

# Baby care

## Turn dressing into learning

**W**e're going outside to play," says Ms. Adams. She holds out a jacket to 14-month-old LaKiesha, "Let's put on your jacket so you won't get cold."

LaKiesha throws down the toy telephone she has been playing with and claps her hands.

"Put your arm through here," says Ms. Adams, gesturing toward the child's right side. The child thrusts her arm forward, and Ms. Adams wraps the jacket around to the other side. "Now the other arm. Great! Now the hood over your head."

LaKiesha claps her hands again and moves toward the door.

"Wait, we have to zip you up," says Ms. Adams, trying to hook the zipper. But LaKiesha is squirming and struggling. "OK, we'll settle for the snaps—one, two, three. All done!"

Seconds later, LaKiesha is running in the play yard, the wind blowing in her face.

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**P**utting on a jacket to go outdoors, taking off shoes for nap, and changing play clothes after finger painting may appear to be trivial chores in the daily care of infants. But all dressing activities offer rich opportunities for learning.

Dressing along with feeding, diapering, and napping make up most of baby's day. These routines require caring interaction between baby and caregiver. Caring interaction is the most important factor that defines quality in an early childhood education program (Dombro 1999).

### What children learn

Dressing is a self-help skill, an ordinary but necessary task of living. Children depend totally upon adults to accomplish this task during infancy, gradually learn to help by "putting your arm here," and do it almost entirely by themselves by kindergarten.

In the process, they learn how to operate buttons, snaps, zippers,

and hook-and-loop fasteners like Velcro™. These tasks require the development of fine-motor skills, which children will need for writing and drawing.

Because dressing is done on the body, children learn the names of body parts and pieces of clothing. Clothing becomes a material for learning colors, patterns, and textures as well as concepts like *front* and *back*, *top* and *bottom*, and *inside* and *outside*.

Dressing provides opportunities for social-emotional growth. Having diapers changed promptly and warm clothes to wear helps infants develop trust. As toddlers choose which socks or shirt to wear, they learn about their own likes and dislikes and how to make decisions. Being able to pull on a T-shirt or put on shoes with hook-and-loop fasteners builds self-confidence.

Dressing can also affirm family and cultural values. A T-shirt emblazoned with a university logo may indicate the expectation



of going to college. Patched overalls may convey thrift, and blinking-light sneakers, a sense of fun and whimsy.

## Working with parents

Clothing is an important item to discuss with parents at enrollment. As children grow, caregivers and parents need to continue communicating about children's changing clothing needs.

**Diapers.** Decide what type of diapers will be used and who furnishes them. If parents furnish diapers, agree on how many they will bring and what happens if the supply runs out. For example, your center will supply extra disposable diapers and bill parents at retail cost.

When parents ask about toilet training, discuss the signs that show when children are ready. When training begins, agree on words and materials to use—disposable or cloth training pants, for example—to keep center practices consistent with those in the home.

**Clothing.** Encourage parents to dress babies in the same clothes worn at home to foster a sense of safety and security. Ask for a spare set of clothes so you can change the baby if the need arises. Make sure all clothes and belongings are labeled with the child's name.

When babies become more mobile, encourage parents to dress their children in play clothes. Explain that clothes must be able to withstand active play and messy activities.

Toddlers need clothes that are easy for them to manage. These include pants with elastic waists, jackets with snaps, and shoes with Velcro™ fasteners.

**Footwear.** Booties, socks, and footed pajamas help keep a baby's feet warm. Avoid any footwear that's too small or tight. Shoes are not necessary until a child starts walking (Shelov 1998). Before that time, shoes can interfere with foot growth and the development of balance.

## Dressing routines

Throughout the day, dressing routines provide opportunities for learning. Here are some ideas.

- Talk with the baby about what you are doing. "Your overalls got wet. We're going to put on some dry pants. It feels good to be warm and dry." Encourage the back-and-forth of conversation: "Does that feel better?" Listen for coos and babbles and respond. "Yes, I hear you talking. Tell me about it."  
Describing what you are doing helps babies develop language. Toddlers learn what to expect, which gives them some sense of control and helps build trust.
- Introduce vocabulary about body parts and clothing. "We put *shoes* on your feet, and *mittens* on your hands." With older babies, introduce concepts: "Your shirt is *inside out*. We need to turn it to the *outside*."
- Sing or play a music box while dressing to develop auditory skills. Using the tune to "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush," for example, you might sing:  
"This is the way we change your diaper, change your diaper, change your diaper."  
This is the way we change your diaper so early in the morning."
- Beginning about 9 months, play counting games as you dress

the baby. For example, playfully touch each finger or toe and say: "Here are your fingers. One, two, three, four, five. Five little fingers on your hand." Count snaps or buttons while putting on a jacket: "One, two, three, four, ready to go out the door."

