

# Schools Therapy Resource Pack

Section 6e –  
Looking after  
myself

## Looking after myself

### Introduction

This section is about the skills children want and have to do to meet their personal needs every day with increasing independence:-

- Drinking and eating
- Washing
- Dressing
- Managing the toilet

For older children, these tasks include things such as shopping and using local community facilities.

The development of these skills is a part of children's learning where partnership between home and school is particularly important. Consistent approaches shared with parents are more effective and appreciated.

Although it may appear task-focused, a combination of underlying skills is needed for success e.g.

- Difficulty with balance may make it difficult to stand upright and still for dressing
- A child who leaves face and hands messy after eating may have poor touch awareness
- Putting clothes on back to front or in the wrong order may result from reduced spatial awareness or planning

Working on sensory, motor and perceptual skills may therefore also help to improve self-care.

This section includes strategies for the different aspects of self-care, together with some specific techniques e.g. for dressing and doing up shoe laces.

Before helping a child to develop their self help skills you need to break it down into small steps and consider how it can be best taught for the individual; you may decide to use a forward or backward chaining method of teaching.

Forward chaining: start at the beginning. After each small step is mastered, instruction begins on the next step.

Backward chaining: you teach each step in the reverse order, so the last step first. The benefit of this approach means that they are always completing the task which gives them an experience of success.

Some children may benefit from visual aids as a prompt thus reducing adult support e.g. laminated picture sequence for toileting. Please see resource list for more details.

**Important note: Please share the advice in this section with parents so that a consistent approach is taken across home and school.**

### Strategies for drinking and eating

#### **Drinking**

Tends to cough when swallowing or spills drink:-

- Sit at table, with both elbows supported, hold cup/bottle with both hands, encourage to drink slowly

NB: If this continues please seek advice from your GP or discuss with the school Speech and Language therapist.

#### **Eating**

- Remember: When hungry a child will not want to learn a new skill!
- Check sitting posture and chair/table height (see Handwriting Section 7). At home he/she might need to sit on their knees on a dining chair or have a box under their feet. Think about how it feels to sit on a bar stool.
- If he/she cannot hold and use knife and fork (encourage using spoon and fork for the time being), see below for teaching; try cutting playdough/plasticene/clay first or cooking/craft activities in classroom or at home (simple cooking activities provide further practice).
- Use 'hand over hand' help to cut up food at start of meal or to open lunch boxes and containers (sit slightly behind or beside child)
- Identify dinner lady to supervise particular children – ensure he/she has an opportunity first and the adult supports with as little of the task as possible, e.g. loosening tops so the child can unscrew, popping a packet so the child can pull apart.
- Suggest he/she check (in mirror if possible) when face/hands are messy (and wash/wipe), whether or not they are dirty at that meal to encourage consistency.

- To encourage children who are reluctant to try eating/drinking in school, provide a range tastes, smells, cooking experiences etc. in classroom activities and at home but do not force a child to try something and provide no pressure to do so. A child may be better eating in a less distracting or stimulating environment. Ask them.

(See also Sensory Strategies Section 6a and mouth control activities at the end of this section)

- For the child who lacks confidence or gets lost easily in a busy environment, use a buddy system to encourage independence. Provide obvious clues in school corridors and on classroom doors.
- Packed lunches may be easier to manage but school dinners (with adult support) can provide useful practice.
- For packed lunches, consider
  - can the child open packets? If not, putting the food in a zip lock plastic bag may help.
  - can the child manage drinks cartons independently? If not, a sports bottle is an alternative.
- Some children may find it easier to hold more contoured and/or thicker handled cutlery (see resource list).
- If the child has difficulty keeping the plate or bowl still – try using non-slip matting (see resource list).
- High sided bowls and plates can help a child who has difficulty scooping food on to their spoon or fork. (see resource list).

