



How to Support your Toddler to Adopt Healthy Habits

The habits toddlers learn often stick with them for a long time, just like learning to use cutlery or safely climbing the stairs. Developing good and safe habits as a little one is an important part of development and social growth. Adults can support toddlers in learning healthy habits, starting at home but also in nursery, school and through peers.

One of the best ways a little one can learn about adopting healthy habits is through observing the adults around them. If they watch you washing your hands before eating or brushing your teeth in the morning, they are more likely to copy those behaviours. A good way to encourage this is to talk about what you're doing and why, young children often want to be like grown-ups and will imitate you to seem mature. Do things together at the same time and copy each other.

Make good hygiene a habit

To make sure they get into the habit of brushing their teeth, you can ensure they are happy and comfortable doing it. This could mean getting a flavour of toddler toothpaste they like, letting them choose the colour of toothbrush and keeping them near the basin on an easy-to-reach stool. If something is uncomfortable, they won't be motivated to continue doing it. Also, toddlers love to be in control, so make sure they are choosing as much as they can within reason!



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Reward charts are another great way of encouraging good behaviour. For hygiene and healthy habits, a sticker chart is an easy way to encourage things like washing hands or brushing teeth. You can have one by the sink for handwashing and one near the toothbrushes. Allowing your child to choose their own stickers or pen to make a mark each time will encourage them to see hygiene as a fun activity.

For toothbrushing you can find songs to sing together to make the timing right and you can even get a teeth brushing timer: it can be fun to count down or up together while you brush.

Try to talk about hygiene habits throughout the day and involve these conversations in your child's downtime. Rather than making toothbrushing, bathing and handwashing being a daily chore, seek out games, programmes and books that encourage little ones to see these tasks as something interesting. These extra activities will help to cement what they see adults around them doing and foster their own habits. Sometimes toddlers are resistant because that is normal at this age: just keep persisting so they learn these things are an important part of daily life that all the adults and their friends do as well.

About the contributor

Dr Ellie is a leading NHS GP, familiar to many as the doctor for the Mail on Sunday. She has appeared regularly on This Morning, BBC Breakfast, Sky News, and ITV News. In 2022, she was recognised by the medical journalists' association for her writing on mental health. Ellie's most recent book, *Is Your Job Making You Ill?* focuses on health issues at work.



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