Teaching personal care: step-by-step teaching sheets

A free set of teaching sheets from Special Learning for direct support staff, to use WITH an adult: ask what the person wants to learn, ask before you touch, keep the door closed, honor the person's preference for who helps, and let the person lead. Teach when the person wants to learn; help when the person wants help. Edit every sheet for the person. These sheets are practice guidance; they do not replace the person's plan, the plan's author, your licensing rule or your funder's contract.

How to use the sheets

1. Ask the person what they want to learn and when, and who they want to help. Write the goal in their words.
2. Pick the sheet. Edit the steps for this person: products, room, order, speed.
3. Choose how to chain it (forward, backward or total-task) and the prompt levels you will use, lightest first.
4. Set the room up the way the person wants it: supplies in reach, door closed, a picture list if it helps.
5. Run the session. Wait before prompting. Give the lightest prompt that works. Ask before any touch.
6. Fill in the data sheet right after, with one code per step.
7. Once a week, do the review box with the person. Fade a prompt on any step done the same way a few sessions in a row.
8. If the person is distressed, refuses again and again, the data stay flat or there is a health concern, take it to your supervisor and the clinician.

Privacy and consent, every time

Ask first, every time. Ask whether the person wants to do the routine now, and who they want to help. Tell them what you will do before you do it. A "no" or "not now" stands. Come back later.

Ask before you touch. No hand-over-hand or physical prompt without the person's yes, each time. If the person does not use words, agree on how they tell you yes and no, and honor it. Use a model, a picture or your own hands first.

Door closed, person in charge. Personal care happens in private. Close the door and put a sign on it. Stay outside, within earshot if the plan calls for it, unless the person asks you in. Knock before you enter. In provider-owned or controlled residential settings the HCBS rule also says "each individual has privacy in their sleeping or living unit."

Same-gender support, where possible. Ask whom the person prefers for showering, menstrual care, shaving or dressing, and arrange it where you can. If you cannot, say so honestly and take it to your supervisor.

The person leads. The person decides the pace, the products, the order and when to stop. A teaching sheet is a guide, not a script. Use adult language and adult supplies.

Keep it private after, too. Do not talk about a person's body or routines in front of others or in the log beyond what the plan needs. The NADSP Code says "protect each person's privacy."

Prompt levels and chaining

Use the lightest prompt that works. Wait before you prompt. Physical prompts need the person's yes each time. The codes below go on the data sheet.

Code	Level	What you do	Note
I	**Independent**	The person does the step with no help.	Wait. Give the person time to start.
G	**Gesture**	You point, nod or show with a hand.	Lightest help. No words, no touch.
V	**Verbal**	You say what to do, in few words.	Name the step or ask "What's next?"
M	**Model**	You show how, on your own hand, a model or a picture or video.	The person copies. Do not do it to them.
P	**Physical**	You guide the person's hand or body.	Only with the person's yes each time and, for personal care, only if the team has agreed. Fade fast.

Where this comes from: Libby et al. (2008), Behavior Analysis in Practice; Gil et al. (2019), Behavior Analysis in Practice. Most-to-least prompting can prevent errors but sometimes slows learning (a study with children); least-to-most was used with young adults to teach a community skill. Our default for personal care is lightest first with a pause.

Choose a chain with the person

Way to chain	What you do	A good fit when	Watch for
Forward chaining	Teach step 1. You do the rest.	When the first steps are the hard ones; when the person likes to get going.	The person may not reach the end of the routine themselves for a while.
Backward chaining	You do every step but the last. The person does the last step, then the next-to-last, and so on.	When the end of the routine has a clear payoff, like fresh breath or clean hands.	The person sees the routine start with you doing it.
Total-task	The person tries every step each time. You prompt only where needed.	When the person already does many steps; short routines.	Long routines can feel like a lot of corrections.

Where this comes from: Slocum and Tiger (2011), Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. In a study with children, no one chaining method was consistently more efficient. Pick, read the data, switch if needed.