### **Chewing**

When a school age child is often seen to be chewing things (e.g. pencils, shirt collar or cuffs, hood strings, toys etc.) this could be a sensory-seeking behavior which is being used to help a child to keep calm, listen and think.

If this is not dangerous or destructive then it is not an issue. Otherwise consider offering the child latex free tubing ( or Chewlery/ chewable jewelry), Chewy pencil tops, have snacks that are crunchy or chewy at break times, to chew on a straw, or have a water bottle with a sports top to provide resistance to sucking.

### **Steps involved in using a knife and fork**

- Stab with fork

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- Hold food still with fork, cut with sawing motion with knife
- Stab food or use knife to guide food onto fork
- Encourage child not to grasp cutlery too tightly (keep arms relaxed)
- Practise first with softer foods (potatoes, fish fingers, sausages, well cooked vegetables)

### I can use a knife and fork!



Remember, good positioning at the table is very important.

It may be useful to concentrate on using each tool (knife/fork/spoon) on its own first before using together.

Have the right tools for the job! A serrated knife is easiest to cut most food with, but an un-serrated knife is easier for spreading toast / bread. Ensure the cutlery is a suitable size for your child – they may find a child-size knife and fork much easier. There are also many kinds of adapted cutlery available for people who have difficulty holding standard cutlery. (See resource list)



One skill area that many parents and teachers ask about is developing knife and fork skills. Using a knife and fork is an intricate task which involves the use of two hands together to form a smooth and efficient movement.

Children who have difficulty with other motor skills often will have difficulty with cutting, lifting and coordinating using a knife and fork. The task needed when

children are hungry can be tiresome and cause stress to the child and parent. Which can result in tantrums and refusal to use cutlery or eat food altogether!

### **Positioning**

Positioning is extremely important. To be able to use their hands and body well he/she needs to be sat supported so they are not thinking about balancing.

- A cushion on the seat can raise them up but needs to be firm.
- Their feet should rest firmly on the ground or on a foot rest, or a box if their feet cannot reach the ground.
- His/her back needs to be supported by the back of the chair.

### **At the table**

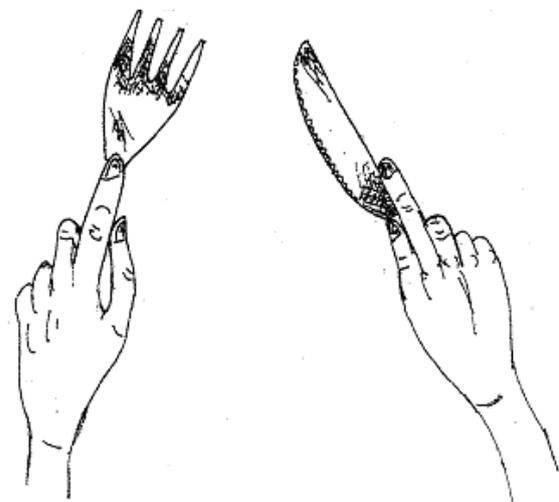
Start by using one utensil only. A spoon is good to start with. Consider the type of food you are going to serve. Consider a food which is easy to scoop and also a bowl that is easy to scoop food out of. Try it if you are not sure.

Encourage your child to hold the bowl with their other hand. This will encourage two handed skills which will help with knife and fork skills.

Once your child has mastered using a spoon, move on to using a fork for shovelling or stabbing movements. Again consider the type of food – pasta and sausages are good foods to stab. Continue to encourage your child to hold the plate with their other hand.

To develop knife skills, start with tasks that use a knife only, such as spreading, buttering and cutting. Use foods that are easy to spread (like jams, cream cheese, peanut butter, soft butter) on a hard surface (toast and crackers). You may need to place your hand over your child's hand to help them to learn the motor pattern of the movement. Demonstrating the movement will also help. During spreading encourage your child to hold the bread / toast / crackers with their other hand. For cutting movements firstly practice using play doh and a small knife. You can then progress to using food items that are easy to cut and motivating for child to eat (e.g. banana). This will give them an immediate sense of achievement. All cooking activities will also help with this.

