


## Helping Your Child Develop Independence



### Take Time to Teach

It is important that families plan time in daily routines to both teach Pre-K children tasks related to self-care and to allow time for practice of the skills. These skills build the sense of independence and confidence in developing children.

**Set up your child's areas** so that you create opportunities for your child to be independent.

- Placing materials and their personal items at their levels
- Set up your daily routines and tasks with this question in mind – “How can I teach the task in such a way as to allow him to complete this task without my help?”

**Be a good role model.**

- Model the skills you are teaching. Talk about what you are doing.
- A good way to be a model is to take turns performing steps of a task with a child. The adult should do a small step in the sequence of the skill and then ask the child to do it.
- Peers, as well as older siblings and relatives, can be excellent role models. Point out the older children's actions and ask peers to show others how to do what they have already learned.

**Incorporate self-care skills into the daily routines and schedules** of the child's home and environment. The skills become more meaningful children if they practice them throughout the day as part of their routines.

- Re-teach routines and tasks on a regular basis.
- Use visuals such as picture icons and photos. Visual strategies can be used to cue a child that it is time for a certain activity and to show a child the steps of a task.
- Use photographs, clip-art, or drawings to make your child a schedule like the one shown here.



**Use clear and easy-to-follow steps with prompts and help as needed.**



- Break down tasks into small sequential steps.
- Use visual supports such as pictures, gestures, or modeling examples to help make your directions clear.
- Provide encouragement and reinforcement throughout the steps of tasks
- Provide assistance throughout the steps of the tasks; but remember to reduce the amount of help you are giving as your child learns the skills. Gradually reducing how much you assist will help your child become more confident.
- Don't forget to use **“Wait Time”** to give your child time to process the directions, recall the steps of the task, and allow for difficulties with language and/or motor processing.

**Collaborate with others**

When you are working on self-care skills such as dressing, it is important to discuss your plans with others who help care for and teach your child (for example, baby-sitters, grandparents, day-care providers, teachers, therapists). If your child attends a child-care setting or attend preschool, let the teachers know that you are working on certain skills so that they can be aware of your goals and assist in following up.

## Helping Children Develop Dressing Skills

Following are some strategies that can help develop independence in this area. Remember that dressing skills can be difficult because they involve the use of several developmental skills such as gross and fine motor and sequencing steps of dressing.

- Choose clothing that is easy to put on
- Consider using colored dots to help identify left and right shoes and the front and back of clothing
- A visual work system can help children remember the steps to dressing.

Seek the advice of your pediatrician or a developmental professional if your child has ongoing difficulty with dressing and/or might be exhibiting motor coordination, strength, or motor processing difficulties.

### Prompting and assisting:

- If your child cannot put on the shirt the right way, line up the tag and place the shirt part way over her head. Let her pull it down. Help the child finish by putting her arm in the armhole.
- Encourage children to dress by themselves; just provide minimal assistance. Begin with older infants and toddlers by encouraging them to help pull socks on and off, pull up pants and help put their arms through sleeves. As children get older, encourage them to dress themselves but help with challenging steps such as zipping and buttoning.
- Let your child practice putting buttons through holes. Choose some clothing that has big buttons and big button holes. First take buttons that are loose and slide them through the holes. Then work on the actual buttons on the clothing.

## Teaching Dressing Skills During Play and Other Activities

- Teach your child that the label for pants and shirts goes in the back. Let him practice by putting the clothes out for dolls or stuffed animals. Put the label side on the floor. Lay the doll or stuffed animal with its back on the floor. Slide the clothes on. Begin with shirts that button or snap and let him attempt to button or snap. Toys which provide a variety of fasteners are also available (the dress-up monkey is an example).
- Provide your child with "dress-up" items and allow time for your child to engage in dress-up activities. Encourage him to try to get the clothes on and off with minimal assistance. Provide dress-up items with a variety of fasteners, including some that are easy to manipulate (ex. Velcro fasteners). The dress-up items shown here are purchased but most children enjoy playing "dress-up" with a variety of clothing, including "grown-up clothes". Many types of items can be used for dress-up and imagined to be super hero capes, hats, etc.



Most public libraries have collections which include books about dressing; but if your library does not have any, request that they order on loan from another library.

## Addressing Your Child's Unique Abilities

- Children who experience difficulties with motor, processing, or remembering the steps of dressing might become easily discouraged or frustrated with the task of dressing. Young children most often respond to praise and small rewards. Some children might need more reinforcement such as a reward strategy.
  - A strategy of rewarding either the entire dressing or specific steps can be developed as a script which would serve as both a visual sequencing support and a reward chart.
  - Examples of reward charts can be found online. Reward charts can be made simply by drawing the boxes on a sheet of paper and stars, checks, smiling faces can be drawn in instead of using stickers.
  - Examples of reward charts for dressing are shown below:



- Children who have difficulty staying focused on dressing long enough to complete the steps or who have difficulty remembering the steps of dressing sometimes benefit from visuals and charts which show them the steps. These types of pictures are good reminders of the steps and can help children become more independent.
- Examples of Visuals for Dressing



## Helping Your Child Develop Feeding Skills

Listed below are suggestions for incorporating feeding skills into daily routines:

### Practicing with Containers

- Let your child practice taking tops off of different kinds of containers. Put some favorite toys in plastic boxes or jars. If he has difficulty, allow him to finish opening the containers. Gradually close the lids on the containers more and more. Finally let him try to lift the lids without assistance.
- Let your child try to remove the pull-tab tops on containers such as pudding or gelatin. Initially, pull the lid part-way off. Gradually let her do more and more of the task.
- Save bottles when you empty them. Lay out a group of empty bottles on the table. Put the lids in a separate pile. Let your child find the correct lids for the bottles and put them on. You can have a race to see who can finish putting tops on the most bottles.
- Let your child practice pouring while engaging in water play. Put a variety of cups and containers in the water bin and show her how to fill it up and pour it out. Provide several types and sizes of containers.