## Books about getting dressed

### Picture books for babies

- Bauer, Marion D. 2003. *Toes, Ears, and Nose!* New York: Little Simon.
- Bowie, C.W. 1998. *Busy Toes*. Watertown, Mass.: Charlesbridge.
- Kubler, Annie K. 2003. *Ten Little Fingers*. New York: Children's Play International.
- Miller, Margaret. 1988. *Whose Hat?* New York: Greenwillow.
- Miller, Margaret. 1991. *Whose Shoe?* New York: Greenwillow.
- Oxenbury, Helen. 1981. *Dressing*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Wells, Rosemary. 1998. *Max's New Suit*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

### Story books for toddlers

- Carlstrom, Nancy. 1986. *Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear?* New York: Aladdin.
- Cole, Joanna. 2000. *My Big Boy Potty*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gorbachev, Valeri. 2004. *Whose Hat Is It?* New York: HarperCollins.
- Hines, Anna Grossnickle. 2001. *Whose Shoes?* San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt.
- London, Jonathan. 1992. *Froggy Gets Dressed*. New York: Penguin.
- Paul, Ann Whitford. 1998. *Hello Toes! Hello Feet!* New York: DK Children.

- Let the child help as appropriate. Children learn how to undress before they learn how to dress. By 12 months, they can usually pull off their caps, socks, and shoes. By 18 months, they can usually unzip their jackets. Meanwhile they can become partners in dressing by lifting arms to put on a shirt and poking a foot into a shoe.
- Give the child choices whenever possible. “Do you want to put on your cap now or when you get to the door?” “Your shirt got some paint on it. Do you want to wipe it off with a paper towel? Or would you rather put on a clean shirt?” Choices help children develop independence and practice making decisions.
- Step in to prevent frustration. Sometimes children choose a task they can’t complete or get quite right. Enrique tries to button his sweater, for example, and gets frustrated. “Buttoning is harder than snaps,” you might say. “Let me help you now, and you’ll be able to do this yourself when you get a little bigger.”
- If children resist help, involve them in the process. “If you hold the button, I’ll slip the buttonhole over it.” Acknowledge the child’s feelings: “I know you want to do the buttons yourself. You like learning new things.”
- If children continue to resist, be respectful. If a diaper needs changing, be firm and finish fast. If a sweater needs buttoning, you might give the child the option of experiencing the cold for a few minutes before offering to help again.
- Avoid letting a protest turn into

a power struggle. Recognize that toddlers need to assert their independence and they do it with everyone, not just you. Instead of giving in to your anger, focus on the need for dressing and what children can learn.

## Dressing activities

Dressing routines are excellent learning opportunities, especially for babies from 1 to 6 months old. As babies grow, use morning and afternoon play time to help children learn dressing as a self-help skill. Consider expanding the “getting dressed” theme to other activities that promote physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development.

Select an open play area away from cribs and highchairs. Put infants on blankets or soft rugs on the floor, in infant seats, or propped against pillows.

Make sure the area is safe and free of clutter. Cover electrical outlets, and lock floor cabinets. Supervise babies closely while they are on the floor.

Remember that babies have limited attention spans. At first they stay engaged for about two minutes. Later they can last for 10 to 15 minutes. When babies get bored, do something else.

## Color cuffs

(newborns and older)

**Here’s what you need:**

- old baby socks of different colors and textures
- scissors
- colorful fabric scraps of various shapes, about 1-inch square
- needle and thread

1. Cut off the cuff of a baby’s sock to make a small ring of fabric.

2. Sew colored fabric shapes on the cuff. Knot securely.
3. Slip the cuff onto baby’s wrist or ankle and talk about it. “Look, Josie. Here’s a red circle. Can you see it?”

## Colorful socks

(5 months and older)

**Here’s what you need:**

- clean adult socks in bright colors

1. Pull one sock half way over the baby’s hand.
2. Move the baby’s hand in front of the face to attract the child’s attention.
3. Talk about what the baby sees.

**Variations:** Try socks of different textures and let the baby feel the difference. Instead of a sock, loosely tie a short length of brightly colored ribbon to the baby’s wrist or ankle.

