

Occupational Therapy Service for Children and Young People

Dressing Skills

Below are some methods you may find useful when teaching your child dressing skills.

Environmental Considerations

- Make sure you have allocated enough time to the activity, so that you are not rushed. Try practicing these skills when you have some time e.g. not always in the morning when you are rushing to get out, play dressing up games in the evening.
- Try to develop a consistent routine when your child is starting to dress themselves to ensure they associate the activity with the skill.
- Limit the number of distractions in the room to allow your child to concentrate on the activity (e.g. reduce background noise, switch of television etc).
- Try dressing in front of a full-length mirror, particularly to help with top buttons on shirts/polo shirts.
- Ensure your child is in the right position for the task. Sitting on the floor, on a chair or on the bed can help. Your child will feel well supported and be able to use their hands freely.

General

- Give lots of praise and encouragement when your child makes a good attempt.
- It is much easier for your child to learn how to undress before learning to dress.
- Practice the skill out of normal dressing routine as well e.g. dressing up games, dressing up dolls, bears – NB. Toys from the Bear Factory have several wardrobe options that include different fastenings and can be motivating for boys and girls as they have different outfits, e.g. football kits, etc.
- Practice dressing initially with loose fitting clothes to make it easier to get arms in sleeves, etc.
- Make a treasure bag where your child must undo several different fastenings, e.g. zips, buttons, Velcro, etc. to get to the prize in the middle, e.g. a buttoned purse inside a Velcro bag inside a zipped bag inside a buckled case, etc. (Choose a motivating reward for your child).

Strategies for teaching

It may be beneficial to use one or a combination of the following strategies to teach your child:

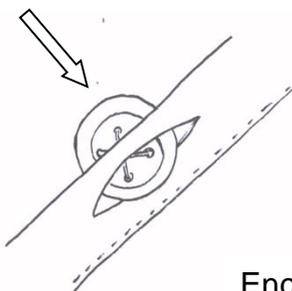
- A **'backwards-chaining approach'** involves the adult beginning the task, with the child only doing the last step. Gradually the adult completes fewer steps as the child become able to do more of the task themselves. This way the child always gets the reward of finishing the task. For example, the adult puts the t-shirt over the child's head and helps them to get their arms through the holes. The child then pulls down the t-shirt at the front.
- The **'hand-over-hand technique'** involves standing behind your child, putting your hands over their hands and guiding their hands into positions and moving their hands in the way that you would if you were doing the activity yourself. Please make sure your hands are not entirely covering the child's as it is beneficial for them to be able to see what positions their fingers and hands are in, and what they are doing.
- Show your child – do the task alongside your child.
- Tell your child – talk your child through each step of the process. Using visual cards can also help.

Fastening Buttons

- Start this activity by practicing posting large buttons through slots cut in a piece of cloth or material, or through a posting box / piggy bank or other narrow slots to push pennies or buttons through.
- Push things through slots where you can see it, and handle it, as it goes in one side and comes out the other.
- Practice unfastening buttons before trying fastening.
- Practice the skill initially with large buttons on clothing that the child is not wearing or on toys.
- Post the button halfway through the buttonhole and get your child to finish the task. (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

Post through



Encourage your child
to grasp and pull

- Practice buttoning using toggles as they are easier to grasp.
- Vertical buttonholes are easier to fasten than horizontal.
- If your child struggles to grasp the button – larger buttons with a raised lip around the rim are easier to grasp.
- Try sewing the button on with elastic thread so it is easier to grasp and pull through.
- Try using elastic loop buttonholes.

Managing Zips

- Practice this activity initially by getting your child to do up a zip that you have already started.
- If your child has difficulty grasping the zip attach a D ring, or ribbon/tag of material to the end of the zip so it is easier to pull.
- Demonstrate how the zip attaches together and practice this on a toy with a zip or item of clothing that your child is not wearing.
- Attach a long reach tag for zips that are at the back.

