

DRESSING

It takes years for children to become independent in dressing as it is a complex activity that requires many pre-requisite skills to be able to perform successfully. Below is a quick reference guide to these early skills in order to support your understanding of the demands that dressing activities place on the child:

- **Motor skills** – a child needs to be able to move their limbs and body in a full range of movements both with and against gravity. For this, the child must have adequate muscle strength and flexibility and control of their joints. (See [Coordinating my body for play and activities](#))
- **Co-ordination** – a child needs to be able to create co-ordinated movements, using both of their hands individually or together. Hand dominance is important for movements that require fine motor skills, such as fastening buttons, and a child needs to be able to cross their midline (the middle of their body) to complete tasks such as removing a jumper (See [Being able to use both sides of my body](#) and [Being able to reach across my body](#))
- **Balance** – a child must be able to maintain their balance whilst changing position with and without the ability to use their vision.
- **Fine Motor Skills** – a child must be able to reach, grasp and release objects in order to complete tasks such as buttoning or holding the item of clothing. (See [Using my hands](#))
- **Proprioception and body awareness** – a child must be able to feel objects to know where they are in relation to their body without relying on vision, for example, finding armholes with a jumper over their head or doing back buttons. A child must have good awareness of body parts and where their body is in space. A child must be able to tell the difference between their left and right to know which armhole is correct. They also need to be able to identify their front and back and the front and back of their clothes. (See [Using my senses](#))

Your child will gradually learn, step by step, how to undress and dress themselves, do up fastenings and make choices about their clothing. Some children find dressing difficult due to movement or learning difficulties.

Here are the main steps in dressing that children learn and are outlined in approximate order of difficulty, but remember that undressing is always easier than dressing:

- Taking off hat, gloves, socks and shoes
- Putting on hat
- Taking off jacket (if undone)
- Pulling down trousers and underpants and taking off
- Pulling shirt on/off head
- Pulling zips up and down

- Putting on jacket
- Taking off loose pyjamas
- Putting legs in underpants and trousers, and arms in shirt
- Putting socks and shoes on
- Putting on a front opening shirt/blouse
- Buttoning (start with big buttons before small, don't worry about the top button)
- Zipping up (including putting zip foot in zipper)
- Tying shoelaces

Activities and strategies to help dressing skills

- For sensitivity to clothing please refer to the [Using my Senses](#) Advice Sheet.
- 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 predictable. 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, for example pictures of the clothes to be put on. This can help the child by giving a pictorial sequence of the stages involved.
- Remember to reinforce their effort and give positive feedback.
- Set small achievable goals e.g. pulling up trousers.
- For children who find dressing very challenging use the backward chaining technique. See [Backward chaining](#) advice sheet for more information about this.
- For children who are easily distracted ensure a quiet distraction free environment.
- Play games to help develop body awareness such as Simon says and having your child clap their hands behind their backs, above their heads, close their eyes and touch the back of their shoulders, pat their backs, pat their waist, put their hands on one arm, chest etc.

- Carry out games to help develop strength and fine motor manipulation – see [Using my hands](#) advice sheets for more ideas.
- Also play games in which your child sequences the pictures of clothes in the order they put them on.
- Carry out arm and hand warm up activities – see [Getting ready for activities](#) advice sheets.

Here are some ideas to help with specific difficulties with dressing:

Issue	Strategy/Advice
Shoes on the wrong feet	• Red dot inside the right shoe – always put the right shoe on first.
Clothes on in wrong order	• Clothes can be placed in a pile in the right order • Give the child only one item at a time • The order and technique can be photographed and then the child has a visual reminder of the process (ask your child to put them in order before they start dressing)
Clothes on back to front	• Find the label at the neck edge • Wear clothes with a logo on the front
Disorganised appearance e.g. T shirt needs to be pulled down, trousers twisted	• Instead of always correcting the child's presentation – get them to look in a mirror and feel and see if all is correct and then encourage them to identify and alter e.g. straighten collar.
Gripping clothes	• Roll up clothing to create 'more' grip e.g. roll up bottom edge of the t shirt. • Choose fabrics carefully – cotton provides more grip than shiny smooth ones
Putting socks on	• Make sure the child is well supported (sitting on the floor works well with their back against a wall or sitting on a chair and bringing their leg up and crossed over the lap.) • Backward chaining – help the child to put the sock over the toe and heel and leave them to pull the sock up. As they master the last part of the task let them do more until they complete the entire task themselves. • Hand over hand method can also work by putting the child's thumbs inside the sock to help them to position the sock over their toes and heel • Sport tube socks can be easier to get on as there is no specific heel position. • Socks with a contrasting heel and toe colour can also assist.

Fastenings

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 will ensure that your child finishes the task every time.

- 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 as 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
- Have your child connect the zip whilst the garment is on their lap, and then step into the article to put it on. This enables better visual awareness as you can see the whole article.