

Occupational Therapy Service

Dressing Advice for Sensory Differences

Dressing involves many skills: visual perception, motor planning, balance, and gross and fine motor skills. Independence in dressing contributes to a real feeling of mastery, which contributes to a healthy self-esteem.

Children may find dressing difficult due to sensory differences such as touch (e.g. finding materials sensitive on skin or movement processing (e.g. finds bending over difficult to tolerate), or proprioceptive processing (e.g. unsure where their body is in space).

Here are some strategies that you may find helpful in enabling your child to dress.

Sensory Strategies

- Be conscious of sensitivities regarding texture; buy clothes that you know your child will like (it is more valuable for your child to be at school in an uncoordinated outfit feeling calm than to have your child at school looking beautiful and upset).
- Try tight clothing or Lycra under normal clothing.
- Try seam free clothing, this is available commercially.
- Try washing clothing before your child wears it.
- Encourage deep-pressure activities prior to dressing to decrease the tactile sensitivities.
- Wear undergarments inside out to prevent scratching seams and tags.
- Increase hat tolerance through massage of the scalp and putting the hat on in front of the mirror.
- If your child has difficulty guiding movement with the eyes, encourage another sensory system to compensate (touch).
- Be aware of audio and visual overload and minimize it.
- Dress the child in front of a mirror to add visual cues to assist with motor planning.
- Try backward chaining, which involves having your child complete the last step of the activity, then the last two steps, etc.
- If your child is having difficulty initiating an action, start the action and have your child complete the action (e.g. pulling up a zipper).
- If your child is fearful when their body position is changed, dress him or her in one position (toddlers can have their nappy changed in a standing position).
- If your child has sensitive feet, let them wear socks inside out and wash shoes to make them soft prior to wearing them.
- Try laced shoes because they can be more effectively tightened.
- Loose fitting, slip on shoes may work better for those that dislike socks and shoes.
- Cut labels out of clothing.
- Wash clothes in unscented detergent.
- Dry clothing with unscented fabric softener.
- Choose softer fabrics like fleece rather than rigid items like denim.
- Be conscious of noises from buckles and overall straps.
- Be sensitive to the length of sleeve and trouser leg your child prefers.
- Be aware of patterns in fabrics and distraction the patterns may cause.
- Ensure that the garment fits well; that it is not cutting into the skin when your child assumes another position.

Other Strategies

- Organise drawers and wardrobes to help a child choose their own clothing.
- Use stories to explain the changes in weather and the need for different types of clothes.
- Choose shoes with Velcro closures and add Velcro to button backs and hoops to zippers for children with fine motor difficulties.
- Organise clothing the night before and lay the clothing out on the bed.
- Encourage your child to put away the clothing so that they know where it belongs.
- If balancing is difficult, have your child sit down to put on socks and shoes.
- Colour- code clothing to help your child identify right and left.
- Sing the steps while dressing.
- Try dressing dolls or teddy bears to practice opening and closing fasteners.

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