



Motivating Children to Learn Self-Care Skills

Teaching children to wash their hands, use the restroom, and choose healthy foods is part of learning, but for children to develop lasting skills, they need to be motivated to embrace healthy choices in their lives.

1. Make Learning Health Skills Fun – Use materials children find interesting. For example, when teaching hand washing use soaps with different smells or foams. With dental care, the flavor of the toothpaste can motivate children, so try different flavors to make brushing teeth more enjoyable. Choices for sports and exercise are virtually limitless. Consider a child’s interests and strengths when selecting activities. Does the child enjoy individual sports such as tennis or running or do they prefer group sports such as soccer and baseball? Most sports involve social interaction during practices and competitions, so children not only are learning a health skill, but they are learning social skills such as good sportsmanship.

2. Motivate through Role Models – Use pictures of role models to inspire children to be healthier. Some children look up to siblings or peers while others find athletes or community figures more inspiring. Use examples of role model’s behaviors to demonstrate activities children should incorporate in their lives. To truly motivate children, use examples that are unique to them. For example, if a child loves animals, discuss how veterinarians wash their hands to keep themselves and the animals healthy. Show pictures of well liked athletes and talk or have children write about how exercise and healthy eating are important for playing well. Point out how a sibling or peer likes to eat certain healthy foods.

3. Use Visuals - Use visual reminders for skills like hand washing, exercise, and healthy food choices to keep health top of mind. Use images as a way to discuss health or to remind children to follow through with a skill. For older children working on specific health concerns, have them select a goal and develop a chart for monitoring progress towards goals, such as exercising twenty minutes a day or eating healthy fruits and vegetables three times a day. Post the chart in an easy to access location so children are consistently reminded of their healthy behaviors and goals.

4. Point Out Benefits – Help children understand the ‘why’s’ of self-care. For example, discuss how germs spread and how hand washing and using a tissue can prevent illness. Talk about the preventative measures of brushing teeth. Let children know how healthy food choices affect their energy level and ability to attend in class. By having a better understanding of why they are asked to do certain things, children are more motivated to learn and retain healthy behaviors.



From *Taking Care of Me*

5. Reinforce Healthy Choices and Actions – Use a reinforcement system such as verbal praise, a chart showing progress, tokens, or a small prize to motivate children to learn new skills. In addition to verbal reinforcement, tangible reinforcement may be necessary for some children to grasp a new concept. Eventually the tangible reinforcement may be reduced until the verbal reinforcement or natural consequences (e.g. after you wash your hands you can go get your lunch) are all that remain.

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