Hygiene and independence

by Adult Down Syndrome Clinic on Saturday, November 13, 2010

Being proficient with hygiene has many positive implications for people with Down syndrome. It is a matter of health, it is a necessary part of appropriate social interaction, and it is an important part of presentation of oneself at one's place of employment. It is part of being independent and mastering these skills can open the door for greater independence.

Unfortunately, hygiene can be a significant challenge for some people with Down syndrome. There are a variety of reasons for this. It may be an issue of intellectual level of function, fine motor skills, or a problem of what I call secondary disability. The most common cause of secondary disability associated with hygiene issues that seem to be a problem in our practice is related to obesity. People who otherwise have the cognitive, fine motor and other skills to do a task are unable to do it due to being overweight.

We are always looking for ways to help individuals with DS develop more independence in their level of function. This may include things like working on weight loss, using reminders (schedules, calendars, pictures, and even I-phones or other smart phones can be used to remind or prompt the individual), directing people to beneficial classes, etc. Another approach we have explored is the use of assistive devices or technology. Some of these are more sophisticated like the use of smart phones.

When we were in Minnesota recently for a conference, we discussed this issue with some parents of teens and young adults with Down syndrome. One skill that is so important with regards to hygiene and independence but perhaps we may prefer not to have to talk about is the issue of self-care after using the toilet. This can be challenging and thus quite limiting for some individuals. One suggestion was the use of a bidet. I have been told that bidets are common in Europe but not something we see commonly in the United States. However, they can be of great assistance in hygiene and help eliminate some of the social and occupational negative implications of poor hygiene. Since a separate bidet unit is quite uncommon in the US, we discussed some alternatives. One family asked that I share the following web site that has a variety of bidet (or bidet-type) devices: http://www.sanicare.com/
At the Adult Down Syndrome Center we have learned so much from people with Down syndrome and their families and care providers. We think there is so much more we can learn and so much valuable information that people with Down syndrome, families, and care providers can share with others. The above information is a good example of families sharing with other families. As mentioned in a previous post, I want to extend an offer to assist with gathering and disseminating this type of recommendation and in addition, add additional health related information and other things we have learned on the topic. Please send thoughts, tips, recommendations, questions, etc to adultdownsyndromeclinic@gmail.com