

# the **early years** toolkit

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## Dressing skills

Some children find dressing difficult due to movement or learning difficulties. All children learn to undress first. You can help your child by breaking the task down into little steps and getting them to assist you at first. Then, as their ability grows, you can let them carry out that stage of dressing for themselves.

If you have used this Advice Sheet and not seen improvement after six months, contact CYPIT for advice

### What you may see

- The child being reluctant to take part in dressing themselves
- The child seeking help and reassurance
- Clothes put on backwards or inside out
- Clothes left twisted on the body
- Some items of clothing left off because it was missed during the sequence
- Frustration due to their inability to dress independently

### Strategies and Advice

- Choose loose fitting clothes with minimum fastenings. Look for tops with easy openings, stretchy socks and elasticated waists
- Start by encouraging your child to assist in the process of undressing / dressing, for example by waiting for your child to push their arm through a sleeve
- Make sure your child is well supported in sitting or standing so that their hands are free to use. If they have poor balance, get them to sit on a chair or use a corner wall for support
- Start by teaching your child to undress as this is easier than dressing
- Talk your child through the order in which clothes are put on, that is which ones are put on first. Draw attention to different parts of the body and name them to help improve their body awareness
- Establish a routine to avoid confusion, so that the activity becomes pre-

dictable. Keep the sequence of dressing / undressing the same

- Try to practise when you are not rushed. Allow time for your child to cooperate in the process e.g. pause when their arm is placed in the sleeve hole so that they can push their arm through independently
- Practise dressing in the evening or at weekends when there is time
- Lay the clothes out in the order they are put on. Lay jumpers out with the bottom edge nearest the child and the neck furthest away
- When you are assisting the child to dress, give simple verbal and gestural instructions e.g. "give me your foot"
- Practise dressing / undressing during doll play or in dressing up games
- Dress in front of a mirror for added reinforcement
- Provide a visual timetable / schedule. This can help the child by giving a pictorial sequence of the stages involved
- Remember to reinforce their effort and give positive feedback

### **Suggested Resources**

- Ball, F. (2002) Hints and tips for activities of daily living. London, Jessica Kingsley.
- Klein, M.D. (1995) Pre-dressing skills.
- Tuscan A.Z, Therapy Skill Builders.
- Websites for visual symbols: [www.do2learn.com](http://www.do2learn.com) [www.ispeek.co.uk](http://www.ispeek.co.uk)

### **Dressing skills – Additional Advice 1**

This section deals with putting clothes on and off, including upper and lower garments. There is a separate section for shoes, socks and fasteners.

#### **Sweaters and Jumpers**

Start by practising undressing with loose jumpers. Progress from a sleeveless shirt to a T-Shirt to long sleeved shirts

- Teach your child one of two methods for putting on a sweater/jumper:
  - 1.Put both arms in first and then pull over their head
  - 2.Pull over their head first and then put arms through
- For putting on a sweater/jumper, have your child lay out their jumper in front of them with the bottom edge nearest to them, the neck furthest away and the front of the garment face down
- Any dressing activity can be taught using 'Backward Chaining' which means teach the last step first. For example, when teaching a child to put on a jumper you would:

1. Place their arm through the holes
  2. Push their head through the hole and then encourage them to
  3. Pull the jumper down as the final step
- Once the child has mastered Step 3, get them to do Steps 2 and 3. Once they can do this, they can move onto doing Steps 1, 2 and 3.

### **Shirts and Cardigans**

- Teach your child one of two methods for putting on an open shirt or cardigan:
  1. Put one arm in and teach your child to reach to the back for the other sleeve
  2. Place the open shirt facing upwards in your child's lap with the collar closest to their body. The child puts both arms into the armholes, raises their arms and brings the shirt over their head.
- To help your child distinguish between back and front, it may be helpful to mark one side with a coloured label or patch or to choose clothes which have a design on the front.
- Bunch up a shirt or so that the armhole is visible and then put in each arm in turn.

### **Trousers**

Start practising undressing with loose trousers and shorts as these are easier.

- Demonstrate to your child how to remove trousers and encourage them to do the same. Show them how to use both hands to grip the sides of the trousers to pull them up and down.
- Trousers with elastic waistbands are easier to put on and take off.
- Place a coloured label in the back of the trousers to help your child to differentiate between the front and the back.

If you do not see any improvement after six months of using this Advice Sheet please contact CYPIT for further advice.

### **Dressing Skills – Additional Advice 2**

This section deals with socks and shoes. There is a separate section for upper and lower garments and fasteners.

#### **Socks: what you may see**

Children often have difficulty putting socks on correctly and end up with the heel on the top of their foot.

#### **Strategies and Advice**

- Demonstrate to your child how to remove and put on socks correctly and allow them to help you.
- Try buying socks that have different coloured heels and toes.

