STEPS TO SUCCESS
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Sensory-Friendly Dressing Techniques

Dressing is an important daily activity in a child's life. However, sensory processing challenges can affect a child's ability to engage in this task. Fabrics, fasteners and the body movements involved in dressing activities may make undressing and dressing an uncomfortable experience, causing distress to both child and parent. Occupational therapists can help provide sensory strategies to optimize comfort and independence in this self-care activity.

Sensory Processing

This refers to a child's ability to process sensory input such as sounds, sights, textures, deep pressure and changes in body position. Some children may be over-responsive to sensory information, which is classified as sensory sensitivity or sensory avoiding. For these children, it can be difficult to tolerate the process of getting dressed and wearing clothes for long periods of time, impacting their self-care and functional skillset (Armstrong et al., 2013).

What may this look like?

- Tags or different clothing textures bother them
- Become distressed when changing their diaper
- Dislike tighter clothing
- Dislike the feeling of seams in their clothes
- Dislikes changing their body positioning in order to put arms into sleeves, legs into pant holes, etc.
- Unable to tolerate clothes being on for the duration of the day (NHS, 2024)

Tips and Tricks

- Using fabric softener to soften texture of clothing
- Use clothes without elastic waistbands, seams or tags
- Provide a calming environment - low lighting, calming music
- Keep consistent body positioning when getting dressed to prevent overwhelming the child
- Make sure detergent is unscented or without strong scents
- Try non-irritating clothing fabrics, such as cotton, satin, denim, bamboo and linen
- Looser clothing that is easy to move around in may be more comfortable
- Wearing a t-shirt underneath clothes to prevent feeling unpleasant clothing textures
- Providing deep pressure, such as bear hugs, log rolls or snuggling in a weighted blanket may help calm kids before attempting to dress (Armstrong et al., 2013)

References

Armstrong, D. C., Redman-Bentley, D., & Wardell, M. (2013). Differences in function among children with sensory processing disorders, physical disabilities, and typical development. Pediatric Physical Therapy, 25(3), 315-321. 10.1097/PEP.0b013e3182980cd4

Kyriacou, C., Forrester-Jones, R. & Triantafyllopoulou, P. Clothes, sensory experiences and autism: Is wearing the right fabric important?. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 53, 1495–1508 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05140-3

NHS. (2024, November 1). Dressing Strategies for Sensitive Children. NHS. https://bedslutonchildrenshealth.nhs.uk/services/bedfordshire-and-luton-childrens-occupational-therapy-service/helping-your-child-with-sensitivities/strategies-for-dressing-sensitive-children/

For an informational video about this topic, please go to this link:

https://youtu.be/RZhmW3xjwpY