## Trying on hats

(5 months and older)

**Here’s what you need:**

- unbreakable mirror
- 2 or 3 hats

1. Place the mirror at the baby’s eye level, whether down low if the child is on the floor or up higher if the child is seated in a highchair.
2. Talk about the baby’s reflection in the mirror. “Look, Andrew. You can see yourself in the mirror.”
3. Put a hat on the baby for a few seconds. “See the hat. It’s too big for your head. Off it goes. Let’s try another.”
4. Put another hat on the baby and continue.

**Variation:** For 1-year-olds, use hats to play a game: “Look, Jeremy. Here’s a hat. I put the hat on my head. Oh! Now I take it off.” Give a hat to each child. See if they can copy what you did.



## Spice socks

(12 months and older)

### Here's what you need:

- spices such as ground cloves or cinnamon
- cotton balls
- baby sock
- thread or string
- 1/2 -inch elastic
- needle and thread

1. Shake a small bit of spice onto a few cotton balls.
2. Put the cotton balls into a baby sock and tie the top tightly closed.
3. Sew a length of elastic to the sock top and hang it securely over the changing table.
4. Show the child how to grab and pull the sock closer to smell it. Talk about the smell.

**Variations:** Try different scents such as baby powder or perfume. Draw a face on the sock or sew on a rattle for added fun.

## First dress-up

(12 months and older)

### Here's what you need:

- large dress-up clothes that are easy for children to put on, such as T-shirts, shoes, hats, handbags
- unbreakable mirror

1. Invite children to dress up. Give help where needed.
2. Let children look at themselves in the mirror and walk around wearing the clothes.
3. Talk with children about the clothes and how they look.

**Variations:** Provide dolls or stuffed animals and simple doll clothes with one snap or piece of Velcro™. Let children dress the dolls or stuffed animals.

## Fill the bag

(12 months and older)

### Here's what you need:

- assortment of purses or tote bags, at least one for each child
- items to put in the bags, such as plastic combs, scarves, toys, and socks

1. Encourage children to open and fill the bag with items of their choice.
2. Allow children to dump the items, carry the bag around, and play as they wish.

## Shoe prints

(12 months and older)

### Here's what you need:

- washable paint and paint tray
- butcher paper
- tape
- markers
- old adult and children shoes, donated by parents or bought from a thrift store
- newspaper

1. Tape butcher paper to the floor.
2. Invite children to choose a pair of children's shoes and help put them on. If they're too tight, choose another pair. If too loose, stuff with newspaper to fit.
3. Have children step in the paint tray, one at a time, and walk across the paper. Label each child's shoe prints.
4. Let children choose a pair of adult shoes. Help children put them on and stuff with newspaper until they fit.
5. Repeat the process.
6. Remove the shoes and encourage children to compare the shoe prints.
7. Hang the paper for everyone to enjoy.

**Caution:** This is a slippery activity. Guide children as they make the prints. Use wet paper towels to clean the shoes.

## Sock dress-up

(18 to 24 months)

### Here's what you need:

- dishpan or box
- clean, colorful adult socks of different colors and textures
- unbreakable mirror

1. Fill the dishpan with socks. Place the mirror on the floor where the children can see their feet.
2. Help children take off their shoes and socks.
3. Invite the children to choose any of the socks and put them on.
4. Talk about the socks and how the child's feet look in the mirror.

**Caution:** Supervise children so they don't slip or trip.

## Sticky tape

(18 to 24 months)

### Here's what you need:

- masking tape

1. Tear off a piece of masking tape and stick it to a child's shirt or pants.
2. Show the child where it is. Say: "There's a piece of tape on your pocket. Can you pull it off?"
3. If the child has trouble, lift one end of the tape. This activity gives children practice in using a pincer grasp, using thumb and index finger.

**Variation:** Use wide masking tape, and let children scribble on the roll with a marker before giving them a piece of tape.

## Zipper board

(18 to 24 months)

### Here's what you need:

- 2 or 3 small zippers in working order
- fabric, about 12 inches square
- sewing machine
- stapler
- sturdy tape

1. Sew closed zippers, side by side and about an inch apart, onto the fabric.
2. Staple the fabric to a wall, bookcase, or sturdy wooden board. Cover the staples with tape so the children won't pull them out.
3. Point out zippers on clothing such as jackets.
4. Show children how to zip and unzip the zippers on the zipper board. Invite children to practice zipping and unzipping.