- Trainer socks can help to establish where the heel goes without a lot of sock that needs pulling over the heel.
- Looser socks are easier so let your child practice with your socks. A little talc can be added to the bottom of the foot to help the sock slide on easily.
- Cotton socks are easier to handle than nylon ones.
- Practice putting socks onto dolls or stuffed teddies.
- Backward Chaining can also be used for teaching your child to put socks on. This means that you will break down the task into small steps, help them with the task and teach the last step first. When they have mastered this, let them do the last two steps and so on. In this way your child will finish the task every time and you will gradually reduce the help you are giving.

### **Shoes: what you may see**

Children can find putting on their shoes a challenge and much prefer to take them off. You may see:

- Laces left untied or stuffed into the shoe.
- The tongue wedged into the toe part of the shoe, causing discomfort and making it more difficult to put on.
- The heel of the shoe down-trodden at the back where the child has not been able to pull it up over their heel.
- Shoes on the wrong feet.
- Velcro straps not pulled tight so the shoe is loose on the foot.

### **Strategies and Advice**

- Start with taking the shoe off properly.
- Sit behind the child and demonstrate how to take off their shoes by undoing the fastenings, pulling the shoe open to loosen it and pulling it upwards with the hand under the heel.
- Repeat the task but allow your child to do the last step i.e. to pull the shoe off.
- Continue practising the tasks in the same way and, as your child progresses, allow them to do more of the task e.g. pull open the shoe and then pull it off the foot.
- Allow them to practise taking off your shoes for you or shoes off their toys.
- Encourage your child to assist with fastenings.

### **Putting on shoes is a little trickier**

- Start with putting on larger/looser shoes – dressing-up games are a good time to practise this.
- Allow your child to practise with your shoes.

- Open-back or slip-on shoes are easier to start with.
- Teach your child one of two methods according to their ability.
  1. Left foot over right knee and put shoe on – and vice versa
  2. Place the shoe on the floor and let the child wriggle their foot into the shoe.
- If your child needs extra support allow them to sit on the bottom step, against a wall or in the corner of a sofa.
- Always do the task in the same order so it is easier to remember which bit comes next e.g. loosen fastenings, pull shoe open, pull out tongue of shoe, wriggle in foot, readjust tongue and fasten.
- Initially you may need to position the correct shoe by the correct feet. If your child has difficulty putting each shoe on the correct foot you can:
  1. Fix something bright onto one shoe and teach your child 'bright is right'.
  2. Buy shoes with a logo on the outer side.
  3. Hold shoes next to each other before putting them on to see if they are 'friends', that is they 'face' each other.
  4. Place shoes in front of your child in their correct position, so that the left shoe is matching the left foot.
  5. Help your child recognise their left and right shoe by drawing arrows inside the shoes pointing together.

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### **Fasteners**

You have been directed to this Advice Sheet because the child is having difficulty with buttons, zips and other fastenings.

If you have used this Advice Sheet and not seen improvement after six months, please contact CYPIT for advice.

### **Why do some children find this difficult?**

A child may have difficulties doing up buttons and zips for a variety of reasons such as poor bilateral coordination, postural instability, poor fine motor manipulation, reduced muscle tone, or visual perceptual difficulties.

### **Strategies and Advice**

#### **Buttons**

- Start by using large buttons on a doll, a jumper worn by someone else or a toy.
- Teach the child using the 'Backward Chaining' technique. This means that you first break the activity down into steps. You carry out most of the steps but leave the last step for the child. When the child has mastered that step you allow them to do the last two steps and so on until they can complete the whole task. This way they will always be the per-

son to finish the task. This will ensure that your child finishes the task every time. For example you may start your child off with the last stage of the task, which is to pull the button through the button hole.

- Once the child has mastered large buttons, move on to fastening items with smaller buttons.
- Reattach the buttons with a thick thread, leaving about half an inch of thread between the button and the fabric for easier buttoning.
- Make a 'Button Box' for a fun and interesting toy. Use a shoe box and make slots on the top (horizontal and vertical). Let the child post buttons or coins through the holes.
- Make a 'Button Board' out of fabric and large buttons. Make the button holes at least a quarter of an inch larger than the button. Sew the button on loosely with strong thread. Place an attractive picture on the button board under the fabric so that after the button is unfastened, it reveals the picture.
- Use threading cards / games / activities. The same skills and principles in threading are used when fastening buttons.
- When teaching the child to fasten shirt buttons, remember to start buttoning from the bottom to the top to ensure the button and button hole correspond correctly.
- Encourage the child to check him or herself in the mirror.
- Top buttons are often very difficult and can be replaced with Velcro or a popper (sew the button on permanently on the outside). Alternatively, all buttons, including sleeve buttons, can be replaced with Velcro fastenings or poppers.

### **Zips**

- Demonstrate how to fasten and unzip a zip by pulling on the tab. Allow your child to assist you by pulling the zip up or down with you.
- Zip tags can be adapted by attaching a piece of ribbon, a zip ring or a large paper clip. This makes it easier to grasp.
- Start with heavy-duty large zips which have big tabs or rings as these slide more easily.
- Practise unzipping a purse or pocket to reveal a surprise!
- Velcro tabs can replace zips to encourage independence.