

Intellectual Disability: promoting personal hygiene in adolescents

Teenagers and hygiene

Most people want to feel and look good. Teenagers, like all of us, typically feel good if they and others think they look good. Body image is important and teenagers may want to experiment with new hairstyles, clothes and makeup. Many teenagers worry about what their skin looks like and fear pimples or acne. Other personal hygiene issues that may concern your teenager include their general appearance (body shape and clothing), how to manage their skin care (cleaning, shaving, moisturising, tanning), what to do about body odour, and managing periods.



Intellectual disability and hygiene skills

Adolescents with intellectual disability may need extra support with hygiene habits. The support needs of each teenager will vary—some will require none, others a little and some more. It is important to have realistic expectations and consider what supports will help your teenager develop maximum independence.

Intellectual disability could mean your teenager may have problems:

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

Hygiene activities

Some aspects of personal hygiene that teenagers generally learn are:

- Managing body odour and bad breath
- Washing hands and private parts
- Managing periods
- Using make up and hair products
- Shaving.

Learning a new activity

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 teenager new skills, consider tailoring your methods to their learning style.

Step-by-step

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

- Get razor and shaving cream
- Stand at sink in front of mirror
- Push lid to get foam
- Wipe foam on skin
- Slide razor along skin
- Rinse with water
- Dry skin
- Apply moisturiser/aftershave.

Backward chaining

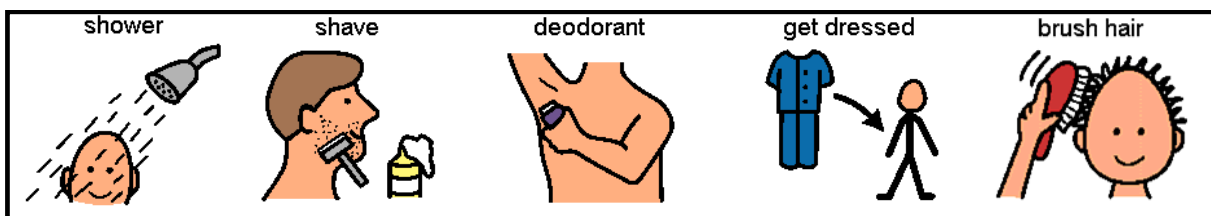
'Backward chaining' is a technique you can use to help your teenager learn a new skill. It means the person is taught the task in the reverse order. Take your teenager through the first steps of the task and begin teaching at the point where the last step begins. (For example, when teaching shaving, the first step for the teenager to learn would be: 'Apply moisturiser/aftershave'.) The teenager then completes this final step. The process continues over time as you complete one less step and your teenager does one more until they can do the whole task on their own. Backward chaining means the teenager receives instant success, which is likely to increase their motivation and confidence.

Routine

Personal hygiene activities such as showering are typically part of a daily routine. Getting into the habit of doing things at the same time each day can make personal hygiene habits much easier to learn. Establishing these routines can take time and effort, but it is worth it in the long run.

Schedules

Schedules are designed to bring routine and predictability to your teenager's day. A written schedule can help your teenager understand and remember the planned activities.



Using pictures of activities in the order they occur during the day is a great way to promote independence and help your teenager learn routines.

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

Praise your teenager

Give praise. Your teenager needs to know that their efforts are seen, appreciated and recognised, and that you are proud of their successes. Teenagers may receive very little positive feedback from their peers.

A few praises you may want to try out:

- 'Good on you for...(getting showered before school)'
- 'I'm proud of you for...(taking pride in how you look)'
- 'I really liked the way you...(cleaned up the bathroom when you were finished)'
- 'I like the way you...(brush your hair)'
- 'Congratulations on...(being able to use a razor)'
- 'You did a good job with...(choosing your clothes today)'
- 'I have to say I was really impressed with...(how clean your teeth look)'
- 'Thank you very much for...(getting ready so quickly)'

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