

Teaching self-help skills

Self-help skills are the abilities and skills considered necessary for a person to be able to care for themselves and function independently. They include everyday self-care skills like dressing, eating, toileting and cleaning teeth.

Self-help skills tend to be gradually learnt throughout childhood but can also be acquired into adulthood. They are often defined by age-appropriate tasks and abilities, however it's important to remember that every child develops differently. While some children may learn new skills quickly, others may need more time or not be ready yet. Equally they might find it easier to master some self-help skills over others.

Children need a variety of pre-requisite skills to master self-help skills. These include, among others, sensory processing (to be able to register, understand and respond to cues and indicators in their body and in the wider environment), communication and language (to be able to comprehend and follow instructions and to be able to communicate their wants, needs and choices), fine and gross motor skills, and the ability to follow a multi-step task. Autistic individuals may need more support with the development of self-help skills. Tasks can be adapted to be more accessible and broken down into smaller more achievable steps.



Motivation

We can help support the development of self-help skills by breaking down a task into achievable steps. This helps to build confidence and empower people to have more autonomy over their life. The more we give opportunity and create habits and routine, the more likely we are to have success.

Other ways to make tasks more motivating:

- Cut meals into shapes that are more visually entertaining
- Make a game out of getting dressed (e.g., pretend to search for arm 'lost' in the t-shirt)
- Pretend you can't do the task and ask for help
- Follow up the task with something motivating in a now and next format (e.g., now getting dressed, next we can bounce on the trampoline)

Backwards chaining

'Chaining' is a useful approach to teach new skills and help your child develop their independence. Chaining is the process of breaking down the parts of an activity and learning step by step to ensure that the task is not too overwhelming. By doing this we are setting achievable goals. Backwards Chaining is the teaching of an activity by focusing on the end steps first and working 'backwards'. See below for an example of what this looks like: How to teach backwards chaining - e.g., putting a top on.

1. Write every step of the task down
 - Know where the tops are kept
 - Open the drawer/cupboard
 - Pick just one top
 - Turn the top the right way round
 - Lift it up and put your head through the biggest hole
 - Reach one arm through and find the correct arm hole
 - Do the same with the other side
 - Ensure the top is fully pulled down
2. Complete most of the steps together and let your child finish the task (i.e., pull the top down)
3. Once they have mastered a step, support as little as possible on the step before until they are able to do the whole task
4. Praise when each step is achieved and when an effort is made to achieve a step

Forwards chaining

This is like backwards chaining but is done in reverse. Break the task down into steps but your child starts the task, and you help them to finish it, slowly fading out the support until they're completing the whole task.

Motor skills

We need a level of fine and gross motor skills to be able to manipulate items to be able to carry out self-help skills. For example, we need to be able to form a pincer grasp (putting our index and/or middle finger to our thumb) to hold onto a t-shirt to pull it down. We need enough balance to raise our foot to put trousers on, even when sat on the bed. To support success in self-help skills we can do fine and gross motor tasks that will support the development of motor skills needed for dressing.

We can improve fine and gross motor skills by encouraging participation in everyday activities. For example:

- Get them to open doors to build shoulder and core strength
- Give hand over hand to support when opening packets or lunch boxes or get them to do it if able to
- Encourage picking up smaller items to increase pincer grasp
- Mark make/draw/colour with small crayons or chunky pencils
- Utilise park/playground equipment. Holding onto swing, holding rails to climb, crawling through tunnels, hang from monkey bars or go down the slide

Make things fun!

When working on self-help skills with your child, make it as fun as possible. Create games or songs for completing activities or surround the area with your child's favourite things.

Signposting

If you are concerned about your child's communication, contact your GP, Health Visitor or education setting, for advice on how they can make a referral. Alternatively, you can contact your local NHS Speech and Language Therapy service. Our **Roles of professionals** factsheet can also help you to navigate who go to for support with communication.

How to contact a speech and language therapist? You can contact a Speech and Language Therapist through your local NHS service website, or you can request a referral to a Speech and Language Therapy service via your GP, Health visitor or education setting. Alternatively, you can access private Speech and Language Therapy input by searching the Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice. (ASLTIP) website: www.asltip.com

For further information on the various AAC systems and their pros and cons please visit our website.

You can also access support, information and advice on AAC through the Communication Matters website: www.communicationmatters.org.uk