

Teaching New Skills to Children

You are your child's first and most important teacher. Every day you are helping your child learn new information, skills and ways of behaving.

There are three useful ways you can help children learn everything from basic self-care to more complicated social skills:

instructions

step-by-step

modelling

Before you start

No matter which of the three methods you use, these tips will help your child learn new skills:

Before you start, make sure that your child is ready to learn the new skill.

Consider timing. Is your child alert?

Consider the environment. Is your child focused?

Give your child the **chance to practise** the skill.

Give encouragement.

Avoid giving lots of negative feedback if your child does not get it right.

You can use a **step-by-step approach**

Some tasks or activities are complicated or involve a sequence of actions. For these, you can break down the task into smaller steps.

The idea of step-by-step teaching is to outline the steps that make up a skill one at a time. When your child has learned the first step, then you teach the next step, then the next, and so on.

Example Skill - Putting on their t-shirt.

You could break down each of these steps into parts:

Face the t-shirt the right way.

Pull the t-shirt **over the head**.

Put **one arm** through.

Put the **other arm** through.

Pull the t-shirt **down**.

Only move on to the next skill when they have mastered this one. You can use this sequence for each item of getting dressed. Putting on their underpants, then their trousers, then their t-shirt, then their socks and finally shoes.

Be specific with encouragement – *'I see you put one sock on by yourself, try the other one now'*.

You can give instructions

We give our children instructions all the time. When teaching a new skill, here are the steps that help our instructions become learning:

Give instructions only when you have your child's attention. Use your child's name and encourage your child to look at you while you speak.

Get down to your child's physical level to speak.

Remove any background distractions like the TV.

Use language that your child understands. Keep your sentences short and simple.

Use a **clear, calm voice**.

Use **one instruction at a time**, for example; *'take off your coat.'* Then *'hang up your coat'*.

Use gestures to emphasise things that you want your child to notice.

Gradually phase out your instructions and reminders as your child gets better at remembering how to do the task.

You can use modelling

Through watching you, your child learns what to do and how to do it.

Modelling is usually the most efficient way to teach children a new skill. For example, you're more likely to show rather than tell your child how to tidy up, throw a ball, set a table or wash their hands. You can also use modelling to show your child skills and behaviour that involve non-verbal communication, like body language and tone of voice.

For example, you can show how you turn to face people when you talk to them, or look them in the eyes and smile when you thank them.

You can combine steps and modelling, for example, in social skills development. For example, if you are expecting a visitor to your home. Practise what will happen when they arrive.