



# Toddlers who can!

Tap into your tot's desire to do things for herself by involving her in daily activities that will build essential life skills. By Saleema Dawood

**E**ver heard of the phrase: "Never do for a child what they can do for themselves?" "My 17-month-old toddler stunned me when he proved this true. "After undressing him, he eagerly picked up his dirty clothes strewn on the floor, popped it all into the laundry bin, picked up the lid and then replaced it. I was totally bowled over!" says Saleema.

Zakeera Ganie, occupational therapist at Willomead Centre, Cape Town, and mother of two, says parents seldom realise how capable kids are. As a result they tend to 'baby' them by doing things for them.

This stage of development, when toddlers want to explore things by themselves, is known as the sensorimotor stage and independence can be fostered even before this stage. "In fact, the first true taste of independence a baby experiences is when

she's able to sit," says Ganie.

When it comes to the psychological benefits of raising a child in this way Ganie says: "Those who are taught to do things for themselves feel more secure and suffer less separation anxiety when exploring unfamiliar environments."

Many parents don't have a lot of spare time in the day, but Ganie assures parents that they don't have to take special time out to teach their child things. A toddler's normal daily routine provides ample opportunity to nurture independence.

"Allowing your toddler to become an active participant will develop his sense of



When teaching your child a new skill, be patient and start small.

competency, independence and self esteem," says Ganie.

Here are some skills you can teach your child to help him take care of himself and, best of all, you'll be beaming with pride.

**I can eat all by myself**  
Start off with small steps before making the giant leap of letting your child eat everything independently. **GET THEM INVOLVED:** Start off by feeding her and leave a little left over for her to feed herself. At around 16 months, you can give her free reign with her cereal. Porridge mixed with a little boiled water is easy to scrape out of a bowl and sticks to the spoon. The to-and-fro manner of feeding will develop her hand-eye coordination.

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### ✓ I can help brush my teeth

While your tot may not be able to do a great job on his own, it shouldn't stop you from encouraging this skill. **GET THEM INVOLVED:** Let him hold the brush while you apply the toothpaste. Toddlers are great imitators, so brush your teeth alongside him so he can see the correct motions. You can place your hand over his and do a quick touch up.

### ✓ I can wash my own hands

This essential skill can be introduced at around 18 months and can be done daily before eating.

**GET THEM INVOLVED:** Provide your toddler with a step-up stool at the wash basin, show her how to push up her sleeves and hand her a small bar of soap.

Allow her to open the tap and show her how to use the soap. Then show her how to wipe her hands with the towel.

### ✓ I can help prepare my own snacks

Your toddler will enjoy getting involved in the everyday preparation of his snacks, which will assist in developing his fine motor skills.

**GET THEM INVOLVED:** Slice a banana in rounds and make a small cut through the peel to make it easier. You may need to show your toddler how

to do this, but he'll eventually get it. "As my son reached 18 months, I'd peel the top of the banana and he'd do the rest. At around 20 months, he could do the same with a naartjie," says Saleema.

At 18 months, give your toddler a slice of bread, butter in a flat dish, and a plastic knife so that he learns to spread.

### ✓ I can help pick up my toys

"It usually comes as a great surprise that a toddler's sense of order starts from as early as two," says Tim Seldin, author of *How to Raise an Amazing Child the Montessori Way*.

Teaching your toddler to tidy up and pack his toys away will not only assist

### in developing his character, but will instill lasting habits.

**GET THEM INVOLVED:** Make tidying up part of your daily routine so your toddler will come to expect it. Encourage him to help you, doing the same with bath toys. Singing a little song will make the process fun.

### ✓ I can help dress and undress myself

As your toddler grows and matures, you'll realise that she'll be more inclined to dress herself.

**GET THEM INVOLVED:** Let her put her own arms through the sleeves, pull a sweater over her head, pull down her pants or zip herself up. These are small steps that encourage independence, but don't be tempted to hurry the process by doing it yourself. Let her pick up her dirty clothes and put them in the laundry bin.



### ✓ I can help groom myself

The seeds for grooming and personal hygiene can already be sewn at a young age and will build your child's self-esteem.

**GET THEM INVOLVED:** Provide your toddler with her own grooming area consisting of a mirror (even if it's plastic) and a brush placed on a stool or pedestal so she can reach it. Let her brush her hair after she has seen you do the same thing. Add a few tissues for blowing her nose and a small pot of sunscreen that she can apply under your supervision.

### Joining the family team

Research has shown that children have a natural tendency to be helpful. Use these opportunities to encourage your child to pitch in and become part of the family team.

- Help with laundry. If you have a front loader, he'll love putting in and taking out the clothes.
- Feed the pets and water the plants. Get him a little pitcher for outdoor plants.
- Polish furniture. Give him a cloth and some furniture wax and let him help you.
- Fetching or putting things back for you. This could be putting things away in other rooms of the house or passing you things from the cupboard while you're cooking.
- Help you to tidy up and place discarded items in the bin.
- Teach him to clean up his spills and messes. This will teach him to take responsibility for his own actions. I&I