Shoes / Socks:

- Place a small toy of interest inside the sock or shoe and see if the child can feel it, or even grab it and pull it out!
- Slippers – another great way to practice putting on and taking off shoes is to start with slippers! They are softer, less rigid, and easier to get on and off, but still require the same movements and a little bit of strength too!
- Planning how to reach the feet and maintain a stable position is challenging for some. Two ways to make this easier and more stable is to:
 - 1) sit on a chair or the last step on the stairs and cross one ankle over the opposite knee
 - 2) lie on your back, bend one knee and have the foot flat on the floor and then cross the other leg over the bent knee to bring the foot closer in. These positions place the foot in a position that is closest to the child's reach and field of vision
- Shoes and socks that is slightly too large for the child will be easier to begin practicing with.
- Practice tying bows with ribbon or pipe cleaners (as this is less likely to slip) or practice tying their dressing gown cord around their waist.

Getting things on the right way round

- Get your child to lay their clothing out and turn it over so it is face down before putting it on.
- Clothing with patterns or pictures on the front is easier to practice with.
- Put a mark on the inside of the hem, or on the label to remind your child which is the back.

- To get shoes on the right feet put a coloured dot or mark inside the shoe where your child can see it e.g. put a red dot inside the right shoe so your child can remember their red/right foot goes in the red right shoe.
- Put two small marks or blobs of Tippex on the inside of both shoes on the edge of the sole so your child knows the marks must be next to each other.
- To organise dressing and get things on in the right order get your child to lay out their clothes in order of what comes first.
- Practice sequencing dressing by making picture cards of the process and get your child to arrange them in the right order.
- Dress a cardboard cut out figure with clothes you have cut out of paper with fold over tabs and get your child to organise the sequence.
- Practice the dressing sequence backwards, e.g. get your child to take clothing off and lie out in a line then work forwards, etc. to re-enforce the sequence.

Dressing - Social Story

Social stories are short stories that show a social situation that your child may come across. These can help children understand everyday events. It's good to read the story every day when they are calm and ready to listen. These could help with explaining why we wear certain clothes (i.e. warmth), or what we need to do to get ready in the morning.

Dressing – Visual aids

Visual cards can be used to help children with identifying the sequence of getting dressed, without the constant reminders from parents / school or nursery staff. As children become more confident with the sequence, they will require less and less support and be able to use the visual cards independently. In the long term this will help children correctly identify the sequence to dressing without using the visual aids.

Additional activity ideas to encourage the development of the skills needed for achieving dressing skills:

- Play games where the child must reach outside of their base of support without falling over. Practice sitting or standing, depending upon the child's skill level e.g., the child can try hitting a moving balloon in the air with their hands, without moving their feet (the child will be practicing trunk rotation, eye hand coordination skills and balance skills).
- Play body awareness games such as Simon Says; try adding in directions such as "Simon says touch both hands to your left foot" or "Simon says squat down and touch the floor". If Simon Says is difficult for the child, play a game where they copy your actions / movement sequences. Move your body a certain way, i.e., reach your right arm behind your back and then the child will try to match your actions exactly.

- Try doing art and craft projects which involve ripping paper / card, which can help to increase hand strength (needed when managing fastenings or tying shoelaces).
- Paper weaving, constructional toys, lacing games are all activities to try regularly with your child as they help develop the fine motor skills needed when dressing / undressing.
- Obstacle courses – practicing concepts of under, over, around and through. Try copying these in a set sequence.
- Play catch or kick a ball with each other. Simple games of catching, throwing and kicking include many of the underlying skills necessary for learning how to get dressed. When catching a ball, a child brings his hands to midline (skill needed for unzipping, buttoning, etc.). When throwing a ball, a child rotates the trunk and brings their arms across midline during the follow-through phase (skill needed to reach for socks and shoes). When kicking a ball, a child must momentarily stand on one foot while the other side of the body is moving (skill needed for getting pants on and off in standing).
- Velcro – Pulling against heavy duty Velcro is another great hand strengthener. Try using Velcro to make file / folder games, or making other fun Velcro fine motor tasks!
- Rolling Pins – grasping, pushing, and rolling with a rolling pin are all great ways to strengthen hands and fingers. Try it on play dough, bubble wrap, or during cooking activities.
- Cooking - kneading dough, rolling it within hands, stirring the mix, scooping, and cutting.
- Practice with scrunchy bobbles: picking them up and stretching them and placing them over ankles (this can help children learn the skills required for putting on socks).