



Self-help Skill Development

As your child gets older, she'll learn to do more things for herself. While watching your baby's growing independence can be bittersweet, learning to take care of herself is an important part of your child's personal and social development.

When it develops

Your child will probably start doing things for herself sometime after her first birthday. Advances come fast and furiously at around 18-24 months, and while children will still need lots of help and attention for years to come, many will have the basics of self-care — dressing, brushing their teeth, washing their hands, feeding themselves, and going to the bathroom on their own — mastered by or soon after their fourth birthday.

How it develops

Although your child won't make significant progress in self-care until the toddler years, you'll see the first stirrings fairly early on. At about 9 months or so, your baby will begin to understand how objects relate to one another and may begin using them for their intended function — brushing her hair, babbling on her play phone, and so on. Soon after, she'll start learning how to drink out of a cup, and in a few months she'll be able to hold the cup herself (the one-handed grip will come at about 24 months). At 11 months or so, she'll even start holding out her arm or leg to help you dress her.

Your child will really start developing her own sense of self in the first few months after her first birthday. By 15 months, your toddler will recognize herself in the mirror — no longer will she reach out and try to touch the "other" baby. And soon after, she, like most toddlers, may go through a period of adamant no-saying. It's her way of asserting her new feelings of individuation.

As her sense of self increases, so will her achievements in self-care.

- Using a fork and spoon: Some toddlers may start wanting to use utensils as early as 13 months, and many children have figured out this all-important skill by 17 or 18 months. By the time she's 4, your child will probably be able to hold her utensils like an adult, and she'll be ready to learn table manners.
- Taking off her own clothes: While this may lead to lots of naked-toddler chase sessions, it's a key accomplishment, and your child will begin to learn to do it sometime between 13 and 20 months.
- Brushing her teeth: She may start wanting to help with this task as early as 16 months, but she probably won't be able to do it on her own until sometime between her third and fourth birthdays.
- Washing and drying her hands: This skill develops between 19 and 30 months and is something your child should learn before or at the same time as using the toilet — you don't want her spreading bacteria.
- Getting dressed: She may be able to put on loose clothing as early as 20 months, but she'll need a few more months before she can manage a T-shirt and another year or two after that before she'll really be able to get dressed all by herself. At 27 months, she'll probably be able to pull off her shoes.
- Using the toilet: Most children aren't physically ready to start toilet training until they're at least 24 months old, and some won't be ready to begin for as much as a year or two after that.
- Preparing her own breakfast: Toddlers as young as 3 may be able to get themselves a bowl of cereal when they're hungry, and most kids can do it by the time they're four and half. Make it easy for her by leaving kid-size containers of cereal and milk in the cupboard and fridge.