When your child has developed sufficient control over the knife and fork you can introduce using the knife and fork together at meal times. Ensure the child holds these using correct grips (as illustrated). A coloured dot or face can be drawn on or stuck on the cutlery and these must always face the child. This will



help them to put their fingers in the right place.

Technique is everything! Teach this in steps:

1. stab the food with the fork,
2. saw with the knife forwards and backwards (as one would a piece of wood).

Encourage the child not to grasp the cutlery too tightly and to keep their arms relaxed (rather than holding their elbows high in the air).

When your child is still mastering the use of a knife and fork it may be easiest to practice on soft foods etc.

- Sausages
- Fish fillets / fish fingers
- Egg
- Soft potatoes
- Well cooked vegetables
- Pasta (preferably not spaghetti though)

If knife and fork skills are particularly slow and difficult, perhaps allow your child to use a spoon or fork only for the first half of the meal or cut up the first part and get them to finish to minimize hunger and frustration but remember -

**practise is the best way to master this skill !**

### **The environment**

Remove all distractions from where he/she eats: including radio, t.v. washing machine. Where possible sit at a table with others when eating. This will help a good position and also help your child can learn from others who are sitting and eating at the table. Your child will also be exposed to learning the social skills that are required during meal times.

### **Involvement**

Involve your child in the meal time routine. Have him or her set the table, or if they have difficulty with setting the table, to put a few items on the table, for example the salt or pepper pot, or glasses. This will help your child mentally prepare for the meal and also gives you an opportunity to praise your child for their efforts, encourages team work, doing things we all have to do (but don't always want to) and teach a functional skill and also provides a positive meal time experience for your child. Remember you can involve your child in the wash up and clean up as this is just as important!

### **Fine motor activities**

By playing and doing various games and activities with your child you can help his/her hand strength, finger dexterity and coordination. Games include construction (Lego, K'Nex, Duplo etc), play-doh, blocks, craft, gardening, baking, cutting, colouring, or peg games.

### **Final tips and advice**

Remember that this is a life-long skill and therefore you should allow a lot of time for its development. It may take some time.

These are broad suggestions - it is key to think about your child and how these suggestions may apply to you and your family considering what you want them to be able to do.

### **Activities to improve mouth control**

The following activities are used to develop a better sense of the face and mouth area. Difficulties with being either over or under sensitive to sensations in the mouth can lead to difficulties with lip closure, chewing, dribbling, and speech, teeth brushing and eating. Some of the activities are games to play and it is useful to try and do one of these every day; others are different ways to do the everyday activities to improve the experience.

1. Consider food provided for snack/break times – those which can help increase attention and organisation include dried fruit, gummy sweets, liquorice, fruit chewy bars, mints, crunchy crisps.
2. Have crunch food available, ie. dry cereal, crackers, granola bars, raw vegetables such as carrots and celery.
3. Chewing on a straw or rubber tubing placed on the end of a pencil.
4. Drinking water from a bottle kept on the desk.
5. Sipping water or other drink through a crazy straw or thin straw – add tubing to increase resistance, put straws together to make longer.
6. Drink thick liquids through a straw i.e. ice cream, milkshake, smoothies, jelly etc. Change the type of straw. Thick, thin, long and short.
7. When brushing teeth concentrate on the tongue, gums and inside the cheeks and roof of the mouth at least once per week.
8. Try different types of toothbrush; manual, powered, sonic, chew brush.
9. Guerning – make faces at yourself in the mirror or to a friend. Who can make the funniest? Concentrate of stretching and squishing the lips and cheeks.

