

Dressing Skills

How is Dressing Learned?

Dressing is a complex life skill that is easy to take for granted. For adults, steps to dressing are so well mastered that most people follow them unconsciously and don't recognize how challenging it is to learn for children. As the saying goes, "monkey see, monkey do!" We learn by copying, the child will learn best by following your lead.

Why is Dressing So Hard?

Sequencing: If the child can't remember the order of clothing, they may need a picture strip (see pictures, right) to learn the whole process.

Balance: Good balance is needed when putting on pants and shoes. Children who are learning to balance may benefit from sitting on a stool instead.

Fine Motor Skills: A child needs good finger strength to grip boots and pants, and dexterity to learn snaps and zippers. If the child is developing hand skills, use elastic pants and pull-on shoes to make it easier for them.

Body in Space: Many children are developing an accurate sense of where their limbs are in space without looking – for example, finding the arm holes when putting on a shirt or jacket. If this is tough, you might get them to put their arms in their shirt before putting it over their head.

Winter Clothes Picture Strip

1



Snow Pants

2



Coat

3



Boots

4



Hat & Gloves

Start with One Piece, and Get Them Trying!

- **One Item at a Time:** Rather than getting the child to participate with everything, pick one article of clothing as your focus, and practice that until mastered.
- **Let Them Try:** If you know the child can do it, let them do it! It is not as easy when you are rushing out the door, so take advantage of having more time to let them dress themselves. The more practice they get, the faster it will be learned.

How Should I Coach My Child?

If the child needs help, here are some suggestions to make it easier.

- **Hand-Over-Hand:** Put the child's hands in the right place and physically coach them through it. Provide less physical help over time.
- **Demonstration:** Using your clothing, show them where you place your hands and break it down into little steps. One piece of clothing at a time.
- **Pictures:** Point to pictures of each steps to cue the child.

Backwards Chaining

Backwards chaining refers to taking the broken-down steps and teaching them in reverse order. For example, start with the last step such as 'pull down hat' so that the child feels the immediate success of completing the task. Next time ask them to do the last two steps: put hat on head, pull down hat.

What Does it Look Like to “Break Down Steps” to Dressing?



Getting Organized: Tips for Dressing

- **Picture Strip:** Use a picture strip to walk the child through the steps to getting dressed.
- **Lay out Clothing in Sequence:** You can also teach the proper order of dressing by laying out clothing in a specific order; in a pile or line. Pick a consistent order and stick with it.
- **Making Practice Easy:** When teaching them to put on clothes, use clothing that is easier to put on, such as elastic pants, pull-on boots and a jacket vest with no sleeves.
- **Snaps, Buttons and Zippers:** The child may need help with snaps, buttons and zippers until they are about 4 ½ - 5 years old, but you can start practicing as young as 4 years old.
- **Simple Language:** Aim for 2-4 words for each step.

Action Plan!

The best time for us to practice dressing is: _____

The item of clothing my child will master first is: _____

The sequence or steps my child will follow are: _____