

## Intellectual Disability: promoting personal hygiene in children

Parents/carers play a significant role in supporting their children's hygiene habits. You may help your child understand the importance of hygiene by teaching and demonstration.



### Children and hygiene

As your child grows and learns new skills, you can expect that they will become increasingly independent with their hygiene habits such as brushing their teeth.

### Intellectual disability and hygiene skills

So, how might intellectual disability affect a child's ability to learn personal hygiene habits? Intellectual disability is likely to mean your child could have problems:

- Learning new behaviours and skills
- Knowing when and how to carry out specific hygiene activities
- Working out what to do when they come across a problem.

Children with intellectual disability are more likely to need extra support to develop hygiene habits. The support needs of a child will vary depending on the nature of their disability and the environment. While some children will need no help, others may need a little and others more. It is important to have realistic expectations and consider what supports will help your child to develop independence. The next few pages will outline some helpful tips for teaching your child hygiene skills.

### Tips for teaching personal hygiene in young children

#### Make It fun

You can help your child to see personal hygiene as less of a chore by making it more appealing to them. For example, brightly coloured toothpaste with sparkles, a toothbrush in your child's favourite colour or decorated with their favourite cartoon character can add to the fun of bathroom routines. Scents, vivid colours and fun shapes can add excitement to soaps. Bubble bath, fizzy bath balls or perhaps a drop or two of essential oil can make bath time just that bit more special.

#### Set a good example

Actions speak louder than words. Children often look up to their parents and follow their example. Help reinforce learning by describing what you are doing while doing it, for example, 'I'm brushing my teeth. Look, squeeze the paste on like this'.

## Time matters

Try to teach your child the appropriate length of time for each hygiene activity. Sometimes singing a song, playing a song or using a kitchen timer can help children know when time is up.

## Keep it in mind

You can remind your child how important it is to practice hygiene habits such as washing their hands to wash away the germs.

## Learning a new activity

Each of us has a preferred learning style. Some children prefer to learn by listening, others by seeing or doing. Some may benefit from pictures of 'washing hands' above the sink, others may find a song or a rhyme more helpful. For best results when teaching your child new skills, consider tailoring your methods to their learning style.

## Readiness

Start teaching a new activity when your child seems ready. This means they can:

- Understand what they are to do: for example when brushing teeth, your child understands that the goal of the activity is to clean their teeth.
- Be aware of the steps involved, for example, get toothpaste and toothbrush.
- Be physically capable of doing the task, for example, able to hold the items and squeeze the paste onto the brush.
- Use hand-eye coordination, for example, hold the paste above the brush and see that the brush is correctly aligned. Direct hand movements to adjust the position of the brush or paste as needed.

## Step-by-step

Sometimes breaking a task into small steps and teaching one step at a time can make it easier for your child to learn the whole activity. For example:

- Get the toothbrush and paste
- Stand at the sink in front of the mirror
- Squeeze paste on brush
- Brush in circles all around your teeth until the song finishes
- Fill your mouth with water, swish it around and spit it out.

## Backward chaining

'Backward chaining' is a technique you can use to help your child learn a new skill. It means teaching in reverse order. Take your child through the first steps of the task and begin teaching at the point where the last step begins (For example, when teaching brushing teeth, the first step for the child to learn would be: 'fill your mouth with water, swish it around and spit it out'). The child then completes this final step. The process continues over time as you complete one less step and your child does one more until they can do the whole task on their own. Backward chaining means the child receives instant success, which increases their motivation and confidence.

## Personal hygiene in children with intellectual disability

### Patience and praise

Patience is very important. Your child may make mistakes and take a while to do the activity. You may find it difficult to watch your child struggle with a task that would take you only a minute, but it is necessary and well worth the time.

Give praise for small steps—this helps your child to know that their efforts are seen, appreciated and recognised, and that you are proud of their successes.

### Routine

Personal hygiene activities such as showering are typically part of a daily routine.

### Schedules

Schedules can be used to help provide structure to routines. A written schedule may help your child understand and remember the planned activities.



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.

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

### Choosing equipment and items

While many children will find standard items easy to use, others may need changes (For example, some children may need a step stool to help them reach the washbasin and some may find that a toothbrush with a wider handle is easier to hold and use than a standard toothbrush).

### References

Department of Health Community Services, 2001, *Learning through the Senses*, Northern Territory Government, Health House

J Gilles, 1995, *Self-help Strategies for Parents in HELP for preschoolers: Activities for Home*, VORT Corporation, USA

L Hodgdon, 1995, *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication: Practical Supports for the Home and School*, QuirkRoberts Publishing, Michigan

G Llewellyn, R Grace-Dunn & M Dibden, 1998, *As Children Grow Older: Into the Future for Parents with Intellectual Disability*. Paper from Changing Families, Challenging Futures, 6th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, 25–27 November 1998

D Llewelyn Jones & S Abraham, 2000, *Every Girl*, 3rd Edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne

Parenting SA: Self-Esteem [online] Accessed on 21 June 2013 at:  
[www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs/peg\\_category.asp?peg\\_category\\_id=9#peg49](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs/peg_category.asp?peg_category_id=9#peg49)

---

Copies of this publication are available from the Disability Information Service  
Tel: 1300 786 117 Email: [disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au](mailto:disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au) Website: [www.sa.gov.au/disability](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability) Version: June 2013



Licensed under Creative Commons <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0>  
Attribute to: *The Dept for Communities and Social Inclusion, Government of South Australia*