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Dressing skills: backwards chaining

Information for parents and carers



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What is this leaflet about?

This leaflet provides general advice for parents and carers whose children experience difficulties with learning to get dressed and undressed.

Occupational therapy takes a whole-person approach to both mental and physical health and wellbeing, enabling individuals to achieve their full potential. Occupational therapy provides practical support to enable children/young people to overcome any barriers that prevent them from doing the activities that matter to them. This helps to increase their independence and satisfaction in all aspects of life. This could be essential day-to-day tasks such as self-care, work or leisure.

What is backwards chaining?

Always let your child complete the very last stage of a task, giving them the opportunity to always end in success. As children develop in confidence and skills, they can "take over" earlier in the sequence. This is known as "backwards chaining".

For example, putting on socks (simplified) has several steps in the sequence:

1. Hold your sock by the edge with both hands.
2. Push your toes in to the sock.
3. Lift your foot and pull the sock over your heel.
4. Pull the sock up your leg.

Using the backward chaining method, your child would learn step four first, then learn the other steps backwards, through steps four to one. Backwards chaining can be used with all items of clothing and ensures success for your child.

Socks



Steps for putting on socks (while sitting).

1. Pull up sock from above heel.
2. Pull up sock from heel.
3. Pull up sock from just below heel.
4. Pull up sock from mid foot.
5. Pull up sock after toes have been started in.
6. Push toes in to the sock.
7. Hold the sock by the edge with both hands.
8. Put on sock when handed to them with the heel in the correct position.
9. Put on sock with heel in the correct position.

Pants

Steps for putting on pants

1. Pull on pants when already pulled halfway up bottom.
2. Pull up pants from just below bottom.
3. Pull up pants from mid thigh.
4. Pull up pants from knees.
5. Pull up pants from below knees.
6. Pull up pants when one foot is in and the other foot is started in.
7. Put on pants when one foot is started in.
8. Put on pants when placed correctly in front of them.
9. Put on pants when positioned next to them.





Tops

Steps for putting on a top

1. Pull top down after arms are both fully through the sleeves (head is already in).
2. Put on top when one arm is through and the other is halfway in (head is already in).
3. Put on top when one arm is already in and the other is at the opening (head is already in).
4. Put on top when one arm is through (the head is already in).
5. Put on top when it is over the head and one hand is at the sleeve opening.
6. Put on the top when it is placed over head.
7. Put on top when it is placed on their lap
8. Put on top when it is handed to them



Some tips for dressing

- Undressing comes first and is an easier skill to learn than dressing.
- Loose fitting clothing is easier to manage than tight fitting clothing. Try tighter fitting clothing once your child is confident putting on loose fitting clothing.
- Try to be consistent with the dressing task. For example, encourage your child to start with the same side of the body each time.
- Try to work on dressing at the same time each day, during your child's daily routine.
- Leave extra time so that your child does not feel rushed.
- Try to minimise distractions and interruptions.

- Provide verbal cues as necessary. Try to use the same wording for consistency. As the child becomes more independent, reduce the cues until they can be stopped completely.
- Try practicing getting dressed in front of the mirror unless it confuses the child.
- Complete the dressing skills sitting on the floor or on a bench if it is too difficult whilst standing.
- Remember to end each session with a success and praise your child's efforts.
- Activities that involve heavy work, engaging the muscles are great to do before getting dressed as it desensitises your child's sensory systems.
- If your child does not like labels, cut them out.
- If your child doesn't like the feeling of seams, then wearing soft undergarments may help.
- Seamless clothes in general are becoming more accessible and can even be found in some high street shops.
- If your child gets irritated by sock seams you can buy seamless socks or even just try turning them inside out.
- Let your child pick the clothes they want to wear, this way they can pick something that they find the least sensory stimulating.
- Using a mirror can help with visual cues or placing clothes in order.
- Try washing clothes in unscented products if your child is sensitive to the smell of your chosen washing powder.
- Be conscious of your child's sensitivities and build a wardrobe of comfortable clothing for them.

If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.

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