



DRESSING SKILLS

INTRODUCTION

Occupational therapy is the promotion of health and well-being by facilitating meaningful occupation. Occupational therapists work with people who have difficulty doing things that are related to areas of occupational performance, i.e. self care, productivity and leisure. These include activities of daily living (ADLs) such as dressing, feeding and washing.

It is important for children to be able to learn skills in order to become more independent, as part of growing up. Being independent provides a sense of achievement and a sense of worth enhancing a child's overall self esteem.

This handout includes a range of hints and tips to assist with dressing. Every child has differing capabilities and learning styles so the approach needs to be tailored specifically to meet these needs.

Included in this handout are a range of activities in order to assist the child with pre-dressing and dressing skills. The notes may refer to backward chaining methods; these are explained within this handout.

PRE-DRESSING SKILLS

Dressing is a complex activity that requires many pre-requisite skills to be able to perform successfully. Below is a quick reference guide to pre-requisite skills to gain an understanding of the demands the activity places on the child.



MOTOR SKILLS

A child needs to be able to move 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 at their joints.

CO-ORDINATION

A child needs to be able to create co-ordinated movements, using both unilateral (i.e. using one arm) and bilateral (i.e. using both arms) skills. Hand dominance is important for movements that require fine motor skills, such as fastening buttons. A child needs to be able to cross their midline to complete tasks, e.g. removing a jumper.

BALANCE

A child must be able to maintain their balance whilst changing posture/position with and without vision occluded.

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.

PERCEPTION

A child must be able to have various perception skills, such as form constancy (i.e. knowing various sizes and shapes of buttons are all still buttons) and spatial awareness (i.e. knowing the position of their body in space related to the position and size of arm holes).



STEREOGNOSIS

The child must be able to feel objects to know their relation to their body without relying on sight, i.e. finding arm holes with jumper over head or doing back buttons.

BODY SCHEMA

A child must have good awareness of body parts and where their body is in space. A child must be able to differentiate their left and right to know which arm hole is correct.

PRE-DRESSING SKILLS ACTIVITIES

Dressing should not be seen as a chore. Try to keep it fun, e.g. play dressing up games, dressing toys, and generally having fun. Dressing dolls: using age appropriate dolls to dress up provides the child with increased sense of body schema and organisation of clothes. Provides a way of completing dressing skills whilst being able to use vision skills.



- Musical dress up (a variation of musical chairs): the children put items of clothing on from a pile until the music stops, at the end of the game the child with the most clothes on is the winner.
- Using a variety of large shirts or smocks, get the children to get ready for wet play, painting or cooking.
- Button boards or play cubes. These can be made to give the child practice at certain types of fastening.
- Cloth button or popper book. Parts of a picture have to be buttoned or 'popped' on.
- Matching sock game. Place a variety of socks in a pile, the child has to find pairs and put them on.
- Wooden shoe - a shoe shaped piece of card or wood with holes in can be used to practise lacing and tying shoes.
- Bow book. A fabric book with different types of materials to make a bow, e.g. ribbon, laces, apron strings, etc.
- Package wrapping. Making parcels and tying them up with different sorts of ties.
- Play 'Simon Says' and get the child to identify various body parts. Start with arm, leg, and tummy. Move onto ankle, elbow, and knees. Build upon this by asking the child to touch left arm, then right leg. Finally being able to locate left elbow, wrist, etc.
- Completing threading activities. Getting them to copy a pattern of various sized beads on thread (wool is better for larger beads) to improve pattern recognition. Adapt the task by getting the child to pull desired bead from bag without looking to improve stereognosis.
- Complete lacing activities using lacing boards to develop fine motor skills such as grip, release and eye-hand co-ordination.
- Labelling clothes. Let the child develop labels for their clothes, i.e. front, back, etc. NB. Ensure that you are able to remove them. OR get an old white t-shirt and paint on labels. This will help raise body awareness and will assist with orientation.
- Posting coins. Let the child use pincer (finger and thumb) grip to post coins into a money box. Once child has mastered this, post pennies through a slit in a piece of paper. This will help develop pre-button skills.
- The 'Hokey Pokey'. Get child to participate in this song, could be part of group to enhance body awareness.
- Completing jigsaws and form boards will assist with visual perceptual skills.
- Foot massage. Give the child a foot massage to provide sensory input to increase awareness of feet. This can also be achieved by walking on various surfaces barefooted, grass, concrete, etc. Do these



as a preparation for putting on shoes and socks, tying shoelaces.

- **Clothes Pictures.** Make a picture representation of the clothes the child is wearing and get him/her to talk through what order they are going to undress/dress in, this will improve motor planning and organisation. These pictures can then be used as a reference point for future dressing sessions.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

For the child to be able to learn new skills the environment must be appropriate. Think about the noise levels and distractions; other children in the room, computers, pictures on walls, toys and smells e.g. from the kitchen.

