

Teaching Your Child to Dress

Introduction

For a child to learn to dress themselves, they must learn a series of complex steps, from selecting an outfit, to learning how to put it on. To do this, a child must develop a cognitive understanding of how to dress, as well as learn the steps to putting on their own clothes. Dressing requires a certain amount of dexterity and motor control as well. Teaching a child to dress takes time and patience, and even a typically developing child may take months or years to learn how to dress themselves and may need an adult to prompt them when required. A child with autism may need additional visual and physical prompting, as well as reinforcement to complete all of the steps of dressing themselves.

To start out, let's take a look at the challenges a child with autism may face while trying to dress themselves:

Challenges:

1. **Fine Motor Skills** – Often, children with autism will have difficulty with tasks that involve fine motor skills and may take longer than a typically developing child to gain fine motor control. This can affect their ability to button a shirt, zip up a pair of pants, and even wiggle their fingers into a pair of gloves. You can discuss your child's readiness to learn dressing skills with your child's Occupational Therapist, who may be able to assess when your child is ready to dress themselves. Your child's therapist may also be able to work with them to teach them how to perform various fine motor tasks associated with dressing. Occupational Therapists often work with tools that allow a child to practice the skills needed for self-dressing, such as a button or zipper board.
2. **Sensory Processing Challenges** – Children with autism often have over reactive or under reactive sensory responses to things such as colors, smells and textures, which impacts how comfortable they feel in certain types of clothing. As an example, jeans might feel too rough on their skin and make them uncomfortable. You can make notes about what your child most likes to

wear, which fabrics he or she prefers and also see if you can purchase tag-less clothes for comfort.

3. **Cognitive Development** – If your child has a delay in cognitive development, it will affect his or her ability to learn the various steps required for dressing. For example, a child with autism may not understand that it is important to wear pants with a t-shirt. She may understand that she needs a t-shirt, but may not automatically understand that she also needs pants to go with this. You can teach this by using a process called chaining, which we will discuss later in this module. She may also not understand that she needs to wear a hat if it is cold outside.
4. **Restrictive Behaviors** – Restrictive and repetitive behaviors can also get in the way of a child learning how to dress themselves. Examples of these behaviors are a child who constantly wants to button and unbutton a shirt, or a child who will just not wear pants because of the way they feel.

Tips and Techniques for Teaching Dressing Skills:

1. **Choices** – Allow your child some flexibility in picking clothes that they like. This could include clothes with a favorite character, or in a particular color or material, or give them more than one coat to pick from, so that they feel a sense of control while dressing. This can reduce their anxiety around dressing.
2. **Comfortable Clothing** – comfortable clothing is important for children. However, what may seem comfortable to you, may not feel comfortable to your child. Fabrics such as nylon or wool can make a child itchy. Thicker materials such as a thick pair of jeans can restrict movement and feel uncomfortable. Puffy dresses with frills and lace can rub against a child's skin. Consider materials that do not need buttoning and zipping. Elastic pants, Velcro shoes and tops in soft cotton material are good choices.
3. **Chaining** – A common technique used by Board Certified Behavior Analysts to teach skills with many steps is called chaining. Chaining is a method used to teach complex skills, where a

person is required to perform many steps in a sequence. As an example, imagine that you bought a closet which required assembly but you were not provided any instructions. Without step-by-step instructions, you would most likely not know where to begin, or struggle to build it correctly. For a child, being told to dress themselves and merely providing them with the clothes they need, is like giving them a closet to assemble without instructions. Chaining is a technique which provides those instructions to them and allows them to understand the link between each step.

Let's take a look at how you can use chaining to teach dressing skills. Before you can teach chaining, you will need to break the task down into very specific steps. This is called a "task analysis". A task analysis is used to break down a complex skill into teachable components. You would use this to guide your teaching of the complex skill. Here is an example. If you want to teach a child to put on a top, a pair of leggings and shoes, you will need to break this down into smaller steps. Here is an example of how you would break this task down:

1. Find the head opening in the top.
2. Put your head into the opening and pull it over your head.
3. Find the right armhole.
4. Slide your arm into the right arm hole.
5. Find the left armhole.
6. Slide your arm into the left arm hole.
7. Pull the top over your torso in the front.
8. Pull the top over your torso in the back.
9. Find the back of the pair of leggings. (Note – You may want to use a consistent way for a child to find the back of their bottoms. You can use a waterproof marker to put a black dot on the back, inside of the bottoms, so your child can learn to look for this.)
10. Position the leggings correctly.
11. Put your right leg in the right opening.
12. Pull the leggings over your leg until your foot emerges from the other end.
13. Put your left leg in the left opening.
14. Pull the leggings over your left leg until your foot emerges from the other end.
15. Find your right shoe.

16. Undo your right (if there is a strap, or buckle, or laces).
17. Put your right foot into your right shoe.
18. Close your shoe.
19. Find your left shoe.
20. Undo your left shoe.
21. Put your left foot into your left shoe.
22. Close your shoe.

As you can see there are twenty-two steps to putting on a simple pair of clothes. To teach using the chaining technique, you would teach the first step until your child has learned it completely, then teach the second step in conjunction with the first step, then the third step in conjunction with the first two steps, and so on until they are able to complete all the steps independently. For the steps that you are not actively teaching your child, you would complete the remaining steps for them. By using this technique, your child will learn to associate each step with the previous step. This type of chaining is called forward chaining.

4. **Visual Supports** – You can use Social Stories, videos and visual schedules to help a child learn to dress themselves. A story with pictures can walk them through what is expected, and motivate them to dress themselves. You can also share videos of how to dress with your child. Videos can teach specific skills such as tying a bow. Visual schedules can remind a child of the specific steps involved in dressing themselves. For example, you can stick a visual schedule with a top, an underwear, a bottom and socks on a child's closet door and this will prompt them to complete each step in dressing.

Conclusion

We hope you have found these tips helpful. You can discuss specific techniques such as chaining with your child's behavior therapist. Your child's therapist can also work with you to reinforce specific skills with your child. You can also discuss techniques for working with a child's limited fine and gross motor skills with an Occupational Therapist. Teaching a child to dress takes time and patience, and is a skill they will develop over a period of time. You can find additional resources on the Porchlight website.

www.porchlighteducation.org