

Learning to Get Dressed

This need-to-know skill encourages independence (and sometimes, creativity!)

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Learning to get dressed is a skill most kids start to figure out in the preschool years.

Like to wrestle? Because if you spend any time getting a little kid dressed, that's probably what you are doing. Trying to get a small child to stand or sit still long enough so you can pull up pants or throw a shirt over their head can be, well, trying. The good news is, learning to get dressed is a sequence of lessons that most preschoolers master by the time they turn five. And like everything else, learning to get dressed definitely makes for teachable moments. Not only do kids have to develop certain gross and fine motor skills to do things like put legs into pant holes or pull up a zipper, they also need to start matching colors and recognizing how to choose clothing that will keep them warm or cool enough, all contributing to a growing sense of independence.

Learning to get dressed isn't a single skill that your child will learn overnight. Rather, it's a series of lessons that your child will grow to understand as they grow and mature. Here are some approximate ages of when kids figure out certain aspects of dressing themselves:

- Starting to get undressed -- 12 to 18 months old
- Can get completely undressed without help -- 18 to 24 months old
- Pull up pants that have an elastic waistband -- Two to two and one-half years old
- Put on socks or a shirt -- Two and one-half years to three years old
- Get dressed and undressed with minimal assistance (including no-tie shoes) -
- Three to four years old
- Dress independently including any buttons, snaps, zippers or buckles -- four to five years old
- Tie shoes -- between five and seven years old

Don't stress if your child hasn't hit one of these milestones. These ages are simply guidelines and depend a lot on your child's gross motor skills, maturity and interest in the process.

Show and Tell

You may think because your child has been part of the process of you getting her dressed every morning that you can hand her a pair of pants and she'll pull them right on. And for some kids, that may be the case. But for many children, a simple lesson in how the clothing gets put on will do wonders. Keep it easy. Show on yourself and then help your child get dressed, giving a running commentary on what you are doing -- "Your pants have three holes. One at the top that goes around your waist and one for each leg. Make sure the tag goes in the back."

Simple is Best

To make the process simple, let your child learn on garments that are easy to put on. Loose-fitting clothing that don't have buttons, zippers or snaps are great to start off with. Elastic waistbands, large openings and pieces that have tags in the back (to avoid putting something on backwards) are also very little-kid friendly.

Make Success Easy to Reach

If your child's clothing are hanging high in the closet, it is going to be a lot harder for him to start the process. If it is possible, put all the clothing that your little one will need to access at a level that they will be able to reach -- use drawers at the bottom of the bureau and lower the bar in the closet if you can. If not, together pick out the outfit that your little one is going to wear. In the beginning give him a few choices -- three at the most -- of outfits to choose from.

Solicit Her Opinion

The thing about teaching a child to dress herself is, that once they learn to do it, they are going to want a say in what they wear. And believe it or not, that is a good thing. Now you may see some interesting outfits, yes, (think checkered pants and a striped shirt) but that's OK. In fact it is great. Because your little one is learning that she has an opinion and it's OK to express it. As long as the outfit isn't inappropriate (not warm enough for instance), let her wear what she likes. You are only young once and chances are her tastes will soon become more refined as she gets older.

Time and Patience Complete the Look

Make no mistake, getting dressed on your own is not an easy task. Even when a child has all the motor skills down, there is still a lot to think about. It's important to not rush them, especially in the days where they are just learning. Be patient and resist the urge to just get your child dressed yourself. The more you step in, the less they'll learn.

Mismatched Socks? Backwards Shirt? Praise, Praise, Praise

Learning to dress yourself is not a skill a child will learn overnight. And there can be some steps backwards. So if your little one comes downstairs with her shoes on the wrong feet or pants that aren't buttoned, help them fix what needs fixing, but also be sure to commend them for their great work.

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