

# Behavior Shaping: Teaching Your Child Complex Skills One Step at a Time

Behavior shaping is a way to teach your child a new or complex skill by breaking it into small, manageable steps.

Think of it like climbing a staircase — your child masters one step before moving to the next.

## How Does It Work?

You start by rewarding any behavior that is close to what you want, and then gradually raise your expectations as your child improves.



## Example - Teaching your child to get dressed independently:

**Step 1:** Your child pulls up pants that are already mostly on → Praise!

**Step 2:** Your child pulls pants up from the knees → Praise!

**Step 3:** Your child steps into pants and pulls them all the way up → Praise!

**Step 4:** Your child picks out pants, steps in, and pulls them up → Praise!



## Key Steps to Shaping a New Behavior



1. **Pick a goal behavior.** Decide exactly what skill you want your child to learn. Be specific. Instead of "be more independent," choose "put on shoes by yourself."
2. **Figure out what your child can do now.** Watch your child and notice what part of the skill they can already do.
3. **Break the skill into small steps.** List the steps from what your child can do now to the final goal.
4. **Reward the first step.** When your child does the first small step, immediately give praise or a small reward. Be specific with your praise — say "Great job pulling up your zipper!" instead of just "Good job."
5. **Gradually raise expectations.** Once your child is doing a step easily and consistently without prompts, stop rewarding that step and start rewarding the next step.
6. **Be patient.** Some steps may take days or weeks to master. That is normal. If your child gets stuck, go back to the previous step and practice more before moving on.



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# Behavior Shaping: Handwashing



## When to Practice

Before meals, after using the bathroom, after playing outside, after sneezing or coughing.

## Goal

Child independently washes and dries hands using all steps without prompting.



## Step-by-Step Shaping Sequence

### Step 1: Walk to the sink

Verbal prompt: "Let's wash our hands." / Gestural prompt: point to sink.

### Step 2: Turn on the water

Model turning the faucet on. Provide hand-over-hand if needed.

### Step 3: Wet both hands under the water

Gesture toward water. Praise: "Great, your hands are wet!"

### Step 4: Pick up or pump the soap

Point to soap dispenser. Use hand-over-hand for pumping if needed.

### Step 5: Rub hands together to lather — palms, backs, between fingers

Model lathering. Count aloud: "1, 2, 3..." for 20 seconds.

### Step 6: Rinse both hands completely under the water

Gesture to rinse. "Make sure all the soap is gone!"

### Step 7: Turn off the water

Point to faucet. Fade to gesture, then independence.

### Step 8: Dry hands with a towel

Point to towel. Praise drying each hand.

### Step 9: Hang or dispose of towel properly

Point to towel rack or trash. Reinforce: "You did it — clean hands!"



#### PRO TIP:

- ▶ Place a visual schedule with pictures at the sink for reference.
- ▶ Use preferred soap scent or foam soap to increase motivation.



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# Behavior Shaping: Brushing Teeth



## When to Practice

Morning (after breakfast) and evening (before bed). Minimum twice daily.

## Goal

Child independently brushes all tooth surfaces for the recommended duration without prompting.

## Step-by-Step Shaping Sequence

### Step 1: Get toothbrush from holder

Point to toothbrush. "Get your toothbrush."

### Step 2: Turn on the water and wet the toothbrush

Model wetting brush. Gesture to faucet.

### Step 3: Apply toothpaste (pea-sized amount)

Point to toothpaste. Use hand-over-hand for squeezing if needed.

### Step 4: Turn off the water

Point to faucet. Fade prompt over time.

### Step 5: Brush outer surfaces of top teeth (30 seconds)

Use visual timer. Model circular or back-and-forth motion.

### Step 6: Brush outer surfaces of bottom teeth (30 seconds)

Continue timer. Provide gestural cue pointing to lower teeth.

### Step 7: Brush inner surfaces of top and bottom teeth (30 seconds)

Model tilting brush to inner surface.

### Step 8: Brush chewing surfaces of all teeth (30 seconds)

Point to biting surfaces. "Now the tops!"

### Step 9: Spit toothpaste into the sink

Model spitting. "Spit it out — don't swallow!"

### Step 10: Rinse mouth with water and spit

Model cupping water. Reinforce rinsing.

### Step 11: Rinse toothbrush and put it away

Point to holder. "Put it back where it goes."

#### PRO TIP:

- For sensory-sensitive children, try different toothbrush textures (soft, silicone) and non-mint flavors.
- Use a 2-minute timer app, electric toothbrush with timer, or sing a tooth brushing song.



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# Behavior Shaping: Taking a Shower (with hair washing)

## When to Practice

Daily or as determined by family routine (e.g., every evening before bed).

## Goal

Child independently completes all shower steps and dresses afterward without prompting.



