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Developmental Milestone: Self-care

Self-care: What to expect when

As your child grows older, he'll learn — and want — to do more things for himself, from brushing his teeth to getting his own bowl of cereal. While watching your preschooler become increasingly independent can be bittersweet, learning to take care of himself is an important part of his personal and social development.

Skills he'll work at

Using a fork and spoon: By the time your child is 4, he should be able to hold a fork and spoon like an adult. With some guidance from you, he can also get a handle on how to use a knife. And — joy of joys — he'll be ready to learn table manners.

Dressing and undressing: Preschoolers should be able to put their clothes on and take them off without too much trouble. Zippers, buttons, snaps, and clasps on overalls still may be tough; while many preschoolers can undo these with ease, they will probably need help with fastening. Velcro, on the other hand, is easy for little hands to manipulate. Many children this age can put on their shoes without help if they have Velcro straps.

Brushing teeth: Most children get fairly adept at tooth brushing sometime between their third and fourth birthdays, but they still need your help and supervision. It takes quite a bit of coordination for your child to hold a toothbrush and maneuver it around his mouth so that he's really cleaning in there. But let him do his bit — it makes him feel grown up and helps him develop a good habit for life. And make sure he uses only a pea-size drop of fluoride toothpaste; he's apt to swallow some instead of spitting it all out, and too much fluoride is not a good thing.

Using the toilet: Most children are toilet trained by about age 3, though some aren't ready until age 4. As a toddler your child probably used a potty rather than a toilet. Now he needs to get comfortable using the toilet both at home and elsewhere. Little boys typically sit down to urinate in the early stages of toilet training, but as preschoolers they'll want to copy their dads, older brothers, and friends, who stand up to urinate. Also at this age, your child may develop the ability to stay dry at night if he hasn't done so already.

Preparing breakfast: Children as young as 3 may be able to get their own cereal for breakfast, especially if they're hungry. The more he practices, the better he'll get. If your child wants to get his own breakfast, make it easy for him by leaving kid-size containers of cereal and milk on the counter and in the fridge in spots he can reach. Then brace yourself for some spills — they're worth it in the long run.

Helping out around the house: Children this age can help by picking up their toys (though they'd usually rather not), and 4-year-olds can begin making their beds. They can also lend you and your partner a hand with simple tasks in the kitchen and around the yard. Many preschoolers, for instance, love to help stir the muffin mix or water the garden. Instead of allowing yourself to get into a power struggle with your preschooler, encourage him to help rather than insisting. You can accomplish a lot through long-term encouragement.

What you can do

Encouragement is key. When your preschooler tries his hand at a new skill, tell him you're proud he tried (regardless of the result) and urge him to try again. Don't always jump in to help; it's essential that he have enough time to master tasks on his own, at his own pace. Try not to pressure him before he's ready, either. And be flexible: If allowing him to prepare his own breakfast means you'll have to sweep cereal off the floor, go with the flow. If he's years away from perfecting hospital corners on his bed, don't sweat it. Just buy fitted sheets and a comforter so bed making is a cinch.

Keep a watchful eye on your child as he begins to experiment with doing things he hasn't tried before, and explain why he can't do everything for himself. Tell him, for example, why it's not safe for him to turn on the oven or cut his own bread with the bread knife. He may not be happy about it, but he'll understand.

What to watch out for

Children develop skills differently, some more quickly than others, but if your child actively resists attempting any of the tasks above or shows no interest in learning them, talk to his pediatrician.

What's ahead

As the years roll by, your child will get better and better at taking care of himself. He'll be able to tie his shoes and take a shower or bath on his own, and then it's simply a matter of time before he can do laundry and cook dinner, not to mention drive himself to soccer practice.