**Caution:** Watch children so they don't get fingers pinched.

**Variations:** Sew strips of snaps (cut from an old jacket), large buttons and buttonholes, and other fasteners on fabric to make similar practice boards.

### Use your judgment

Remember that caps, capes, and other clothing with neck straps or strings could pose a strangling hazard. Don't let children wear these items when climbing on jungle gyms or other equipment.

If you think infant jewelry, such as a silver neck chain, could pose a hazard, discuss the matter with parents.

## Jewelry box

(18 to 24 months)

### Here's what you need:

- safe, easy-to-put-on jewelry, such as bracelets, paper-chain necklaces, crowns, paper brooches to tape on
- box or dishpan
- unbreakable mirror

1. Encourage children to put on the jewelry. Give help where needed.
2. Talk with children about how fancy they look.  
**Caution:** Make sure jewelry has no small beads, charms, or other pieces that a child could choke on. Don't use metal chains or cords as necklaces; they pose a strangling hazard.

## Dress the teacher

(18 to 24 months)

### Here's what you need:

- adult clothing articles, 2 or 3 of each, such as scarves, hats, handbags, mittens
- basket to hold the articles

1. Play a pretend game with a child: "I'm going shopping and I need to get dressed. Can you find a hat for me to wear?"
2. Let the child choose a hat and put it on your head.
3. Continue the game, asking for a scarf and then a handbag, for example.
4. End by saying: "There, I'm all dressed. Thanks for your help."

## Washing clothes

(18 to 24 months)

### Here's what you need:

- shallow pans of water, one for every two children
- mild dishwashing detergent
- cord or rope for clothesline
- doll clothes and rags
- waterproof aprons, one for each child.

1. Tie the rope between two trees or two chairs outside. It should be waist-high to children.
2. Squirt a small dab of detergent into the pan of water and swish to make bubbles.
3. Encourage children to put on an apron and "wash the clothes." Show them how to wring out the clothes and drape them over the line to dry.

**Caution:** Containers of water pose a drowning hazard; supervise children carefully.

## Glove match

(24 months and older)

### Here's what you need:

- 5 pairs of gloves, various colors and sizes
- basket or box

1. Mix up gloves in the basket.
2. Invite children to choose a glove and find its mate.  
**Variation:** Decorate each pair of gloves a different way. You might paint on flowers, or use a marker to make polka dots, for example. Substitute shoes or socks for gloves. Find old shoes at a thrift store and paint them different colors such as red and purple.

## Clothes cards

(24 months and older)

### Here's what you need:

- photos of children's clothes, such as dress, jacket, shorts, shirt, long pants, pajamas, and swim suit, cut from magazines or catalogs
- cardboard cut into equal size pieces, such as 4 by 6 inches
- glue
- scissors
- clear adhesive-backed plastic or laminator

1. Glue each photo to a piece of cardboard.
2. Cover with clear adhesive or laminate.
3. Show the pictures to children and name each article of clothing. Talk about boys' and girls' clothes, and when to wear each item.

**Variations:** Punch holes on one side of the card and make a book using brads or rings. Add photos of specialized children's clothing, such as raincoat, ballet tutu, and cowboy boots to the collection. Provide real clothing like these for dress-up play. Find two of the same photo in duplicate catalogs, and create a matching game.

## Who's wearing it?

(24 months and older)

1. Sit with a small group of children in a circle. Explain that you are going to talk about what one child is wearing and see if the children can guess who it is.
2. You might say, for example: "I'm looking at a girl who's wearing a blue shirt and green pants. On her feet are white tennis shoes and blue socks. Can you find her?"
3. Continue playing the game until you have described each of the children.

### Action rhymes for dressing

#### One, Two, Fasten My Shoe

After putting on their shoes, children can go through the motions described.

One, two, fasten my shoe.  
Three, four, shut the door.  
Five, six, pick up sticks.  
Seven, eight, lay them straight.  
Nine, ten, a big fat hen.  
Let's turn around and count again.

#### If You're Wearing Red Today

(Tune: "Muffin Man")

Use this rhyme as a transition or group activity.

If you're wearing red today,  
Red today, red today.  
If you're wearing red today,  
Stand up and say "Hoo-ray."

(Repeat for other colors.)

## References

- Albrecht, Kay and Linda G. Miller. 2000. *Innovations: The Comprehensive Infant Curriculum*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House.
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