



# ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENCE

When we become parents, our children depend on us for their every need. As our children grow, we can watch them cross small but major developmental milestones. Such milestones include holding their bottles, sitting up, pushing away from (or pulling toward) something, reaching for things they want to hold, and holding utensils for feeding. Next, we begin seeing independent travel, such as scooting, crawling, and eventually walking. Walking opens up a completely new world for toddlers and presents opportunities for children to begin to experiment with self-care and independence.

Typically, when children approach preschool years, they want to do more and more for themselves. Watching this quest for independence unfold can be unnerving for parents and caregivers. However, we must realize that **our children learning to take care of themselves is very important to personal and social development.**

Around the ages of three and four, most self-care skills emerge, but mastery of these skills may not occur before age six. Children with special needs and developmental delays may not reach mastery of self-care skills until later years.

Mastery of self-care skills varies from person to person, but with practice and persistence, children will improve their self-care skills. If your child actively resists attempting any of the tasks for self-care or has no interest in learning, consult your pediatrician.

## It's a great idea to help toddlers begin:

- Using a fork and spoon. With some guidance and help from you, even using a plastic knife is possible.
- Dressing and undressing. Preschoolers should be able to put clothes on and take them off without much trouble. Elastic waists in shorts, pants, and skirts allows children to dress and undress easily, while occasionally wearing clothing with buttons, snaps, zippers, buckles, and ties gives children opportunities to practice these skills.
- Brushing teeth. Children may be using a toothbrush, but they still need help and supervision to ensure they are brushing correctly and long enough to clean teeth thoroughly. This is a task that takes great coordination, but it makes them feel like a grown-up. Make sure that children only use a pea-sized drop of toothpaste. Ingesting excess fluoride is not good.
- Using the toilet. Most children are toilet trained by age three, but some are not even ready to try until age four. Do not be discouraged if your child is not 100% potty trained at this age, but do consult your physician if you think there is a problem.
- Preparing breakfast. Children ages 3–4 can get their own cereal for breakfast if they are hungry and are able to access dishes and spoons. Make it easy for them by setting out bowls, cereal, a spoon, and a small container of milk in the fridge that they can reach. Prepare for many spills, but remember, they are learning.
- Helping around the house. Even though they may not want to help pick up clothes, toys, etc., children this age should help pick up and tidy family spaces. Encourage them to help in the yard by pulling weeds or picking up trash and sticks. In the kitchen, let them help with cooking and baking simple foods such as puddings, muffin mixes, and sandwiches. ✨

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