

Preparing for more independence in Dressing and Grooming Routines

These are some ideas for helping children to tolerate dressing and grooming tasks. "Play" and "Practice" are great strategies for children to rehearse anxiety provoking events. During play, some of the basic skills can actually be practiced, and sometimes desensitisation can occur as well. Not all of these ideas are intended for all children.

DRESSING

- Spend some time thinking about what your child likes to wear and why. Generally, softer clothing is better tolerated. It will be a lot easier for your child to cooperate if he/she likes the clothes.
- Don't tackle independence in dressing when you are in a hurry to get out the door or when the child is excited or agitated.
- Buy or make a "dressing board" with a variety of snaps, zippers, buttons and buttonholes, velcro closures, hooks, buckles and laces.
- For the older child, provide household items for the child to zip, button, and fasten, such as sleeping bags, backpacks, handbags, coin purses, lunch boxes, doll clothes, suitcases, and cosmetic cases.
- Provide fun dress-up clothes with zippers, buttons, buckles, and snaps. Oversized clothes are easiest to put on and take off.
- Play make-believe "Shoe Store." Gather a few pairs of shoes and boots, a shoehorn, and new shoelaces. Take turns pretending to be the customer and the salesperson. Practice lacing.
- Use a large doll or teddy bear to practice dressing.
- Remove unnecessary choices from your child's drawers and closet. Clothes that are inappropriate for the season and that jam the drawers are sources of frustration.
- Put large hooks inside or outside closet doors at the child's eye level so he can hang up his own coat and pajamas.
- Attach loops to coats and pajamas (on the outside so they won't irritate the child's skin).
- Supply plastic bags for the child to slip his/her feet into before pulling on boots. The plastic prevents shoes from getting stuck and makes the job much easier. The boots will then come off much easier too. Discourage the child from wearing heavy boots when not necessary.
- Let your child choose what to wear. If the child gets overheated easily, let him/her go outdoors

wearing several loose layers rather than a coat. If he/she complains that new clothes are stiff or scratchy, let him wear soft, worn clothes, even if they're not very fashionable; comfort is more important. Try pre-washing and softening new clothes.

- Set out tomorrow's clothes the night before. Let child help choose.
- Encourage the child to dress himself. Allow extra time, and be available to help out. If learning a dressing skill is difficult, help the child into the clothes but let him/her do the finishing parts. Help the child get pants over the feet but have him/her pull them up (with some help in the back). Start the coat zipper but let the child zip it up, button all but one or two of the buttons, buckle the belt but let the child secure the end through a loop.
- Motivate the child to dress himself with preferred clothes. If a child chooses his/her own clothes, shoes, coat, etc. the child will be more willing to learn to put them on and do the fasteners. Discuss this when the child finds something he/she really wants.

GROOMING

- Play make-believe "Beauty Shop". Gather combs and brushes, bobby pins, ribbons, elastic bands, a mirror, a chair, a smock or towel, and a bowl of warm water. Take turns pretending to be the customer and the barber. Incorporate tooth brushing and hand washing into your play on some occasions if these are issues for the child.
- Keep a stool handy so the child can see in the bathroom mirror. Or put a small self adhesive mirror tile at the child's height. On the sink, keep a kid-sized, broad-handled toothbrush in a plastic cup, within arm's reach. Even if the child resists brushing teeth and hair, be firm, if possible. Some things in life are nonnegotiable.
- Try using a "Nuk" toothbrush set. These include 3 small "brushes" that help to gradually desensitize a child's mouth to toothbrushing. Or use deep finger rubbing on the teeth to begin to desensitize the mouth. Sponge mouth wipes can also be helpful in desensitizing.
- If the child is apprehensive with a lot of avoidant head movement, try firm pressure down on the crown of the head (with the neck in a neutral upright position), or a nice firm grip on the lower jaw. Combine steady and deep pressure with a calm reassuring voice. Doing the above with the child seated snugly in your lap can also be very calming in the early stages.
- Some children will like battery operated tooth brushes; others may like the kind that make sounds as they are moved.
- If the child doesn't want you to brush his/her teeth, have the child start the process. When the child controls the movement, the resulting sensations are more tolerable. If you have to go over the areas after the child, some desensitization will have occurred by then. Don't brush hair or teeth too gently, this is more irritating than firm pressure.