



First Steps

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Keeping Clean

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

Between the ages of 2 and 3, children naturally want to imitate the adults in their life. This seems an ideal time to begin teaching children habits of personal cleanliness. They are old enough to understand the difference between a clean and a dirty face, for example, and they are coordinated enough to begin brushing their own teeth with parental supervision. This is also the time that most parents toilet train their toddlers, so it makes sense to also teach them to thoroughly wash and dry their hands. Even putting their dirty clothing in the laundry basket and wearing clean clothes are habits children can learn early. It may be easier to simply do these things for children, but eventually parents want their children to be able to take care of themselves. Developing habits of personal cleanliness will become a part of a child's daily routine that will last a lifetime.



Things Parents Should Help Children Learn to Do:

Wash hands: At first, parents must physically put soap and water on their child's hands and gently scrub to show the child how this is done. Be sure that he rinses his hands, too, and then show him how to dry his hands by taking each hand in the towel and wiping it dry. Young children get dirty when they play, so it is important that they understand why and how to wash their hands, especially before they eat.

Clean teeth: Wipe an infant's gums with a clean, damp cloth at least once a day. As teeth emerge, brush twice a day with a small baby toothbrush and a small amount of toothpaste; clean and massage the gums in toothless areas. When the child is old enough to hold a toothbrush, let him brush his own teeth. Then check to be sure that all his teeth are clean.

Wash face: To begin with, parents should let the child look at herself in a mirror, then wet a washcloth with warm water and gently wipe her face. Encourage her to do the same thing and then show her face in the mirror again. Praise the good job she did in washing her face. Eventually, she will be able to do the whole job by herself by looking in the mirror. Be sure the mirror is low enough that she can safely see herself.

Wear clean clothes: Each night when your child changes from her play clothes into her pajamas, she should pick up her play clothes and put them in the laundry basket or hamper. Doing this means she won't put on the same dirty clothes the next day. At this same time, help her lay out the clean clothes she will wear tomorrow.

Young children need lessons in behaviors that protect their health and help them learn habits of personal cleanliness. Self-help skills such as hand washing should be encouraged through activities where children are taught these personal grooming skills and are given opportunities many times a day to “practice” what they have learned.

Young children need proper training in using the toilet in order to care for basic needs and to learn the importance of good health habits. Soap and water and a step stool should be placed near the sink. These items should be handy for the child to reach so he can wash his hands after using the toilet. Doing this encourages self-help skills and good health habits.



Toddlers can be taught to brush or comb their hair. Parents must show a child how this is done, but most children after the age of three can manage to run a brush or comb through their hair to groom themselves.

Personal hygiene should be a regular part of family training for children. Parents need to support what is healthy and socially pleasing like clean face, hands, and teeth. Children should be bathed at least every other day. Children under the age of 5 need parental supervision during bathing, but children should learn how to wash themselves by age 3.

Checklist for good personal care routines for children:

Wash hands

- After using the toilet
- Before eating or handling food
- After playing with toys or on the playground
- After playing with the dog or cat
- Whenever hands are visibly dirty
- After blowing the nose, sneezing, or coughing
- After breakfast, lunch, and dinner
- Before going to bed
- Whenever the face is visibly dirty

Brush teeth

- After breakfast, lunch, and dinner
- After snacks or sugary drinks
- Before going to bed

Wash face

Bathe the whole body

- Daily or at least every other day
- After active play in warm weather
- After active play in the dirt

Comb hair

- After waking up in the morning
- Before meals
- After bathing

Wear clean clothes

- Daily

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.