

Skills for Independent Living: Personal Care Skills

Start the Conversation

Many parents are comfortable having a conversation with their son or daughter about his or her developing body. However, other parents may prefer to have some suggestions to start these discussions. Before you begin, determine who would be the best person to have the conversation with your youth. A consideration might be identifying a person that is the same sex as your youth. Your son or daughter may find it easier to have this conversation with a sibling, grandparent, aunt, or other trusted adult.

Conversations about self-care are critical to your youth's health and safety. Having frank discussions helps parents understand their youth's physical development issues, improve their self-care skills, and launch them on their path to becoming a more independent adult.

This handout offers practical tools and strategies you can use to help your youth through puberty, adolescence, and self-care. You will find discussion starters to help you and your son or daughter become comfortable discussing personal topics.

Strategies for Discussing Personal Care and Physical Development

You may find it helpful to explore the concepts of “public” and “private” as they relate to your youth's developing body. Having an understanding of the concepts of “public” and “private” will help your develop appropriate self-care skills. Here are some ideas to begin that important conversation:

Strategy 1 — Discussing parts of the body

You could:

- Draw a picture of a body, include private areas covered by a swimming suit, or bra and underwear
- Use photographs of people from magazines or images from the internet
- Ask your Individualized Education Program (IEP) team for help locating appropriate teaching materials and visual aids
- Investigate whether disability specific organizations may have helpful materials

Using the illustration or drawing you have selected, ask your son or daughter which areas of his or her body are changing. You will need to determine whether the graphic or drawing you have selected are detailed enough to accurately identify the body parts being discussed.

Strategy 2 — Discussing whether activities and behaviors are “public” or “private”

Ask your youth if the following activities are “public” or “private” and why. If the activity is private, ask where it is appropriate to do it.

- Taking a shower or bath
- Brushing teeth
- Eating
- Changing clothes
- Using the bathroom
- Self-stimulation

Strategy 3 — Discussing places that are “public” or “private”

- a. Talk about which rooms in the house are for “public” activities (e.g., living room, kitchen) and which are for “private” activities (e.g., bathroom, bedroom).
- b. Discuss places in the community and which “public” and “private” activities occur in each place. Use images from the internet, magazines, resources from disability organizations, or take a trip to the location with your youth and discuss the subject.
 - Store
 - Place of worship
 - Public parks
 - Doctor’s office
 - School
 - Public transportation
 - Bowling alley
 - Hotel room

Strategy 4 — Discussing “personal space,” hugging, and touching

Self-care includes being able to gauge the appropriate distance your youth should be to others in various situations, and what distance is appropriate for others to be with your son or daughter. Keep in mind that there are cultural differences in what is considered personal space and who it is appropriate to touch or hug.

According to multiple studies of personal space in the United States, researchers have determined there are four distinct levels of distance. People from other cultures may have different boundaries for personal space, prohibitions about touching, or have specific differences in acceptable space by gender. Studies have identified boundaries or distances typical in various situations. (Hall, E.T. (1966). *The Hidden Dimension*, New York: Doubleday):

Intimate — 18 inches (family, relatives, and close friends)

Personal — 1.5-4 feet (friends and acquaintances)

Social — 4-12 feet (contacts at work and meeting new people)

Public space — more than 12 feet (individuals or groups you don’t know)

- a. Discuss how close or distant someone can be without you being uncomfortable.
 - Family members
 - Teachers, classroom assistants
 - People from your faith community
 - The mail carrier
 - Personal care attendants
 - Health care practitioners
 - People on the bus
- b. Discuss whether it’s appropriate to touch or hug (be hugged by) the following.
 - Family members
 - Teachers, classroom assistants
 - People from your faith community
 - The mail carrier
 - Personal care attendants
 - Health care practitioners
 - People on the bus

Build Self-care Skills

Depending on your youth's disability, learning and performing self-care tasks may have different challenges. Here are three tools you can use to improve your son or daughter's self-care skills.

