

## Teaching your child how to get dressed

### Key points

- **Getting dressed is an important skill for children to learn.**
- **Very young children can start learning to get dressed by doing things like pulling off socks.**
- **It helps to break getting dressed into small steps. Teaching the last step first can work well.**
- **Children will develop skills like dressing themselves at different rates.**

### Why your child needs to learn how to get dressed

Learning to get dressed builds your child's confidence and independence and gives them a sense of achievement. And once your child can dress themselves, helping them get dressed is one less thing for you to do.

Also, getting dressed **helps your child develop many other skills**. These include:

- fine motor skills – for example, by fastening buttons and zips
- gross motor skills – for example, by standing on one leg to pull on a pair of pants
- cognitive skills – for example, by remembering which clothes go on first and concentrating on getting the task done
- language skills  
(<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/development/language-development/language-development-0-8>) – for example, by naming types of clothes, colours and sizes
- awareness of time and space – for example, by dressing for certain occasions and weather conditions.

## **Getting started with getting dressed**

Often very young children start to be aware of clothing by pulling off easy-to-remove things like socks, shoes or hats. Sometimes they try to put them on again. You can build on this early awareness by **naming the clothes** your child has taken off and the body parts they go on.

You can start to include your older baby or toddler in getting dressed by **letting your child choose clothes** and naming them as you put them on your child.

And when you decide it's time to work on this skill with your child, it can help to **have some easy clothes on hand**. These might include:

- loose, elastic-waisted pants
- clothes with velcro or large buttons and button holes
- jumpers, t-shirts and underwear with pictures on the front to help your child work out front from back
- clothes that are easy and comfortable for your child to move in.

## **Getting dressed: breaking down the steps**

Getting dressed can have a lot of steps. It helps to break it down into smaller steps – for example, putting on underwear, then t-shirt, shorts, socks and shoes.

You can also break down each of the steps in getting dressed, depending on your child's skill and age. For example, you could break down the steps for putting on shorts like this:

- Face shorts the right way.
- Hold on to the front of the waistband.
- Push one leg at a time through the leg holes while also holding the shorts.
- Pull the shorts up.

Talking your child through each step helps them know what to do. In the early stages, simple words or phrases are OK – for example, 'Shirt on'. You can say more as your child's language develops – for example, 'Push your arm through the sleeve'.



When your child can almost dress themselves (usually from 3 years and up), you can check whether they understand the steps. Ask, 'What's the first thing you need to put on?' If your child can't remember, you can help them get started by reminding them.

### **Getting dressed: teaching the steps backwards**

A good way to teach your child how to get dressed is to break down each task into small steps and **teach them the last step first**. Once your child can do the last step of the task, teach them the second-last step, then the third-last step and so on.

For example, when putting on shorts, you might help your child face the shorts the right way, hold the waistband and put their legs through the leg holes. **Then teach your child the last step** – pulling up the shorts to their waist by themselves.

Once your child can do this, teach them to put their legs through the leg holes and pull their shorts up. **You can keep working your way backwards through the steps** until your child has mastered them all and can put their shorts on by themselves.

A big advantage of this approach is that often the most rewarding thing about a task is getting it finished – and your child gets to this reward sooner when they can do the last step first.



If your child is having trouble, it can be tempting to jump in to help. But give your child a chance to work it out for themselves, and cheer your child on as they try. Doing it on their own is great for your child's confidence. Step in only when your child really needs your help.

### **Tips for helping your child learn to get dressed**

If you can be positive and supportive, your child is more likely to cooperate. So a lot of [praise](https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/connecting-communicating/connecting/praise) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/connecting-communicating/connecting/praise>) will go a long way, even if your child has put their pants on backwards! Here are some practical tips to help.

#### **Making time**

- Allow a realistic amount of time for getting dressed.
- If you're often rushed in the morning, try choosing clothes with your child the night before.
- When you're in a hurry, let your child do the easy tasks and help them with the difficult tasks.

- Practise getting dressed when you and your child aren't in a hurry or tired.

### **Choosing appropriate clothes**

- Let your younger child choose from a couple of options, like 2 t-shirts. Older or more mature children might be able to choose their own clothing.
- Talk about the weather when you and your child are choosing clothes. Ask your child whether it's hot or cold, raining or sunny.
- Teach your child the difference between dirty and clean clothes – for example, 'Dirty clothes go in the laundry basket. You can wear them again when they're back in the drawer'. You can use some simple guidelines like wearing clean underwear and socks each day.

### **Making it easier**

- Have your child sit down for dressing tasks. Sitting on the floor might be easier than sitting on a chair or bed for some children.
- Store clothing in drawers and cupboards that your child can get to easily. Label clothing drawers with a picture or word to describe the clothing that's in the drawer.
- Wear clothes that have clear front and back clues – for example, a picture on the front and a tag on the back.

**Teach undressing first** – it's easier than dressing. Being able to undress by themselves can boost your child's confidence.



Some children know how to get dressed but need some help with learning to cooperate (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/behaviour/behaviour-management-tips-tools/requests-instructions>). If you explain to your child why they need to get dressed or undressed, it might motivate them to cooperate. For example, you could say, 'You need to get dressed so that you can play in the sandpit with your friends at kindergarten'.

## Teaching children with disability, autism or other additional needs to get dressed

Some children with disability, autism or other additional needs can have trouble getting dressed. Some autistic children have sensory sensitivities (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/behaviour/understanding-behaviour/sensory-sensitivities-asd>) that make it hard for them to cope with the texture of different materials on their skin.

If you're having trouble teaching your child with disability, autism or other additional needs to get dressed, an occupational therapist (OT) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/occupational-therapist>) who works specifically with children might be able to help. OTs can give you strategies to teach your child to dress or suggest equipment that can make the process easier.

## Development of skills for getting dressed

Here's a rough guide to dressing skills at different ages. Keep in mind that children develop skills at different rates.

At **one year** children can usually:

- hold their arms out for sleeves and put their feet up for shoes
- push their arms through sleeves and legs through pants
- pull socks and shoes off.

At **2 years** children can usually:

- take off unfastened coats
- take off shoes when the laces are untied
- help push down pants
- find armholes in t-shirts.

At **2½ years** children can usually:

- push down pants with elastic waists
- try to put on socks
- put on front-buttoned shirts, without doing up buttons
- unbutton large buttons.

At **3 years** children can usually:

- put on t-shirts with little help
- put on shoes without fastening – they might put them on the wrong feet
- put on socks – they might have trouble getting their heels in the right place
- pull up and push down pants by themselves
- zip and unzip without joining or separating zippers
- take off t-shirts without help
- button large front buttons.

At **4 years** children can usually:

- take off t-shirts by themselves
- buckle shoes or belts
- connect jacket zippers and zip them up
- put on socks the right way
- put on shoes with little help
- know the front and back of clothing.

At **4½ years** children can usually:

- step into pants and pull them up
- thread belts through buckles.

At **5 years** children can usually:

- dress without your help or supervision
- put on t-shirts or jumpers the right way each time.



Tying up shoelaces is a skill that most 5-year-olds are still learning. Our handy [illustrated guide to tying shoelaces](https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/health-daily-care/dressing/shoelaces) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/health-daily-care/dressing/shoelaces>), outlines some easy steps for teaching your child this skill.

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## References

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