

Sensory Strategies: Dressing

Children's Therapy Services



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.

Sensory Strategies

- Be conscious of sensitivities regarding texture; buy clothing 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)
- Build a wardrobe of comfortable clothing for your child
- 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. Be aware of audio and visual overload and minimize it. Dress the child in front of a mirror to add visual clues to assist with motor planning. If your child is having difficulty initiating an action, start the action and have your child complete the action (e.g. pulling up a zip). If your child is fearful when body position is changed, dress him or her in one position (toddlers can have their nappies changed in a standing position). Use augmentative communication strategies to encourage understanding of the consequences of taking clothing off. If your child has sensitive feet, have 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.
- Cut labels out of clothing. Wash clothing in unscented detergent. Dry clothing with unscented fabric softener. Dry clothing in a dryer to decrease stiffness. Choose fabrics like fleece rather than rigid items like denim. Be conscious of noises from buckles and over straps. If your child cannot keep their hands out of their nappy or undergarment, try overalls/sleep suit if younger child. Be sensitive to the length of sleeve/trouser leg your child prefers. Be aware of patterns in fabrics and distraction the patterns may cause. Ensure that the garment fits well; it is not cutting into the skin when your child assumes another position.

Other Strategies

Organise drawers/wardrobes to help enable a child to choose his own clothing.

Transitions for seasons may take time: discuss it, prepare for it, use social stories to explain the change.

Choose shoes with Velcro closures and add Velcro to button backs and hoops to zips for children with fine motor difficulties.

Organise clothing the night before - lay the clothing out on the bed.

Encourage your child to put away the clothing so that he knows where it belongs.

If balancing is difficult, have your child sit to put on socks and shoes.

Colour-code clothing to help your child identify right and left.

Put labels in your child's clothing to help identify him if he becomes lost.

Sing the steps while dressing.

Try dressing dolls or teddy bears to practice opening and closing fasteners.

Try backward chaining, which involves having your child complete the last step of the activity, then the last two steps etc.

Ideas for Self Help Skills – for children with Sensory Issues

Adapted from 'Building Bridges through Sensory Integration' by Ellen Youch, Paula Aquilla & Shirley Suttan



For further information about this service contact:

Children's Occupational Therapy Admin
The Peacock Centre
Brookfields Campus
351 Mill Road
Cambridge
CB1 3DF

Tel: 01223 218065



If you require this information in a different format such as in large print or on audio tape, or in a different language please contact the service on the details above.

If you have any compliments about this service or suggestions for improvements, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 0300 131 1000 (charges may apply depending on your network) or email: ccs-tr.pals@nhs.net.

For free, confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year please contact NHS 111.