on a towel. Once they have completed the task, you can provide a reinforcer for them. A reinforcer can be anything that they like, such as a sticker, a favorite toy or a small snack. Praise is also a great reinforcer!

Once a child has completed a task, you can check to see if they are able to complete any part of the task on their own.

Continue to prompt them until they are able to complete each step independently. Depending on the child, you may need to focus on certain steps first and then teach other steps at a later time. You can create visuals with icons to represent each step in the process and leave them near the sink where they are clearly visible to your child. Depending on your child, you can use actual pictures, icons or even just words. The visuals will serve as a reminder for each step.

Teeth Brushing

To begin with, instruct the child to "brush your teeth." Then, teach them each of the following steps:

1. Open the cap on the toothpaste.
2. Apply the right amount of toothpaste on the brush.
3. Brush their teeth correctly.
4. Spit out the remaining toothpaste.
5. Turn the faucet on.
6. Wash out any spit from the sink.
7. Fill water in the cup.
8. Rinse their mouth with the water. Teaching rinsing can take time, as you want them to learn to swirl the water in their mouth before spitting it out.
9. Rinse their toothbrush and put it in the correct spot.
10. Turn the faucet off.
11. Dry their hands.
12. Close the tube of toothpaste.

As you can see, there are several steps that they will need to learn to brush their teeth on their own. You should reinforce the behavior of successfully completing brushing when they have learned the steps. The texture of the brush, the taste and smell of toothpaste can all make it difficult for a child to want to brush their teeth. To begin with, you could teach a child to brush their teeth without the toothpaste, so that they can get used to the feel of a toothbrush in their mouth. There are many fun toothbrushes and toothpastes that you can find to make brushing more appealing to your child. If your child has difficulty with brushing, you can also consult with a dentist for additional help.

Showering

Below are steps describing how you can teach a child to shower independently. First, think about the best time for your child to take a shower. A shower before bedtime can be relaxing and less rushed than adding it to the morning routine. The steps involved in showering include:

1. Bringing a towel to the bathroom.
2. Undressing themselves.
3. Turning the faucet on and adjusting the temperature BEFORE getting into the shower.
4. Getting into the shower.
5. Wetting their body and/or hair.
6. Soaping themselves up.
7. Rinsing the soap off.
8. Shampooing their hair if needed.
9. Rinsing the shampoo out.
10. Turning the faucet off without burning themselves.
11. Stepping out of the shower.
12. Drying themselves with the towel.
13. Dressing themselves.

You may have noticed that showering has a large number of smaller behaviors that they will need to learn. You can reinforce them a few steps at a time as you teach them how to shower. It may take your child a few months to learn how to shower independently. You can have an adult supervise your child until they have learned all the steps. You can create an order for them to follow when washing the different parts of their body. You can also create visuals with each step, laminate them or place them in a zip-top bag for your child to see in shower. This will make it easier for them to remember to wash everywhere. Teaching your child to adjust the temperature correctly to avoid getting scalded is a very important safety step in learning how to shower. Do not leave a child to shower independently unless you are sure that they know how to adjust the water to the right temperature and they won't play with the faucet during their shower. You could also use a timer to help them understand that they need to finish showering within a certain timeframe.

Brushing Hair

Before you teach a child to brush their hair, think about the best type of hairstyle for them that may be easy to manage. The feeling of a brush in the hair can cause sensory issues for many children, so you may want a shorter hairstyle or one that is easy to manage and requires less brushing for your child. You can pick a brush with softer bristles to avoid pain while brushing. The steps involved in brushing hair include:

1. Picking up the hair brush.
2. Brushing hair on all sides.
3. Ensuring that the hair is not tangled.
4. Putting in hair clips if needed.
5. Checking in the mirror to make sure their hair is tidy.
6. Putting the brush back in the correct place.

Initially you can guide their hand to complete each step, and then prompt them verbally or with visuals until they are comfortable brushing their hair independently.

Challenges with Daily Hygiene

Sometimes you will encounter challenges that make it hard for a child to care for their personal hygiene. These can include aversions or phobias, their ability to generalize a skill in a different setting as well as basic safety concerns. Let's take a look at what you can do to help your child through these challenges.

- 1) Aversions or phobias – Occasionally a child may have an aversion or phobia to something that causes them to avoid caring for themselves. This could be anything like the sound of a flush, to the taste of the toothpaste or the smell of a particular kind of soap. You can help children overcome such aversions by offering them choices, such as the flavor of their toothpaste, the color of their towel or the kind of soap they like. If offering choices does not work, your child's therapist may use systematic desensitization so that certain steps are no longer scary. For example, to overcome Jake's fear of the flush, his therapist started by showing him pictures of the toilet,

then gradually showed him videos of the toilet without sound, and then showed him videos with sound. Once he was comfortable with the videos, the therapist worked on helping him gain confidence in the bathroom.

- 2) Generalization – Sometimes, a child will be able to take care of their personal hygiene in one setting, but not another. Once a child knows how to complete a task in a particular setting, they need to be able to generalize the skill in different settings. For example, once a child knows how to wash their hands, they will need to practice how to turn different kinds of faucets on or off in different kinds of places, such as public bathrooms, the kitchen and their classroom, to be able to use that skill effectively. You can provide opportunities for this by supporting your child through each activity in different places – at a friend's home, in a school or even at a park, until they are comfortable with it. You may also need to help them generalize a skill by providing variety in some of the following:
 - a) Soaps, such as soaps with different colors, smells, shapes or even liquid and bar soaps.
 - b) Towels: different colors, sizes and textures.
 - c) Toothbrushes: different colors, or electric and manual toothbrushes.
- 3) Safety is also very important. For example, you need to be sure that your child will not use very hot water for washing or showering to avoid burning themselves. This is something that you need to teach them, and you can also modify your home environment to make tasks safer. You can turn down the water heater in your home so that even at the hottest setting, the shower would not cause burns. You can also use a color code to remind them which side of the faucet to turn on by using a bright blue sticker for the one they should use. In very cold climates, during hand washing, the water can be freezing cold in the cold water tap and uncomfortable for your child. If they avoid washing their hands because of this, you may need to teach them to mix the cold water with the warm water to make it more comfortable. Also, remember to keep something sturdy for the child to stand on if they are too small to reach the sink while brushing their teeth. Also remember to ensure that the child does not eat toothpaste to avoid fluoride poisoning.

Conclusion

We hope you have found these tips on daily hygiene helpful. Breaking activities into smaller parts can make a big difference to a child who is trying to learn a new skill. Your child's therapist can also assist you in teaching daily hygiene skills to your child.