



Personal Hygiene

- Personal hygiene is essential for everyone as it affects health, socialization, and employment. When teaching personal hygiene skills to a person with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), it is helpful to know what age-appropriate skills are expected.
- For individuals with ASD, learning hygiene skills can take time to learn and practice. There may be sensory difficulties and anxiety related to completing hygiene tasks. It may be difficult for the person to remember the steps to complete the task. In the beginning, the parent or caregiver, may need to help with some hygiene tasks such as brushing teeth with hand-over-hand assistance. As a skill develops, prompts and support can be faded to promote independence.
- As the person first learns these new skills, it can be helpful to provide meaningful reinforcers to encourage good hygiene practices and motivate continued learning. It can also be helpful to play familiar music in the background that is enjoyable to the person during hygiene activities.
- Visual aids can help the learning process by illustrating and describing methods. These tools can include social stories, activity schedules, charts, and videos. A template to create social stories, as well as other helpful tools, can be found at www.childrens-specialized.org/KohlsAutismAwareness.
- To help make personal hygiene comfortable and to motivate, allow the person to choose personal care items of his or her preference. For instance, he or she can select soaps, toothbrushes, toothpastes, and towels, deodorant which are most tolerable and pleasant and relieve potential sensory issues.
- For individuals who may not be able to practice independent personal care, it is important to provide the choice as to who helps with hygiene and where that occurs. Everyone has a right to privacy, including people who may not be able to care for themselves. Make sure personal hygiene takes place behind bathroom or bedroom doors, maintaining the respect and privacy of the person involved.
- Sometimes it's helpful to pair a song or rhyme with a personal hygiene activity. This can make it easier to recall the steps, keep pace, complete the task, and make it more enjoyable. Timers can also be used to ensure that sufficient time is spent on a hygiene activity. Another helpful tip is to use two baskets or bins. One bin can contain items such as the soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and brush. As each task has been completed, the person can place the item into the "finished" basket on the other side. This method can cue which activities need to be done and which have been completed.
- It is important to help a person with ASD understand puberty as best they can, before it happens, so that he or she knows what to expect as his or her body changes. Puberty changes can be frightening for the child as well as the family. If parents are uncomfortable discussing such topics as penis growth, breast changes, menstruation, and masturbation, they should find someone they can trust to have this conversation. Having important knowledge about their bodies can help decrease fears and anxiety. There are also excellent books and videos available on these topics. Choose those that would be appropriate for the cognitive and maturity level of the child.
- Many personal hygiene skills can be built into a child's IEP. These lessons could be conducted in the classroom or in occupational or speech therapy sessions. Partner with the school to learn their methods of teaching and reinforce these skills at home and in other places the child practices personal care.

