

TIP SHEET

Getting Dressed



Often when young children struggle while putting on their shoes, hat, or jacket, we are quick to jump up and help them. Sometimes we are even quicker to offer assistance when a child has special needs as we assume that they need extra help. Learning to get dressed or undressed is a big step towards independence!

Keep in mind that developmental milestones are written with the typically-developing child in mind. If a child has special needs, focus on the progression of skills rather than the age at which a child is “supposed” to be able to do something. It also helps to follow the child’s lead.

Is he struggling with the task or trying to figure things out?

While some children will ask for help when they need it, others may struggle in silence. Let’s use the example of a child who is trying to put on his

boots and determine whether he is truly struggling with the task, or trying to “figure things out”.

He is probably trying to “figure things out” if he:

- Appears to be talking himself through the process (e.g., “Foot in boot.”)
- Follows a visual sequence through the process.
- Is testing different solutions to the problem such as taking his foot out of a boot if it doesn’t fit properly and trying the other boot.

He is probably struggling if he:

- Appears angry or frustrated.
- Looks from shoe to boot without taking any action.
- Repeatedly does something incorrectly such as putting the right foot in the wrong boot.
- Looks at, or, gestures to those around him.

How to promote independent dressing and undressing

Most children will display interest in dressing/undressing themselves and will feel proud of their abilities and accomplishments in this area. Here are some suggestions to facilitate independence:

1. Begin with the easiest garments like a hat, socks, shoes, or pants.
2. Follow the typical developmental sequence of skills. Remember that children learn to undress before they learn to put on clothes.
3. Talk about each step of the process. For example say, “Shoes off”, “Socks off”, or “Hat on”, while you or the child are doing the actions.
4. Verbally praise the child for each step he accomplishes - “Good taking shoes off!”
5. Encourage the child to sit down to complete the steps. This may provide more stability while dressing or undressing.
6. Encourage parents to bring in clothes that make it easier to grasp and pull (e.g., shoes with Velcro, elasticized waistbands, or a jacket with a large ring added to the zipper).
7. Post and use a dressing/undressing pictorial sequence in the cloak room and discuss the steps with the children.
8. If possible, place a mirror in the cubby area or washroom so children can watch themselves as they put on the clothing.
9. Break the skill into smaller steps and teach one step at a time. This process is known as **Task Analysis**. Here’s an example:

Putting pants on

1. Hold pants.
2. Open waistband.
3. Insert right leg into right leg hole of pants.
4. Pull right pant leg up so right foot comes through it.
5. Insert left leg into left leg hole of pants.
6. Pull left pant leg up so left foot comes through it.
7. Pull pants up from waistband.



Breaking down the skill into smaller steps allows a child time to master each step in the sequence. The number of steps really depends on the needs of the child. The actual steps in the task are taught through **Shaping**, the process of rewarding a child for approximating or getting close to the steps that we want to see in the end.

The road to independence can sometimes be rocky, but setting small, realistic goals can make it smoother for both you and the child.

References:

Cook, R.; Tessier, A.; Klein, D. (2000) *Adapting Early Childhood Curricula In Inclusive Settings*. Fifth Ed., Prentice Hall Inc.

For more information:

- Visit our two-part series workshop on [Understanding and Changing Behaviour - Why does he do that?](#) and [Planning for Change](#).
- Read the following [Tip Sheets](#) to learn more about [Task Analysis](#), [Shaping and Chaining Behaviour](#), and [Identifying Skills to Teach](#)
- Take a look at our [Context Story](#) about [Chung Lee and Getting Dressed](#) and the how to teach a new skill like [Putting on a Jacket](#).