Allow extra time for the child to be able to learn the new techniques. Progress at the child's pace and give lots of praise for practicing skills even if they are not successful at completing the task.

Success is important; therefore begin with breaking the dressing activity into small, straightforward steps. Tackle one step at a time and give help where needed with the other steps of the task, e.g. help the child to pull the t-shirt over their head and then allow them to put their arms through the sleeves.

Dress in front of the mirror to provide visual cues and use to check all is correct before going out.

Undressing is usually easier than dressing. Start with undressing. Undressing before bed and helping to put on pyjamas is a good time to start as you have more time at night than in the morning. If there is weakness on one side of the body, put clothes on the weaker side first, and then take the weaker side out of the garment last when undressing (see dressing hemiplegic child).

Follow a consistent sequence and technique when dressing:

- **Clothes can be placed in a pile in the order in which they need to be put on.**
- **Follow the same technique for each garment, e.g. t-shirt is put over the head first and then the arms are put through the sleeves.**
- **The order and technique can be written down so that it can be followed by other carers and school staff. You could use pictures as a visual prompt to help the child remember the clothing order/technique.**

Describe actions and parts of the body as you are helping the child to dress, e.g. 'put right foot in,' 'now stand up whilst I pull your trousers up your legs.'

POSITIONING

Ensure that the child is sitting in a stable position, e.g. on the floor (where it is easier for the child to reach their feet) or sitting on a chair or firm bed with their feet supported. If sitting balance is poor, try sitting against a wall. Some children may sit better in a corner where both walls give added support. Alternatively stand against a wall.

Sit next to, in front of, or directly behind the child during the activity. Guide the child through the task.

Instead of automatically correcting a mistake, get the child to look (maybe in a mirror) and feel if all is correct. Then encourage them to identify and sort out what needs to be done, e.g. t-shirt needs pulling down; shoes 'feel wrong' because they are on the opposite feet.

Try to avoid fastenings, tight clothes and lots of layers. Instead use loose fitting clothing, e.g. tracksuits, sweat shirts. Use clothes with wide neck and arm holes to make it easier to locate these. Initially it may be easier to practice with clothing a size too big.

Try not to watch all the time; the child may do more when left alone.



ENSURING CLOTHES ARE THE CORRECT WAY ROUND

Wear t-shirts, sweat shirts, pants etc. with a picture on the front. Point the picture out to the child.

Identify the back of all garments through having a label or using coloured thread. If necessary, and to avoid confusion, remove other labels, e.g. inside seam of knickers. Encourage the child to find this mark to identify the back of their clothing.

Alternatively for top half garments, mark the inside, bottom front edge of the garment with coloured thread. Lay the garment out flat on a table (or the floor) front facing downwards. Roll up the bottom, back edge of the clothing to give a good grip to reveal the special mark identifying the front.

Choose a coat with a contrasting lining.

Encourage body awareness by naming parts of the body and then piece of clothing that covers.

Lay clothes out flat in front of the child in the order that they are going to be put on. Place the end which is going to be put on first, nearest to your child. Place arms into the garment first so that it is easier for the child to see what they are doing. Then put the garment over their head.

GRIPPING THE CLOTHES

Roll up clothing to create 'more' to grip, e.g. roll up bottom edge of the t-shirt before putting on.

Use adult's hand over child's hand to assist grip (hand-over-hand technique).

Avoid slippery fabrics.

LEVELS OF ASSISTANCE:

There are several levels of assistance that can assist your child to learn new tasks. The amount of time you spend at each level depends on your child. Many things can affect your child's performance. You will need to monitor how your child is doing and do less for them (increasing their independence) when you feel they are ready.

HELPING ONLY

This is doing the step with your child, hand over hand. For example, you help your child to pull up the pants by holding your child's hand and pulling up the pants to his/her waist.

TALKING AND HELPING

This is telling your child what to do and doing the step with your child. For example, you told your child to pull the pants up to the waist and you helped to pull the pants up. Helping may involve holding your child's hands and moving your child through the motions.

TALKING AND SHOWING

This is telling your child what to do and demonstrating what you would like him/her to do alone. For example, you told your child to pull up the pants to his/her waist and you showed how to pull up your own pants to your waist.

TALKING AND POINTING

This is telling your child what to do and pointing to something that shows him/her what you are talking about. For example, you told your child to pull up the pants to the waist and you pointed to his/her waist.



TALKING ONLY

This is telling your child clearly and simply what to do. For example, you told your child to pull his/her pants up to the waist.

TIPS FOR ADJUSTING YOUR LEVEL OF ASSISTANCE:

As your child becomes more familiar with the step of a task, gradually reduce your assistance.

Let your child take more and more responsibility for performing the task alone.

If your child can perform the step and you are helping by talking only, your child is ready for the next step.

If you still need to help or show your child the step, he/she is probably not quite ready for the next step.

