Dressing skills

Key points in teaching the development of general dressing skills.

Independent dressing is a skill that takes us years to learn and refine. Before we can learn to undress, dress and manipulate clothes fastenings, we need to acquire foundation skills to provide a strong base of experience and learning. These skills include:

- understanding and controlling our body's movements
- understanding where our bodies are in space and how to coordinate each bit in turn
- how to plan, remember and sequence a series of instructions and movements
- how to utilise the intricate movements of our hands and use a variety of grasps and finger movements
- how our bodies (and particularly our hands) can effectively feel and discriminate one touch or piece of clothing from another
- how we can process the information we receive from our eyes and coordinate this with our movements to successfully manage the task.

- Explain the activity well. Demonstrate if necessary. If needed break down into parts and practise those first.
- Give yourself plenty of time. If time is pressured just concentrate on one task that is slightly challenging such as putting on trousers with fastenings. And repeat the practice of this item.
- Get the child to imagine successfully completing the task ie good motor planning. Stop and think first!
- Repetition is helpful. The child may need more repetition than others when learning new tasks. “Hands on” help may be necessary at first to actually give the child the “feel” of the required movement or position. Practice with dressing up clothes and costumes and on shopping trips.
- Give feedback about what went well.
- Encourage self-monitoring – tell me why that went wrong, what worked?
- Encourage children to check in the mirror that clothes are on correctly.
- Organise drawers and put picture labels on them to help children choose their own clothes.
- Concentrate on one approach and be consistent in that technique to avoid confusion.
- Children are often used to adult help, be firm in not helping so that they have to start to take part in participating within the activity.
- Undressing is easier than dressing. Always start with undressing first.
- Avoid difficult and tight clothing or many layers of clothes.
- Dressing should be fun, not a chore. Keep it fun with undressing activities for swimming or dressing as part of dressing up in costumes or dressing toys.
- Don’t pressurise: Try not to ‘watch’ the child intensely during the activity. This can pressurise the child into feeling that they need to achieve on every attempt. Allow them some space to practice alone. Remember that it is the process that requires praise not specifically achieving a particular task.
- Hand over hand: sometimes it may be necessary to physically guide your child’s hands within the task. Physically practice with the addition of verbal prompts, a few times and then gradually withdraw your hands but still talk through the task.
- Minimise distractions. Practice somewhere dry, light, warm and relatively quiet to maximise the opportunity for your child to concentrate fully on the task.
- Keep it consistent: try and practice the activity in the same or similar environment with similar equipment, at the same time of the day, with the same learning strategies and using similar types/styles of clothing at first until the child becomes a little more accomplished. Make sure that practice is not isolated to dressing and undressing in the morning and before bed. Incorporate it into
toileting, play etc.
• Modelling: Allow your child to watch their siblings or yourself get dressed and undressed, or dress and undress together. Copying and imitation is a key way to acquire new skills.

Main techniques for learning skills

Backward chaining
You undertake the entire task and then let the child finish the last bit. For example you pull the trousers up, do the zip and they complete the task by fastening the button. As they become more able they complete the previous step ie zip then button then they continue working backwards until the task is complete.

Forward chaining
The child starts from first stage from the task such as putting their feet into the trouser legs and they receive help for all other aspects of the task.

Choose one method of learning only and be consistent.

Think about your starting position
• Some children will prefer the stability and boundaries of being in a corner or leaning against a wall.

• Some will prefer being seated and having their feet raised on something solid to help them to reach without compromising their balance.

• Being behind the child will give them physical and practical support and will allow them a clear view of the task from the correct visual start point.

• Some children will benefit from all of the items laid out in front of them on a bed or chair. You may wish to lay them out in the order in which they are to wear them. If this is so, be consistent with which item sits where in the pile. Some children may also benefit from using a checklist to ensure clothes go on in the right order.

Compensatory methods
Within dressing our aim should be independence and completing the task within an appropriate time frame using an appropriate amount of energy. Plenty of alternatives are available to take the struggle out of dressing.

Shoes
• Use elastic instead of laces to make them ‘slip on’
• Buy commercially available elastic laces (available from www.nrs-uk.co.uk, www.pattersonmedical.co.uk, or www.amazon.co.uk) or lace clips.
• Buy ‘slip on’, elastic or Velcro fastenings instead of laces.

