

Intellectual Disability: promoting daily living skills in children

During the early years, self-care, play and academic skills are important parts of children's development.

Children usually learn self-care skills in the home environment before starting school. Children with intellectual disability may be delayed in learning these skills and need some support both at home and at school.

As children grow they become more independent, but still need support and encouragement from you.



Development and intellectual disability

Development can be thought of as the process by which we grow and change through our experiences and interaction with the world around us.

Although development usually occurs in an orderly sequence, each person is unique. Children develop skills at their own pace and it is important for parents/carers to be aware of their child's intellectual, social, emotional, communication, sensory, and physical development. Being aware of your child's skills and abilities can help parents/carers recognise which tasks a child can realistically be expected to do and which tasks are likely to allow the child to experience success.

You may be concerned about how to help your son or daughter achieve independence. Intellectual disability can mean your child is likely to have some problems learning daily living skills. While other children may learn by watching their parents/carers, children with intellectual disability may need more specific assistance and opportunities to practice, learn and develop skills.

Children with intellectual disability are more likely to need extra support in everyday activities. The support needs of a child will vary depending on the nature of the task, the child's disability and their environment. While some children will need no help, others may need a little and others will always need support with certain activities.

It is important to give your child opportunities to be involved in daily activities around the house because it allows them to:

- Learn new skills and develop their independence
- Feel valued, useful and respected
- Be active and participate in whichever way, big or small
- Communicate about different things
- Explore, choose and increase self determination.

Daily living skills

Children may be expected to independently carry out these kinds of daily living skills:

- Use the toilet
- Wash and dry their hands
- Undress or dress themselves (although they may need help with zips, buttons or laces)
- Wash themselves in a shower or bath tub (perhaps with some prompting)
- Use a knife and fork
- Pack up toys after playing.

Learning a new skill

Each of us has a preferred learning style. Some people prefer to learn by listening, others by seeing or doing. For best results when teaching your child new skills, consider tailoring your methods to their learning style.

Learning new skills takes a lot of effort in the beginning. We learn by practicing, making mistakes and problem solving. Start teaching a new skill when your child shows he or she is ready. If your child understands the purpose of an activity and the steps involved, they will find it easier to learn the skills needed.

Some helpful points to consider are:

- Does your child understand why they are doing the activity? For example, when putting on socks and shoes it can be helpful to suggest that wearing socks and shoes helps them to run, hop, skip and jump.
- What steps are involved? For example, first we get socks then we get shoes.
- Is your child physically capable of doing the task? For example, can they sit on a chair while pulling a sock over their foot?

Step-by-step

Breaking a daily living skill into small steps and teaching one step at a time can make it easier for your child to learn. For example, if teaching your child to put on socks and shoes, you could break the task into smaller steps:

- Get shoes and socks from cupboard
- Bring socks and shoes over to chair
- Sit on chair
- Pull socks onto feet
- Slip shoes onto feet.

Backward Chaining

'Backward chaining' is a technique that you can use to assist your child to learn a new daily living skill. This involves you completing all but the last step of the task. Your child then completes this final step. The process continues as you complete one less step and your child does one more, ensuring that success is achieved at each step, until they can do the whole task on their own. By doing this the child receives

instant success and this increases their motivation and confidence.

For example, when teaching your child to put on their shoes and socks, the first step to learn is 'slip shoes onto feet'.

Tips for Teaching

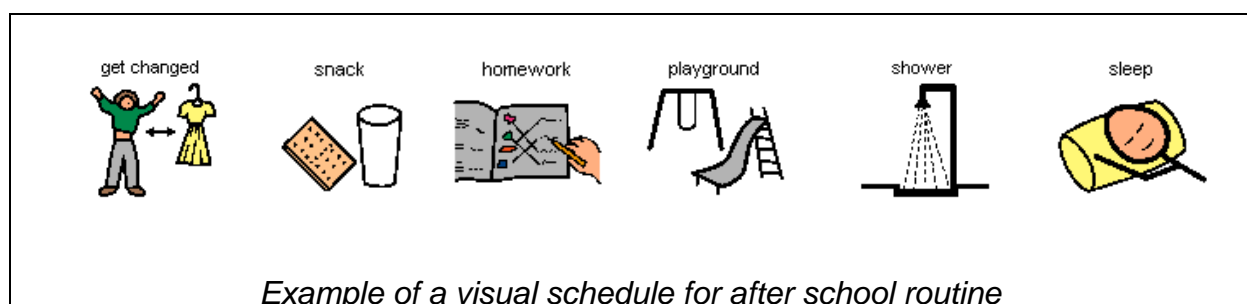
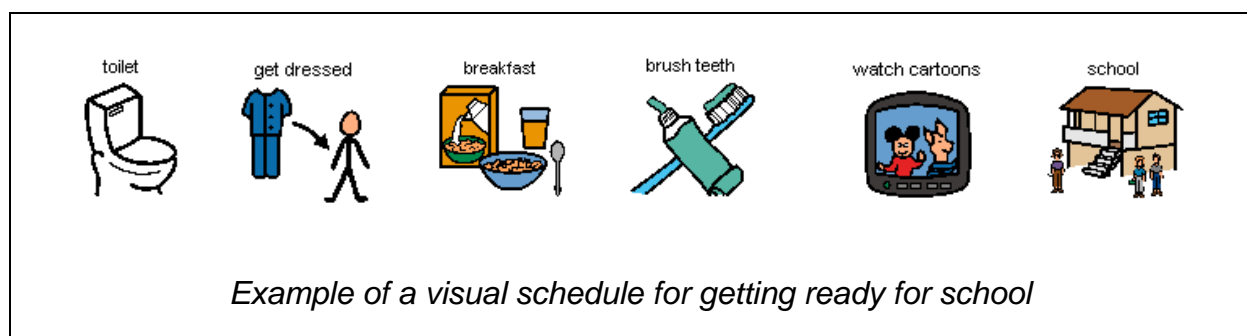
- One of the most important things is that your child feels they have your support. The more you can take the pressure off, the quicker success is likely to come. When children feel tension or anger in their parents/carers, it can make them tense and less able to learn new skills.
- Patience is very important. Your child may make mistakes and take a while to complete a task. You may find it difficult to watch your child struggle with a task that would take you only a minute, but it is often necessary and well worth the time. The moment usually comes when your child can handle many daily living skills on their own.
- Give praise for small steps—don't keep your praise for the time when your child is able to complete the whole task. Teach at your child's pace, and be sure to praise their efforts. Your child needs to know that their efforts are seen and that you are proud of their successes.
- If there are significant setbacks, wait a few weeks and then start again.

Routines and schedules

Establishing routines takes time and effort, but getting into the habit of doing things at the same time each day can make it easier for your child to learn daily living skills and become more independent.

Children with intellectual disability often find visual cues helpful. Using pictures of activities in the order in which they occur during the day is a great way to promote independence and help your child learn routines. They give your child a concrete, consistent and predictable way to remember, understand and anticipate activities that happen during the day.

Your regional office will help you develop a visual schedule if you wish.



We can help

If, despite your efforts, your child continues to have problems learning daily living skills, you may wish to contact us for further support.

Some staff specialise in promoting independence in daily living skills and can support families with such things as sleeping or toileting programs.

Phone: 1300 786 117

Email: disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au

More information

Recommended resources on this topic include: *Steps to Independence: teaching everyday skills to children with special needs* (4th ed) — a step-by-step guide to help parents teach essential life skills to the children with disabilities by BL Baker and AJ Brightman.