Teaching sheet 1: Handwashing

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: Ask whether the person wants a reminder or to try it on their own. Offer the soap and towel they like. If the person finds water temperature or soap texture hard, change it with them.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Notice a reason to wash (after the toilet, before eating, hands feel or look dirty)	
2	Go to the sink	
3	Turn on the water to a comfortable warmth	
4	Wet both hands	
5	Pick up the soap and get some on one hand	
6	Rub palms together to make suds	
7	Rub the backs of both hands	
8	Rub between the fingers and around the thumbs	
9	Rub the fingertips against the palms	
10	Rinse all the soap off	
11	Turn off the water	
12	Dry both hands with the towel	
13	Put the towel where it goes	

Teaching note (ours): Good for total-task teaching if the person already does most steps. If the first step is the hard one (noticing the reason), a visual cue or a routine trigger (every time before a meal) can carry it. Handwashing is the one routine most likely to be done in front of others; still ask first.

Teaching sheet 2: Toothbrushing

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: Nothing goes in or near the person's mouth or face without a yes. Demonstrate on your own toothbrush or a model, not the person's mouth. If the person uses dentures, an electric brush or a mouth rinse, edit the steps with them and their dental professional.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Get the toothbrush and toothpaste	
2	Wet the toothbrush	
3	Put a small amount of toothpaste on the brush	
4	Brush the outsides of the top teeth	
5	Brush the outsides of the bottom teeth	
6	Brush the insides of the top teeth	
7	Brush the insides of the bottom teeth	
8	Brush the chewing surfaces	
9	Brush the tongue (if the person wants to)	
10	Spit into the sink	
11	Rinse the mouth with water and spit	
12	Rinse the toothbrush	
13	Put the toothbrush and toothpaste away	
14	Wipe the mouth and the sink	

Teaching note (ours): Backward chaining can work here: you set up, the person finishes with the rinse and a fresh mouth. A mirror helps. If a flavor, bristles or the sensation is the problem, change the brush or toothpaste and bring it to the clinician or dental professional if it persists.

Teaching sheet 3: Showering

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: Close the door; the person decides whether anyone is in the room. Same-gender support, where possible, is the person's choice. Nothing is washed for the person unless they ask. Falls, water temperature and the need for standby help are decided with the person and the team in the plan, not by this sheet.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Choose a time and get a towel and clean clothes	
2	Go to the bathroom and close the door	
3	Take off clothes and put them in the hamper	
4	Turn on the water and check the temperature with a hand	
5	Step into the shower (using the grab bar if there is one)	
6	Wet the body and hair	
7	Shampoo the hair	
8	Rinse the hair	
9	Wash arms, chest and underarms	
10	Wash private areas	
11	Wash legs and feet	
12	Rinse off all the soap	
13	Turn off the water	
14	Step out carefully onto the mat	
15	Dry off with the towel	
16	Hang up the towel	

Teaching note (ours): Long routines teach well by chaining. Teach a few steps and let the person do the rest their way. Offer products the person chooses. Teach in short sessions; a shower does not need to be a lesson every time. If the person does not want to be seen, teach from outside the door with a picture list or a recording they choose.

Teaching sheet 4: Using deodorant

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: Teach with a model or picture first. The person puts it on themselves; you never apply it. Ask which kind they like (stick, spray, roll-on) and edit the steps to match.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	After washing, dry the underarms	
2	Pick up the deodorant	
3	Take off the cap	
4	Twist up a little (if it is a stick)	
5	Swipe it under one arm	
6	Swipe it under the other arm	
7	Twist down and put the cap back on	
8	Put the deodorant away	
9	Let it dry before getting dressed	

Teaching note (ours): Short, so it chains easily. Put the deodorant where the person will see it after washing. If a smell or skin problem keeps showing up, tell the supervisor and ask about a health check.

Teaching sheet 5: Shaving the face

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: First ask whether the person wants to shave. Facial hair is the person's choice. Use the kind of razor the person and their team have agreed on: edit the steps for an electric razor or a safety razor, and follow any safety rule in the plan. Teach in front of a mirror; the person holds the razor. Same-gender support, where possible.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Get the razor, shaving cream, towel and a mirror	
2	Wash the face with warm water	
3	Put shaving cream on the cheeks, chin and upper lip (skip for an electric razor)	
4	Pick up the razor	
5	Hold the skin flat with the other hand	
6	Shave one cheek in short strokes	
7	Shave the other cheek	
8	Shave the upper lip and chin	
9	Shave under the chin and neck, gently	
10	Rinse the razor between strokes	
11	Rinse the face and pat it dry	
12	Check the mirror for spots that were missed	
13	Rinse the razor and put it away	
14	Wipe the sink	

Teaching note (ours): Shave one side first and add steps as the person gains skill. A mirror and good light matter. If there are nicks or irritation, treat it as information about the razor or the technique and ask a nurse or the clinician about products. A study of video prompting taught leg shaving to women with disabilities; face shaving here is our own adaptation.

