

TEACHING INDEPENDENT HEALTH AND HYGIENE ROUTINES

BY ANDREA MORRIS, M.ED.

From a young age, children start to learn more about their bodies, especially as they mature and experience changes. Throughout adolescence and puberty, these changes become more noticeable.

Teaching your child how to independently care for their health and personal hygiene is a great way to help them build a positive self-image, and develop confidence in their abilities!

There are a number of factors that contribute to overall health, such as eating a balanced diet, moving and exercising your body, getting sufficient sleep, and maintaining good hygiene routines.

Similarly, there are a number of tools you can use to teach and reinforce these concepts. These tools can be helpful for all children, not just those with exceptionalities (*see next page*).



Create a social story for your child (www.thewatsoninstitute.org/resource/health-hygiene) about taking care of their health and hygiene! A social story should outline a particular situation and provide strategies to address the issue. You can adjust the content (vocabulary, amount of words, etc.) to be appropriate to your child's level of understanding.

For example, if you want to teach your child about ways to stay healthy during cold and flu season, you could put together a social story about covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze, washing your hands routinely, and drinking plenty of water.

The social story could incorporate personal information such as your child's name, photo, and their interests. Perhaps your child loves a particular cartoon character - you

DAILY DUTIES : CARING FOR HEALTH AND PERSONAL HYGIENE INDEPENDENTLY

Use visual supports such as a behavior chart, or a mini-schedule to encourage your child to learn how to navigate through their daily routines with greater independence.

1. A behavior chart is a simple chart or grid that can be used to track a set of behaviors or in this case, tasks. For example, you could create a hygiene chart and include tasks such as:

- ✓ brushed teeth (morning)
- ✓ brushed teeth (evening)
- ✓ washed face
- ✓ put on clean clothes

You should post the behavior chart in a prominent location, preferably in the room in which the tasks will take place, such as the bathroom in this example. Consider laminating the paper, or placing it in a plastic page protector, and using a dry erase marker so it can be reused repeatedly!

Every time your child completes one of the activities on the chart, encourage them to place a check in the appropriate box to indicate its completion. This serves as a visual reminder for them as well as a way for you to ensure they are taking care of their personal hygiene independently!

TASK TO COMPLETE	MON.	TUES.	WED.	THUR.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.
Brushed My Teeth (morning)							
Bathed/showered							
Washed My Face							
Cleaned My Ears							
Put on Clean Clothes							
Put on Deodorant							
Brushed/combed my hair							
Brushed My Teeth (before bed)							

Brush Teeth	Wash Face	Put on Clean Clothes	Put on Deodorant	Brush or Comb Hair
				
1	2	3	4	5

2. A mini-schedule can be used to break down an activity into a series of tasks, providing step-by-step visual representations of each task, written explanations of the tasks, or a combination of the two.

It's called a mini-schedule because it should be just that - mini! It shouldn't be used to map out the entire day or even a large portion of the day's agenda. Rather, it could be used in conjunction with a behavior chart to outline each step in your child's hygiene routine, or reinforce how to prepare a healthy snack, like an apple to eat at snack time.

Mini-schedules are really versatile and can be easily customized to best suit your child's needs. Don't be afraid to get creative with it! Use pictures or graphics to represent each step. Including a favorite story character or super hero can really grab your child's attention and increase his or her "buy-in" to the system.

Bonus tip: A great way to reinforce your child to actually use the mini-schedule and follow each step, is to add a place at the end for your child to earn a highly desired item such as a toy, book, or 10 minutes of iPad time! This lets them know that they will earn a reward for completing the task as outlined.



For more about teaching independent health routines, including prepared social story templates on health and hygiene topics, visit www.thewatsoninstitute.org/resource/health-hygiene

could create a social story explaining how that cartoon character always covers his mouth when he has to sneeze and is sure to drink plenty of water when his allergies act up!

Adding these personal touches makes it more fun and relatable for your child! Be sure to read through the social story together at first and explain any concepts or topics that aren't clear to your child. Once they have a better understanding of these topics, you can adjust the social stories as needed.

The combination of visual resources and social stories is an effective way to teach your child about maintaining their overall health and establishing good hygiene routines. •

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Andrea Morris, M.Ed. has more than 30 years of experience in special education and currently works as an educational consultant for the Watson Institute. She has a Masters of Education and M/PH Certification to work with students with mental or physical disabilities from the University of Pittsburgh. In her current role, Andrea provides training and consultation to educational teams serving students with disabilities in a variety of educational settings. Her areas of expertise include: autism and related disorders, inclusive practices, positive behavior support, naturalistic and structured teaching strategies. Prior to her work at Watson, Andee was an Early Childhood Consultant for the Early Learning Institute, Developmental Specialist for LEAP Pre-school and a Head Teacher for North Area Preschool. She has authored several journal articles and is a skilled presenter.