## Step-by-Step Shaping Sequence

### Step 1: Gather needed items (towel, clean clothes, shampoo)

Use checklist or picture schedule. Point to each item.

### Step 2: Undress and place clothes in hamper

Point to hamper. Provide gestural cue for each garment.

### Step 3: Turn on shower and adjust water temperature

Supervise temperature. Teach to test with hand before stepping in.

### Step 4: Step into the shower

Gesture to shower. Provide physical support for balance if needed.

### Step 5: Wet entire body under the water

Prompt to rotate and wet all areas. "Turn around!"

### Step 6: Apply shampoo and scrub hair

Hand-over-hand for applying. Model scrubbing motion on scalp.

### Step 7: Rinse hair thoroughly

"Rinse until no more bubbles." Use timer if needed.

### Step 8: Apply body wash/soap and wash entire body

Use a body map visual. Prompt each body area in sequence.

### Step 9: Rinse entire body completely

"All the soap has to come off." Prompt to check all areas.

### Step 10: Turn off water

Point to handle. Reinforce turning off promptly.

### Step 11: Step out and dry off with towel

Prompt to dry each body part. Use visual if needed.

### Step 13: Get dressed in clean clothes

Refer to getting dressed handout. Praise independence.

### PRO TIP:

- ▶ Break into phases across multiple sessions if the full routine is overwhelming at first.
- ▶ Post a laminated visual schedule inside or near the shower with pictures of each step.



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# Behavior Shaping: Taking a Shower (no hair washing)

## When to Practice

Daily or as determined by family routine (e.g., every evening before bed).

## Goal

Child independently completes all shower steps and dresses afterward without prompting.



## Step-by-Step Shaping Sequence

### Step 1: Gather needed items (towel, clean clothes, shampoo)

Use checklist or picture schedule. Point to each item.

### Step 2: Undress and place clothes in hamper

Point to hamper. Provide gestural cue for each garment.

### Step 3: Turn on shower and adjust water temperature

Supervise temperature. Teach to test with hand before stepping in.

### Step 4: Step into the shower

Gesture to shower. Provide physical support for balance if needed.

### Step 5: Wet entire body under the water

Prompt to rotate and wet all areas. "Turn around!"

### Step 6: Apply body wash/soap and wash entire body

Use a body map visual. Prompt each body area in sequence.

### Step 7: Rinse entire body completely

"All the soap has to come off." Prompt to check all areas.

### Step 8: Turn off water

Point to handle. Reinforce turning off promptly.

### Step 9: Step out and dry off with towel

Prompt to dry each body part. Use visual if needed.

### Step 10: Get dressed in clean clothes

Refer to getting dressed handout. Praise independence.

#### PRO TIP:

- ▶ Break into phases across multiple sessions if the full routine is overwhelming at first.
- ▶ Post a laminated visual schedule inside or near the shower with pictures of each step.



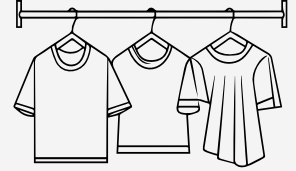
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# Behavior Shaping: Getting Dressed



## When to Practice

Each morning after waking and after bathing. Practice undressing at bedtime as well.

## Goal

Child selects and independently puts on all clothing items in correct order without prompting.

## Step-by-Step Shaping Sequence

### Step 1: Choose clothes for the day (or identify pre-selected clothes)

Offer 2 choices. Lay out clothes the night before to reduce demand.

### Step 2: Put on underwear

Hand-over-hand for inserting legs. Fade to gestural then verbal.

### Step 3: Put on undershirt or undershirt (if applicable)

Teach head-through-first, then arms. Use backward chaining if needed.

### Step 4: Put on pants or shorts — one leg at a time

Model sitting on bed. Prompt each leg insertion separately.

### Step 5: Pull pants up to waist and straighten

Cue to check front/back. Reinforce correct orientation.

### Step 6: Put on shirt — head first, then each arm

Use backward chaining: start with shirt almost on, child pulls it down.

### Step 7: Fasten buttons, snaps, or zipper (if applicable)

Teach fasteners separately. Use zipper pull aids if helpful.

### Step 8: Put on socks — right side out, heel at the back

Mark heel with a dot sticker during teaching. Fade gradually.

### Step 9: Put on shoes — correct feet

Shoe-split sticker: place sticker inside both shoes that forms a heart when correct.

### Step 10: Fasten shoes (velcro, tie, or buckle)

Teach tying separately. Elastic laces are a helpful accommodation.

### Step 11: Check appearance in mirror

"Does everything look right?" Prompt self-checking behavior.

- ▶ Lay clothes out in order top-to-bottom to reduce decision fatigue.
- ▶ A picture chart numbered 1-10 on the wall or closet door supports independence.



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