Teaching sheet 6: Menstrual care

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: This is the most private sheet. The person leads and chooses the products. Same-gender support, where possible, and the person's preference on who helps. Close and lock the door. Never touch the person; use pictures, a model or your own words. Do not discuss it in front of others. If the person uses tampons, a cup or medicine for symptoms, a nurse or other health professional should teach that part with the person.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Notice it is time to change (or that a period has started)	
2	Get a new pad (or period underwear) and a disposal bag	
3	Go to the bathroom and lock the door	
4	Wash hands	
5	Take down underwear and remove the used pad	
6	Fold the used pad in its wrapper or the bag	
7	Put it in the covered bin	
8	Wipe from front to back	
9	Unwrap the new pad	
10	Peel the backing and stick the pad to the middle of the underwear	
11	Pull up the underwear	
12	Wash hands	
13	Mark the calendar (if the person wants a record)	
14	Put the supplies away	

Teaching note (ours): Teach with a picture or doll model of the steps outside the bathroom; the person practices the real steps alone. Have supplies in the person's own room or bag. Edit for the products the person chooses. A review of the research found few studies of teaching these skills and notes the private nature of the skill; go slowly and keep it respectful. Symptoms such as pain or heavy bleeding go to a health professional.

Teaching sheet 7: Brushing or combing hair

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: Hair is personal and often cultural. The person's hair type and style lead: use the tools and products they choose, such as a wide-tooth comb, a pick, a brush or a wrap. Do not touch the person's hair or head without a yes.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Get the brush or comb the person prefers	
2	Stand or sit at the mirror	
3	Take any hair ties or clips out	
4	Brush or comb the ends gently	
5	Work up toward the roots	
6	Brush or comb the sides and the back	
7	Part or style the hair as the person likes	
8	Put in hair ties, clips or a hat if wanted	
9	Check the mirror	
10	Clean the brush and put it away	

Teaching note (ours): Teach the person to start at the ends and work up if the hair tangles; this works for many hair types, but the person and the people who know their hair know best. Offer a hand mirror for the back.

Teaching sheet 8: Dressing for the weather

Person's goal, in their words: _____ Chain: ☐ forward ☐ backward ☐ total-task Start prompt: ☐ G ☐ V ☐ M

Privacy and consent: Adults wear adult clothes of their own choosing. Offer options; do not lay out an outfit unless asked. Ask before touching clothes or the person's body. If the person needs help with buttons or zippers, ask what kind of help they prefer.

#	Step (what the person does)	My change or note
1	Check the weather (look outside, a forecast or a weather picture)	
2	Decide: cold, warm, rain, snow or sun	
3	Choose clothes that fit the weather and what the person is doing today	
4	Put on underwear and socks	
5	Put on pants or a skirt	
6	Put on a shirt	
7	Add a sweater or a jacket if needed	
8	Fasten buttons, zips and shoes	
9	Add a hat, gloves, scarf or umbrella if needed	
10	Look in the mirror: comfortable?	

Teaching note (ours): Step 2 to 3 is the skill that matters: matching clothes to weather. Teach it with a weather picture board or a choice of two outfits. Let the person keep their style.

Data sheet: prompt level for each step

Fill it in right after each session. Write one code for each step: I independent, G gesture, V verbal, M model, P physical (only with the person's yes). Percent independent = number of I marks ÷ number of steps × 100.

Person	
Routine (sheet)	
Chain used	
Staff who taught, by date	

Step (copy from the sheet)	Date	Date	Date	Date	Date
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					
11.					
12.					
13.					
14.					
15.					
Number of I marks					
% independent (I ÷ steps × 100)					
Staff initials					

Codes: I independent · G gesture · V verbal · M model · P physical (only with the person's yes, only if the team has agreed).

