

Practical Tips for Clothing, Tactile Sensitivity, and Getting Dressed!

Many children find wearing clothes very stressful due to tactile and/or heat sensitivity. You may see a variety of behaviours to communicate this including:

- Prefers to wear the same clothes all the time
- Difficulties accepting new clothes
- Clothes feels uncomfortable
- Clothes have to be tight
- Difficulties tolerating the feel of socks seams and shoes
- Dislikes labels and seams
- Particular about clothing
- Meltdowns when asking them to get dressed
- Prefers to be naked
- Refuses to get dressed

Below are some tips to try that may help reduce stress levels around wearing clothes. Please keep in mind that every child is unique, and what may work for one child may not work for another. Also, a certain method that works for a child one day may not work for that same child the next day.

- 1) **Reassure your child**, try to imagine how uncomfortable it must be for them and validate their feelings.
- 2) **Do not force** them to wear clothes they cannot tolerate wearing.
- 3) **Buy clothing** you know your child is comfortable with, often soft cotton, elasticated or baggy clothes or tight-fitting clothing. Notice what your child seems to complain about or gravitate towards.
- 4) **Avoid rough textured clothes** and pyjamas if these bother your child.
- 5) **Check seams** for thread, cover elastic, and remove any clothes tags.
- 6) **If socks are an issue**, turn them inside out so the seam is not touching their feet. Alternatively, you can buy seamless socks.
- 7) **Encourage your child to layer their clothing** so that the most comfortable clothing is against their skin.
- 8) **Wear lycra/sports wear clothing** that applies firm pressure to the body as the first layer i.e. bicycle shorts, tights, clingy long johns, vests, etc.
- 9) **Wash any new clothes** several times using fabric softener to make the fabric softer, more comfortable and tolerable for the child.

- 10) Desensitise your child's skin** before getting dressing to make it easier for them to tolerate a wider variety of clothing. This can be done using deep pressure touch strategies i.e. massage, pressing a hand-held vibrator against the skin, hugging the child (if they like hugs), squeezing their hands, wrapping your hands around their forearms and giving a firm squeeze, pushing down on the tops of their shoulders or rolling a Pilates ball or similar firmly across the child's back, legs, and arms whilst the child is lying down on their tummy.
- 11) Repeat above deep pressure touch strategies** after the child has dressed themselves if needed.
- 12) Allow extra time for your child to get dressed** so that you can support your child through it using any of the strategies outlined in this handout.
- 13) Offer choices** – as soon as children feel like they have some control over what their body experiences, they are more willing to push themselves out of their comfort zone. If possible, give them two pairs of trousers to choose from, ideally of different textures or fit. If they are not sure, you can talk about the differences i.e. “You can choose the black trousers with no buttons, or these jeans with a zipper and button, which would you like to wear today?”.
- 14) Use a time limit** – let the child know when he can take his clothes off or change into comfortable clothes. For example letting a child know that he can take off their school uniform as soon as they get home. Knowing when you can take your clothes off can help the child wear the clothes for longer periods.
- 15) Repeated exposure** – although we do not want to force the child to wear clothes they feel uncomfortable, it is helpful to encourage them to try, especially if it is clothing that cannot be worked around i.e. school uniform. Try small doses at home and build up tolerance over time. Use deep pressure touch strategies to support the child through this.
- 16) If your child can tolerate it**, moisturise their skin. When skin is dry, tactile sensitivity can be worse, making it harder for children to wear clothing they might otherwise be able to tolerate. Consider desensitising your child's skin with deep pressure touch before applying the moisturiser.
- 17) Encourage older children, if they are interested in fashion**, to buy their own clothes as they may be more likely to tolerate wearing the clothes if they chose it.
- 18) Encourage your child to engage in activities that provide them with proprioceptive input.** Proprioception is the sensation that has been observed to help children regulate their response to touch. Proprioception occurs when we move our muscles. Look at any activity where your muscles have to work against resistance i.e. pushing, pulling, lifting, and carrying. This is commonly known as heavy muscle work. For example, jumping on a trampoline, swimming, lifting weights at the gym, riding a bike through soft terrains i.e. beach, muddy ground, etc., climbing, walking or running with a weighted backpack, etc.

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