Tool 1 — Discussing what your youth is doing while he or she is performing a task (parallel talk)

Your youth may be better able to perform self-care tasks if he or she understands why they are important. One example of a strategy to use is— discussing what your youth is doing while he or she is performing a task (called parallel talk). This strategy teaches the skill to your child and gives the task a real-life context.

Example of Talk: Using Deodorant

“Armpit odor usually begins when you become a teenager and becomes a little stronger when you become an adult. People use deodorants or antiperspirants to be sure they don't smell bad. People usually put deodorant on in the morning after they have a shower. You apply the deodorant to your armpits because that is one of the places where you sweat the most, and sweat can lead to odor. Remember that anything that causes you to sweat more, like gym class or working outside on a hot day, can produce more body odor. In those cases, more washing and deodorant might be needed.”

Tool 2 — Break self-care tasks into smaller steps (often called task analysis)

If tooth brushing, taking a shower, or performing other self-care tasks seem too complicated, try breaking the activity into smaller steps in the order in which they should happen (often called task analysis). You may need to do the task yourself in order to identify each step of a process that is automatic to you. Ask your youth repeat the steps until he or she learns the task.

Example of Steps in Brushing Teeth

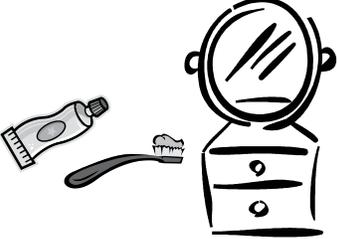
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Step 1. Select toothbrush | Step 7. Spit toothpaste into sink |
| Step 2. Turn water on | Step 8. Turn water on |
| Step 3. Get toothbrush wet | Step 9. Rinse toothbrush |
| Step 4. Turn water off | Step 10. Turn water off |
| Step 5. Put toothpaste on toothbrush | Step 11. Put away toothpaste and toothbrush |
| Step 6. Brush teeth | Step 12. Done! |

Tool 3 — Use story boards for teaching self-care tasks

Story boards teach self-care activities by breaking the task into smaller, more manageable steps. Instead of words, story boards use pictures, such as drawings, illustrations, online images, or symbols that can be used with a communication device. You also can even illustrate story boards with photos you take in your own home. Story boards may be as large or small as is needed. Post the storyboard where the youth needs reminders or provide in on a sheet of paper that can be carried in a backpack. In addition to illustrating a specific self-care task, a story board can also illustrate a series of tasks, such as those associated with getting ready in the morning or preparing for bed.

See Story Board Example on page 4.

Story Board Example: Brushing Teeth

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Select toothbrush</p>  | <p>Turn water on</p>  | <p>Get toothbrush wet</p>  |
| <p>Turn water off</p>  | <p>Put toothpaste on toothbrush</p>  | <p>Brush teeth</p>  |
| <p>Spit out toothpaste into sink</p>  | <p>Turn water on</p>  | <p>Rinse toothbrush</p>  |
| <p>Turn water off</p>  | <p>Put away toothbrush and toothpaste</p>  | <p>Done!</p>  |

This Story Board is adapted from PACER Center's handbook, *The Journey to Adulthood: What Parents Need to Know (Sexuality)*, page 4.

Parent Action Plan

First Steps to Independent Living: Personal Care

Parents' Goals and Concerns

Personal Care — Things my youth can do on his or her own

- Dress
- Shower
- Use the toilet
- Take care of hair and nails
- Choose clothing appropriate for the weather or setting
- Apply make-up
- Apply deodorant
- Understand changing clothes and washing them
- New personal hygiene routines for daughters related to puberty
- New personal hygiene routines for sons related to puberty
- Other _____

Personal Care — Tasks I would like to start working on with my son or daughter

Tools that help my youth:

- Begin a discussion of the developing parts of the body
- Learn the concepts of “private” and “public”
- Learn the concept of “personal” space

Break a task down into many small steps (task analysis)

Notes:

While your youth is doing a task, explain why each step of the task is necessary (parallel talk).

Notes:

Story boards (Develop your own story board, using images from the Internet, newspapers, magazines, mobile apps, or take pictures of your youth performing the tasks at various stages)

Notes: