

Ask a Child Care Adviser - Supporting Health and Hygiene Skills

NCAC Child Care Adviser Angela Owens answers frequently asked questions about supporting children's self-help skills in health and hygiene tasks.

Q: Why is it important for children to develop self-help skills?

A: Developing the ability to manage aspects of their own care, including health and hygiene tasks, is an important aspect of each child's journey toward independence and autonomy. As with all developmental achievements, each child will develop their self-help skills according to their unique experiences, personalities and abilities. Carers and families play an integral role in supporting and encouraging each child's confidence and ability in relation to managing self-help tasks.

Q: Which health and hygiene tasks are children able to manage?

A: The age and developmental skills of individual children will affect the types of health and hygiene tasks that they can manage either on their own or with minimal assistance from their carers.



Even very young children can begin to manage simple tasks such as handwashing, handwiping, cleaning their faces and helping to keep their environment clean (for example, putting food scraps into bins).

Older children may also begin to take some responsibility for deciding when it is appropriate or necessary for them to perform hygiene tasks. With support from carers they can contribute to planning when or how routine health or hygiene tasks should occur within the service's program. It is important for carers to draw upon their knowledge of individual children to help them to determine the level of support required by each child in relation to their self-help skills.

This article relates to:

FDCQA:

Principles 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5

OSHCQA:

Principles 1.1, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.2 and 6.3

QIAS:

Principles 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.6, 5.3, 5.4, 6.1, 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5

Q: What strategies can carers use to support the development of children's self-help skills?

A: Modelling and talking about self-help tasks, even with very young children, can help to make their later attempts to master those tasks less daunting. Supporting the development of children's self-help skills may occur most successfully where staff and carers use opportunities for one to one and small group interactions, rather than large or whole group activities. Ensuring that children are able to actively engage in real tasks will assist them to become more proficient and confident in undertaking these.

It is essential to offer lots of positive feedback to children of all ages when they are undertaking self-help activities and it is important for carers to be supportive of children's attempts to master tasks, even when these attempts are not entirely successful. Accepting and praising children's efforts as well as their achievements enhances their confidence and motivation to master independent skills. However, it is also vital for carers to recognise and accept those instances where children are unable or unwilling to manage tasks independently.

Staff and carers need to adopt a sensitive, understanding approach toward children who are feeling insecure or vulnerable about their ability to manage tasks for themselves, even when the carer is aware that a particular child is normally capable of managing certain tasks independently.

Q: How can the service's daily routines support children to manage health and hygiene tasks independently?

A: The service's daily routines must offer some flexibility, and allow plenty of time for children to practice, discuss, observe and explore health and hygiene tasks. Pressuring children to complete such tasks quickly, or when they are not yet ready to do so, may undermine their confidence and willingness to attempt such tasks in the first place. Ensuring that daily routines, while flexible, are also predictable will help children to feel confident in preparing for and managing tasks independently.

Very young children in particular will benefit from routines that are familiar and therefore non-threatening. Older children, particularly in middle childhood, may accept and enjoy more frequent opportunities and encouragement to learn or attempt new tasks and skills. Carers need to judge this according to their knowledge of individual children.

Routines that allow for individual and small group interactions between children and carers will provide opportunities for adults to model and discuss health and hygiene tasks.

Q: In what ways can the physical environment support the development of children's self-help skills?

A: Providing equipment that is safe, accessible and easy for children to use will help to support their ability to manage tasks independently. In relation to health and hygiene tasks, equipment may include taps, sinks, soap, paper towels or other hand drying equipment, garbage bins, mirrors, toilet paper and toilet flushing mechanisms. Older children may also benefit from the presence of signs to prompt correct procedures for undertaking health or hygiene tasks. Younger children may find photographs of themselves and peers participating in health and hygiene activities supportive. Keeping the environment clean and uncluttered will assist children to easily access any resources or equipment they require to manage tasks

independently. It is also important that the physical environment reflects an understanding of the importance of health and hygiene, and that all children are encouraged to contribute to the maintenance of a clean and healthy environment.

Q: How can the educational program support children to manage health and hygiene tasks independently?

A: It is crucial that staff and carers plan opportunities for children to develop and build upon their self-help skills as part of the educational program. As with all aspects of program planning carers need to build upon children's interests, strengths and current skills to ensure that any plans are appropriate for the individual child. Carers may facilitate older children's development of self-help skills by providing opportunities for children to support and mentor each other in mastering specific tasks.

Even very young children may enjoy opportunities to explore and develop self-care skills through socio-dramatic play opportunities, eg home corner, water play, role playing. The use of resources and activities such as books, songs, posters and rhymes may support carers when they model, discuss or explain self-help tasks to children. The use of relevant resources may also make such activities appear familiar and non-threatening to children, and can support them to incorporate self-help tasks into their daily lives. ■



References and Further Reading

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