### Practicing with Eating and Drinking Utensils

- Encourage your child to feed himself by helping with hand-over-hand as you scoop. Start easing your grip until he/she is scooping all by himself/herself.
- Encourage your child to practice drinking from a straw and sip-cup. Put small amounts of liquid in the cup to start. Use a small cup that has a wide steady base. Expect some spills but realize that the effort to develop independence is important, even if additional time is needed.
- Incorporate skills such as hand-washing before meals and snacks and cleaning up afterwards into feeding routines.



### **Key Points – Time – Practice - Encouragement**

When building independent feeding skills it is important to remember the typical developmental stages of self-feeding. The development of motor coordination is important to the ability to manipulate and use utensils. Encourage your child to practice feeding himself, beginning with finger foods and progressing to spoon and fork.

Give your child plenty of time to practice and let her be as independent as possible during mealtimes. Sometimes young children are “picky”. Begin your teaching of self-feeding skills when your child is eating a preferred food.

Give him the tools he needs to be successful. Consider bowls that attach to the table, child-sized utensils and small cups with handles and spouts.

Encourage your child to try for themselves but provide help and encouragement when needed so she doesn't get frustrated.

If your child seems to have considerable difficulties with using utensils, chewing, swallowing, and/or tolerating certain foods consult your pediatrician.

Your child's safety is your priority. Even though the goal is to help develop independence, supervision and monitoring are essential during feeding routines.

## Helping Your Child Develop Skills in Hygiene and Bathing

Your child's safety and health are your priorities. While helping your child develop independent skills in bathing, supervision and monitoring are essential and should be your primary focus during bath time. Developmentally, children do not have motor coordination, reasoning skills, or awareness of danger to a degree that allows them to bathe independently during the preschool/toddler years. However, there are many play and practice activities which can provide practice and awareness of cleanliness and hygiene. Some examples are listed below:

- During play, let your child practice washing dolls and washable toys. Put some soap on the items and let her wash, wipe off soap, and dry.
- Have your child practice with water by filling up small containers and using the water to water a plant.
- Teach your child the importance of brushing teeth and let him practice with actual toothpaste and brushes or by imitating your modeling of the skills in a pretend situation.
- Make hygiene tasks such as clipping nails and cleaning ears a regular part of your weekly schedule.

Emphasize the importance of hand-washing to your child.

Establish a hand-washing routine that includes specific times of the day, such as before snacks and meals, after toileting, after playing outside.

To help your child become more independent with hand-washing skills

- Place soap and drying towel within reach
- Provide a step-stool to help your child reach the sink if appropriate for your child
- Provide a picture step-by-step chart to help your child remember the steps.
- Monitor and supervise your child and provide reminders when needed. Expect some splashing but remember that your child will be learning to be independent and confident in his/her new skills.



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### Key Points – Time – Practice - Encouragement

Encouraging your child to take care of everyday hygiene routines and to use the toilet independently helps him/her learn how to become more independent and self-sufficient.

Although hygiene and bathing skills are skills which usually require adult direction and assistance instruction about the importance of health and hygiene can be emphasized. Many play and learning situations can be developed to reinforce these skills.

## Helping Your Child Develop Personal Responsibility

Suggestions for enhancing personal responsibility skills are listed below:

- Encourage your child to help with clean-up beginning at an early age.
- Give your child responsibilities for placing napkins or utensils on the table. Build routines for children to begin clearing their own plates/placemats, utensils.
- Ask your child to be your "helper" during routine chores and let him/her perform simple tasks such as sweeping with a small broom, putting away laundry, matching socks.
- Designate areas and label belongings so that your child can work toward identifying shelves, bins, and drawers in which to put away items. Build routines that enhance putting his own things away in the designated areas. Teach your child to match the item to the label so that they can easily help with clean-up.

**Participation** is an important factor of Adaptive and Self-Care behavior and personal responsibility. Below are strategies to provide additional supports for children who have unique abilities:

- Use visual schedules and state directions in a "first/then" format so that your child is aware of what will be happening. Refer to the visual schedule throughout the day. Familiarity with the routine increases ease of participation.
- Encourage and praise attempts, even if there are mistakes in your child's performance. Provide visual steps and modeling for new tasks.
- Use time frames and timers so that your child will know when an activity will end.
- Allow extra time in the routine when introducing new skills.
- Deal with your child's frustrations calmly. Repeat and model the instructions. Reinforce attempts.

**Transitions** have a vital role in helping children learn skills such as helping to clean up, remaining with a group or with a task, and following directions. Transitions should be planned as a regular part of the daily routine.

- Use a visual classroom schedule to show and prepare for changes and to make your child aware of "what will happen next."
- Use a timer or "time" statement to prepare for changes in activities:
  - "One more minute"
  - "Two more times"
- Use a transition warning to cue your child that activities are about to change:
  - Transition song or rhyme
  - Lights flicked off and on
  - Clapping hands

### Examples of Free Resources:

[Visuals from Head Start Inclusion Center](#)

[Tip Sheets from National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#)

[Developmental Activities from Help Me Grow Florida](#)

## References and Resources

Head Start Center for Inclusion. *Family Engagement*. Office of Head Start Department of Health and Human Services. (nd).

Help Me Grow Florida. *Developmental Activities*. The Children's Forum and FL Division of Early Learning.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools Prekindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities Extended School Year (ESY) Activities \*Home Packet\*

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. *"Making Life Easier" Tip Sheets*. (nd).

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