10. Spread yogurt, fruit puree, jam or ice cream around the mouth just outside of the lips. Lick around in one sweep to try to remove all the food. Check in the mirror. Concentrate on moving your tongue to the places missed before you try a single sweep again. Try in both directions.
11. Whistling – using a whistle or without. Can you be loud, soft? Can you blow a tune?
12. Musical instruments which use the mouth – Kazoo, Recorder, Whistle, etc...
13. Blow football
14. Use a straw to blow cotton balls, pom-poms, koosh balls etc.
15. Tissue blowing, feather blowing – get it through an obstacle course, or who can cover a course fastest.
16. Pencil flag (tie a string to the end of the pencil, blow for as long as you can)
17. Leaf between fingers, blow leaf to make a whistle.
18. Suck on straw to hold up tissue paper – see who can do this for the longest.
19. Cut out pictures from a magazine. Using a straw pick them up to add them to a collage.

**I can wash myself!**

Opportunities for washing occur mainly after using the toilet or clearing up after messy activities.

**Check**

Can he/she

- reach sink, taps, soap, towels?
  - *provide step* (can be a hazard in communal toilet area, providing lower sink, towels etc. may be an option)
- turn taps on/off?
  - Are they too stiff, need replacing, not turn off too tightly.
- reach and use soap?
  - Different types of soap – bar, push dispenser, hands free dispenser.

Does he/she remember to wash hands after using toilet and before meals?

- *give prompts (a picture sequence on the wall beside the basin may help)*
- Practice sequence: turn tap on, rinse hands, apply soap, rinse, turn tap off, dry hands
- Reinforce verbal prompts with 'hand over hand' support as necessary
- Reinforce with action songs: 'This is the way we wash our hands...'

### **I can dress and undress on my own!**

Children coming into school may still need an adult to help with dressing/undressing:-

- Provide extra time specifically for dressing/undressing and treat as a skill some children need to learn (by practising, watching others, learning specific methods) - encourage parents to reinforce (especially in the evening or at week-ends/school holidays when there's more time)
- Prompt child to do as much as possible e.g. fetch coat from peg, put one arm into sleeve, then provide 'hand over hand' support as required e.g. standing behind, help child slot zip into place and pull up
- If slow dressing/undressing for PE:-
  - Is child easily distracted? Take to a quieter area of the room. Face the corner/wall rather than into class
  - If making the first move to get dressed / undressed is difficult, give clear verbal (and/or visual) prompt to start and try a timer
  - If child has difficulty putting on clothes in the correct order help child to lay them out in the sequence required and/or make a picture card sequence for child to follow (see 'do 2 learn', *Resource List*)
  - If child seems to have difficulties with balance and coordination, improve stability by sitting on floor or chair to dress, e.g. leaning against back support to put on socks
- Check clothing particularly trousers, dresses and pinafores are loose enough for them to pull on easily. Also see suppliers of easy fasten clothing on resource list.

If a child continues to have difficulty, consider more intensive adult support and different approaches such as 'backward chaining', examples:-

#### **Putting on socks**

This example specifies the adult help required (helps to sit on floor behind or next to child - encourage child to use both hands)

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Step 1 | Adult puts child's socks on up to just below the ankle, child pulls socks up.  |
| Step 2 | Adult puts child's socks on, the top of the sock just over the heel of the foot, child pulls socks up from the heel of the foot. |

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Step 3            Adult places child's socks just below the heel, child pulls socks up.

Step 4            Adult places child's sock on toes, child pulls socks up.

Step 5            Child puts toes into socks and puts on independently.

In the following examples, adult provides 'hand over hand' help as required:-

### **Putting on trousers (elasticated waist)**

Step 1            Child stands and pulls trousers up from thighs to waist with both hands

Step 2            Child pulls trousers up to thighs, clearing ankles (important to check this)

Step 3            Child bends other knee and pushes foot into trouser leg

Step 4            Child bends one knee, leans forward and pushes foot into trouser leg

Step 5            Child sits on floor, legs straight in front (with back support if necessary) and holds trouser waist with both hands

Step 6            Child puts trousers on independently

### **Putting on a T-shirt**

Step 1            Child pushes other arm through sleeve (one arm and head are already through T-shirt)

Step 2            Child pushes one arm through sleeve

Step 3            Child pulls T-shirt down over head

Step 4            Child finds space for head and positions T-Shirt over head with both hands

Step 4            Child puts on T-shirt independently.