DIFFERENT WAYS TO LEARN DRESSING SKILLS

There are two main ways which can also be used for learning other skills:

BACKWARD CHAINING

Here the adult begins the task, with the child only doing the last step. Gradually the adult does less as the child is able to do more of the task themselves. This way the child always gets the reward of finishing the task, e.g. 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.

FORWARD CHAINING

This is when the child starts the task (e.g. putting the t-shirt over their head), and the adult helps with the later stages the child needs help with (e.g., putting their arms through the sleeves). The child needs to be motivated to begin the task themselves.

Always demonstrate the correct technique first, telling the child what you are doing at each stage e.g. I am unbuttoning the shirt, I am taking your arm out of the sleeve, and so on. Try to maintain the same order of this activity for consistency.

AN EXAMPLE OF BACKWARD CHAINING

TAKING OFF SHIRTS AND T-SHIRTS

Taking off a shirt: Let the child remove the last half of their arm from the sleeve, let the child remove their whole arm from the sleeve, let the child remove shirt with one arm in and one arm half in, let the child remove shirt when pulled off shoulders, let the child remove the shirt.

T-shirt: : Let the child remove the T-shirt from their head, let the child remove T-shirt from their neck, let the child remove T-shirt with one arm in and one arm out, let the child remove the T-shirt with one arm in and one arm half out, let the child remove the T-shirt with both arms in and T-shirt pulled up to shoulders, let the child remove the T-shirt.

Alternative Method (Needs more skills in co-ordination and crossing midline).

- Let child remove the T-shirt from arms in air.
- Let the child remove the T-shirt from head.
- Let the child remove T-shirt with crossed arms over head.
- Let the child grasp bottom of T-shirt with crossed arms and bring towards head.
- Let the child remove T-shirt.



SOCKS

- Place socks partly over your child's foot, then encourage them to perform the last part.
- Sport tubular socks are easier to use than those with a heel.
- Socks with coloured heels and toes also make it easier to work out the correct way round. Alternatively mark the back of the sock with thread on the inside, top edge.
- Make sure that the elastic is not too tight, avoid tight fitting socks.
- Prompt your child to use their "magic thumbs" to help pull the socks on. i.e. isolating their thumbs to get them under the socks to pull up.
- Roll down the top of the sock to make it easier to get the foot in. Use a loop on the back of the sock for the child to hold as they pull them up.

SHOES AND SHOELACES

- On the inside of the shoes and pumps, mark the inside border of each piece of footwear with indelible ink. The child can then place these two marks together to ensure that the correct foot is inserted into each shoe.
- Flat laces are easier to tie than round ones. Ensure that the laces are long enough to comfortably tie a bow. Practice with two different coloured laces to make following the shoelace tying instructions easier.
- When making the first knot, make an extra twist in the lace so that the laces are twisted twice around each other. This will help to hold the lace firm so that the bow can be tied more tightly.
- Alternatives to needing to tie laces include – using Velcro fastenings, elastic laces, springy spiral laces, slip on shoes.

COAT

There are many different strategies, but this one is quite effective. Drape the coat over the back of a chair with the lining facing outwards and the sleeves freely hanging. The child stands with their back to the lining and puts each arm in turn into the sleeves. The child bends down to get the coat onto the shoulders and then moves up and away to release the coat.

FASTENINGS

Start practicing with larger, flat buttons and then progressing to smaller ones. Ensure that the button hole is large enough for the button.

- Only undo the top few buttons when taking off a shirt/blouse, and then remove the garment over the head. It can be put on over the head and only a few buttons will need to be done up.
- Choose trousers or skirts with elastic waist bands if buttons and buckles are difficult.
- Velcro can be used instead of buttons, e.g. on a coat/shirt use Velcro and sew buttons on to top flap.
- Try leaving the cuff buttons done up. Alternatively sew a piece of elastic or a button attached with elastic thread across the cuffs so that it can be stretched open when the hand is pushed through.
- Allow your child to do up those which they can see (e.g. at the bottom of a shirt). Start the task if necessary but then allow your child to finish e.g. pull the button through. Replace frequently used buttons with smaller ones (e.g. on coat or cardigan) as these will be easier to do up and a good place to start.
- Buttons are easier to grasp if they are flat (instead of concave) large, textured or sewn slightly above the surface of the garment. Be sure buttonholes are large enough for buttoning ease.
- When buying a coat with an open ended zip, test the zip thoroughly as the ease of fastening can vary a lot.
- Attach a key ring or curtain ring to the zip to aid grip.
- Allow time for your child to watch you tie laces. Encourage them to do the last part of the task, for



example pulling the knot tight: backward chaining. This involves gradually allowing your child to complete more and more of the task.

- Toggles are a useful alternative to laces, as are Velcro fastening shoes.
- Using different coloured laces can be useful when learning to tie them as they give an added visual cue.