If you want to pursue laces there are two main techniques. The single loop method is most commonly used but there is also the double loop or bunny ear method – see below.

Buttons
• Start with large buttons and progress to smaller ones as they are easier to manipulate.
• Consider the type of button used. Buttons are easier if large, flat and textured.
• Make sure that the buttonhole is a suitable size and not too narrow.
• Consider backward chaining (see above) techniques to teach each part of the skill.
• Give directions clearly and slowly. Demonstrate first then guide. Allow independent practice and only intervene if the child is becoming frustrated or is losing motivation.
• Emphasise verbal directions with prompts such as push in, pull out etc.
• Practice buttoning on toys, or start with garment in front of the child on a table, not on them.
• Ask the child to do up your buttons to ‘help you’.
• Button hooks are available for fastening buttons one handed and are available from www.nrs-uk.co.uk, www.pattersonmedical.co.uk, or www.amazon.co.uk.

Zips
Try to use larger zips. Practice stabilising the ‘hook’ end against the body. You can buy clips that attach to zips to make them larger or loop a piece of elastic or a hair band through the eye of the zip to make a pulley.

Front/back
Try and look for items that have a logo on the front to reinforce front and back or teach the child that the clothing label goes to the back of a T-shirt or jumper.
Head first?
Try and be consistent in how you are going to put a jumper or T-shirt on. Is it arm-head-arm or head-arm-arm or arm-arm-head?

Trousers
Elastic waistbands can be easier. Make buttons into elastic waistbands by sewing a larger button onto a loop of elastic. Loop the button through the existing button hole and wrap the loop of elastic around the sewn on button.

School ties
If practising tying the tie every day is problematic try loosening it and leave it on the loop, which will allow the child just to tighten it and another person can re-tie it every few days to keep it looking neat. Another idea is to sew the tie in the preferred knot style and then sew either a tie clip or elastic neck loop onto the back of the knot.

When to practice skills?
• At the swimming baths or changing at sports events.
• Choose a time such as the weekend when you are not in a rush. Shortly before the school run is not a good time.
• Undressing is easier than dressing. Encourage the child to get undressed independently for bed each night.

PE at school
Use this as an opportunity to implement the occupational therapy (OT) advice on self-care. Practice independent dressing with one item of clothing if time is limited. Use consistent praise and techniques. Make a verbal commentary on what the child is doing and try to keep distractions at a minimum to aid their focus to the task. If necessary move to a quieter part of the classroom or undertake in the hall if an indoor session or leave five minutes earlier to prepare to un/dress

Sensitivities to clothing
• Some children can be very sensitive to certain textures and therefore can only wear certain materials. Many children prefer loose clothes as they cannot tolerate things being too close to their skin.
• Ask children about the type of fabric and the length of sleeves they like.
• Think about buying a coat with a hood as some children prefer to wear a hood than a tight fitting hat.
• Boxers rather than pants may help a child not to feel restricted.
• Pyjamas should be loose and comfortable.

• Cut off labels or use under garments if labels and seams can’t be tolerated

Common problems and some solutions:
The child loses their arm/head holes.
Put out the clothes, in front of them, put in arms first then head.

Clothes are put on inside out.
• Try and use clothes with contrasting colours or textures on the in and outside.
• Put labels on the inside of clothes and teach the child to find the label.
• Wear clothes that have pictures/logos on the front.

Clothes are put on back to front.
Lay out the garment face down. Add small labels to clothes to indicate front/back and left/right.

Socks are twisted with the heel over the top of the foot.
• Avoid very tight socks.
• Use socks with contrasting colours for the toe and heel.
• Use tubular socks if the difficulty persists.

Putting clothes/shoes on the wrong feet/parts of the body.
• Make sure that the child has an understanding of their body parts and left and right. If this is an issue speak to your occupational therapist for advice if needed.
• Teach your child to dress in the same sequence every day.
• Encourage the child to tell you what an item feels like when on. Is it comfortable? Is it lumpy? Enable the child to feel for clues that an item is correct and encourage them to adjust it themselves until it ‘feels right’.

For further information please contact our advice email oxl-tr.otadvice@nhs.net

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