An example: Ellis, handwashing (invented)

Ellis (invented), handwashing, total-task, least-to-most. Invented numbers to show the layout. Ellis went from 5 of 12 steps done independently on Monday (42 percent) to 9 of 12 on Friday (75 percent). Steps 7 to 9 are still prompted, so the team keeps teaching there. Percent independent is the number of I marks divided by the number of steps, times 100.

Step	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
1 Notice a reason to wash	V	V	G	G	I
2 Go to the sink	I	I	I	I	I
3 Turn on the water	I	I	I	I	I
4 Wet both hands	I	I	I	I	I
5 Get soap	G	I	I	I	I
6 Rub palms	V	G	G	I	I
7 Rub the backs of hands	M	V	V	G	G
8 Between fingers and thumbs	M	M	V	V	V
9 Fingertips	M	M	M	V	V
10 Rinse off soap	I	I	I	I	I
11 Turn off the water	I	I	I	I	I
12 Dry hands	G	G	I	I	I
% independent	**42%**	**50%**	**58%**	**67%**	**75%**

Weekly review box

Do this once a week, with the person.

Dates and routine	
Percent independent this week (first day, last day)	
Steps now independent	
Steps still prompted, and the prompt level	
What the person said or showed about how it is going	
What is working	
What to change next week (chain, prompt level, time of day, products)	
Ask the supervisor or clinician? (distress, refusal, flat data, a health concern)	
Reviewed with the person on	

An example weekly review (invented)

Dates and routine	Mon to Fri, handwashing before lunch
Percent independent this week (first day, last day)	42 percent, then 75 percent
Steps now independent	1 to 6 and 10 to 12 (9 of 12)
Steps still prompted, and the prompt level	7 gesture, 8 and 9 verbal
What the person said or showed about how it is going	“I like the lemon soap.” Sped up on Thursday.
What is working	Waiting for him to start; soap he picked; the picture card by the sink
What to change next week (chain, prompt level, time of day, products)	Fade verbal to gesture on 8 and 9; try before dinner too
Ask the supervisor or clinician? (distress, refusal, flat data, a health concern)	No
Reviewed with the person on	Friday, at the sink

Checklist, sources and one next step

Before you finish

☐ I asked the person what they want to learn and wrote it in their words.
☐ I edited the sheet for this person's products, room and way of doing it.
☐ I asked before every touch and honored every "no" or "not now."
☐ The door was closed and the person chose who helps.
☐ I used the lightest prompt that worked and waited before prompting.
☐ I filled in the data sheet right after the session.
☐ I faded one prompt level on a step the person has done the same way a few sessions in a row.
☐ I did the weekly review with the person.
☐ I took distress, refusal, flat data or a health concern to my supervisor and the clinician.

Where each part comes from

Sources read November 16, 2026 (the eCFR text is current as of November 12; the research papers were read as published abstracts only). The eight task analyses, the data sheet, the weekly review box and the habits are Special Learning's own practice guidance. 42 CFR 441.301 covers HCBS waivers; your state and agency may differ. None of these organizations has reviewed or endorsed these sheets.

42 CFR 441.301(c)(4). https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-42/chapter-IV/subchapter-C/part-441/subpart-G/section-441.301
NADSP Code of Ethics. https://nadsp.org/resources/the-nadsp-code-of-ethics/
Slocum and Tiger (2011), Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22219530/
Libby et al. (2008), Behavior Analysis in Practice. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22477678/
Gil et al. (2019), Behavior Analysis in Practice. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31976275/
Veazey et al. (2016), Behavior Analysis in Practice. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27606248/
Kristiansen et al. (2025), Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38782882/
Foglia et al. (2023), Behavior Analysis in Practice. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37006432/
McHugh et al. (2025), Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40614120/

One next step

If your staff support autistic people, the Level 1 ABA Online Training Course for groups introduces autism and behavior-support foundations, including errorless teaching and prompting. $99 per learner · One-time purchase · Each learner has 12 weeks of access from the day they activate their code · Free 7-day trial of the first 2 sessions.

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