## Fastenings

Buttons, hooks and zips can be the main difficulty when dressing. The following strategies may help:-

### Buttons

-  Play games that involve pincer grip (thumb and index finger tips) e.g. “Pick up Sticks”, Lego, squeeze toys, water pistols, pegs, sand play, making shapes with pipe cleaners, also use games that increase sensory awareness of thumb and index fingers e.g. finger puppets, finger painting, using playdough.
-  Try first with a shirt on child’s lap so he/she can easily see what to do, then practise with the shirt on. When he/she can do buttons with the shirt on, practice with eyes shut. Do the same with trouser buttons, hooks/ clasps, i.e. first practise first with them off, then with them on.
-  Use bigger buttons in a different colour to the fabric. Plain coloured fabric is easier than checks or stripes which can be tiring for the eyes and make buttonholes difficult to see. Patterns can be re-introduced when the child is able to do up buttons. Thin edged buttons will slide through easier than square edged.
-  To avoid confusion, take off any spare buttons on the inside of shirts.
-  Encourage the child to start buttoning from the bottom of the shirt so he can see what he is doing. To do top buttons, help him check in a mirror (at the right level) in the changing area.
-  To ensure that buttons do not come off easily, put some nail polish on the thread at the back of the button to secure it for longer. Sew buttons on with elastic thread so they can be pulled and twisted a little further.
-  To ensure that the button can fit through the buttonhole easily, try snipping the edges of the hole to make it slightly bigger. To ensure buttonholes do not fray and to provide a little sensory feedback and stability, you can use clear nail polish to seal the ends (it will feel like the end of sealed rope).
-  Use shirts that are slightly bigger but resist the temptation to use Dad’s shirts (except for fun!) as they are often too big, with long sleeves and make it difficult to see.

**Typical method for doing up buttons** (practise yourself before helping child who may need to follow sequence a step at a time)

1. Line up the correct buttonhole and corresponding button.
2. Pinch the edge of the fabric with the button hole, thumb on the button hole on the outside, index finger on the inside.
3. With the other hand grasp the button with the thumb and index finger (usually index finger on the top flat surface of the button and the thumb underneath - keeping free the edge of the button going into the hole .
4. Push the button through the hole. As the button gets halfway through, the index finger and thumb of the other hand grasps the button and pulls it through.
5. The other hand will be pushing it through with the thumb while the index finger pulls the material over the button.

For the older child who has been practising but still finds this skill difficult and is unable to fasten buttons independently; compensatory strategies should be considered. These could include:

- Sew buttons on with elastic thread as this allows the button to be manipulated more easily
- Increase size of button hole
- Change button for one with thinner edges or texture to enable improved grip
- Sew up button hole. Attach button on top of button hole and then fasten with Velcro
- Opt for a polo shirt with buttons undone

## Zips

Make sure that you are practising with a zip that is easy to do up.



First make sure child can pull up zips that are already engaged, for example trouser zips.



'Hand-over-hand' support can help child to feel the movement that is needed.



Make sure that your child can see what s/he is doing

- Practise with the garment laid flat on a stable surface first – it may be easier than looking down to fasten it
- Bigger zips are usually easier to see and grip initially.
- Zips without flaps of material around them are easier as they do not get in the way.
- Practice with an old zip can be useful. You could also colour one side of an old zip with nail polish for clarity.
- Attaching a small loop of string or metal ring to the zip can help to make grasping and pulling the zip easier

For the older child who finds using zips difficult consider using compensatory strategies e.g.

- Replace zip with Velcro

### Method for coats, jackets etc.

Practise first with the garment off. Once child can do this easily, practise zipping up with the garment on – the method will be the same – just seen from the other side.

1. Lay out the garment so that it is flat and you can see which sides need to be put together.

2. Make sure that the zipper is right at the bottom.
3. The end of the zipper should be flush with the metal / plastic end (on the same side). Where there's a tab or overlapping fabric, move it away and out of the way and hold it back with the thumb of the hand on the same side. Do not let this side go.
4. With the other hand, take the flat metal / plastic side (that slips into the zipper) and hold it about 1cm away from the edge between the tip of the thumb and index finger.
5. Now slip the flat side into the groove of the zipper. It is really important that the other hand is still holding tightly onto the zipper.
6. Slide the flat side down to the very edge of the garment. (Sometimes you can hear a soft click when it slots into the bottom properly).

TIP: help child pause here – children tend to get excited when they have reached this step, rush and undo all their hard work.

7. Make sure that one hand is holding both sides of the fabric AND the slotted base of the zip VERY tightly.
8. Keep holding on and pull up zipper with thumb and fingers of the other hand.

## Tying Shoelaces

Younger children usually have shoes fastened with Velcro but older child may need laces for football boots and other shoes.

The following method simplifies the tying process.

If this still proves difficult, alternatives to standard laces are available e.g. coiler laces, greepers etc. (see *Resource List*).

**Right Handed Method** (the positions can be reversed for a left-hander)



In each hand, hold up one end of the lace so that there is roughly 10cm sticking out. The hands should be in a position so that thumbs are uppermost.



Cross the ends of the lace, but still with an end in each hand.



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Put the left end over and then under, the right end. (It may help to draw L and R on the child's thumbs). Now pull the end to make the knot tight.

Tip: by doing this twice the knot will be more secure.



Make a loop or 'bunny ear' with the right lace and ensure that there is a 'tail'. The loop should be flush with the knot made in the previous step. This loop should be held tightly at the base (so that the 'bunny doesn't escape').



Keep holding this loop with the right hand. Now, with your left hand, make a loop as in the previous step.



Cross the loops over, right loop on top of left loop, but keep holding the loops tightly. Ask your child to STOP and tell you which hole the loop / 'bunny ear' needs to come through.

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Now push the top loop / 'bunny ear' over the other loop and through the hole – catch hold of this loop whilst still holding onto the other loop.



Pull both loops slowly to tighten, making sure that the 'tails' do not slip through!  
**Congratulations !**

### **I can go to the toilet on my own**

Some children find it more difficult to learn to use the toilet on their own. Sometimes they are not feeling the right signals and therefore are not so aware of urgency.

If difficulties continue, discuss with parents whether there is a need for medical referral to exclude any other cause. Please also consider whether to have a conversation with the school nurse.

These children may need help to develop toileting skills in school (in conjunction with similar approaches at home):-

- Emphasise expectation for whole class of going to the toilet routinely (social motivation)
- Specifically prompt child to go to the toilet regularly e.g. at the beginning of break time
- Check whether child seems anxious about going to the toilet or whether any aspect is physically difficult (e.g. does small child feel secure on the toilet?)
- Provide adult supervision to reinforce sequence e.g. may need 'hand over hand' help with managing clothing, reaching toilet paper, flushing toilet, washing hands
- Provide 'big wipes' which can be easier than toilet paper
- Parents to supply change of clothes to be kept in school (and may reassure child to be aware of this)
- If incontinent, treat as not a problem but involve child as appropriate in washing/changing (helping to manage)
- Keep a record of times when wet or soiled - is there a pattern?
- If there seems to be a behavioural element, consider child going to toilet prior to a rewarding activity / alongside other children (peer reinforcement) or on his/her own (with adult support) if needs less busy environment
- Lots of praise for success can be reinforced with specific rewards or star charts.

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Children with complex needs may benefit from a very structured approach such as that devised within the TEACCH approach (see *Resource List*).