

This is the way I dress myself, dress myself, dress myself ...

An old popular song goes like this:

"Button up your overcoat, when the wind blows free,
Take good care of yourself, you belong to me!"

But the question could be, when living with a young child, just how do I accomplish this? Learning to dress yourself is just one of the many life skills that an infant, a toddler, and a pre-schooler master step by step, like eating, sleeping, and moving. No different from these other capacities, each tiny bit of success in learning to dress herself builds joyful self-confidence and a sense of competence, a sense that she can succeed in her world.

Picture the joyful look on a toddler's face when he manages to pull off his sock, and struggles to put it back on again, over and over. The persistence in trying to manage the sock, and then the shoe, shows us a picture of learning how to learn. Trying again, and again, sometimes making progress, sometimes making no progress that we can see, young children are learning to be active in their lives, taking ownership, taking risks, and caring for their basic needs of warmth and protection by clothing themselves. Another contrasting picture is the five or six year old child who expects and depends upon an adult to do all the activity of dressing for her, who becomes a limp dishrag at the very thought of putting on a snowsuit, a jacket, or boots!

Curiously enough, we often ask how we can help a child learn to crawl, or walk, or to speak – capacities that our children actually learn fully out of themselves, by themselves, and in their own time if there are older people in the environment who move, walk, and speak. And we wonder if it is too early to teach a child to learn to read, and so many other things. But we never seem to ask when it is time to begin to help a child learn to dress himself!

Some things children learn out of themselves, and other things are *social* learnings – meaning that they learn them with us and through our relationships with them. Dressing is a central one of these learnings! And when can we begin? Almost from birth, amazingly enough. For even in their beginning chaotic movements, very young infants are interested in us and can begin to take great joy in those special, intimate times that we spend together when we care for their bodies. If we work slowly, giving her a chance to notice and participate, give her time to respond and to learn what we are doing when we bathe, diaper, or dress her slowly, over time, she will come to expect these movements that we make, to anticipate them joyfully, and to want to be involved in them. If we give time, and notice, we may see that a leg or arm reaches out to help – not yet skillfully, but with a desire to help us. At the beginning, we do most of the cooperating!

But step-by-step, we can lead our children to a joyful sense of competence and confidence, in addition to a feeling of relationship and cooperation. Dressing is hopefully not something we do *to* a child, but something we do *with* a child. If we do it together, it can become a pleasant or even joyful shared moment; if we do it *to* a child, sooner or later the child will gain the strength to resist our forceful uncomfortable efforts. Dressing *is* an ideal time to teach gentle touch, respect for another person's body, patience, and task completion. All these are invaluable life skills, and since the curriculum presents itself so frequently, why not make the most of it?

By the time they can walk, their skills in caring for themselves will give them added security. The child who has practiced hundreds of times with an interested adult will be interested himself and will have real skills, in contrast to the child who has been 'dressed' by someone else, who has a daily reinforcement that this is something beyond his skills or abilities. By the time your child reaches that magical age when their sense of self comes forth strongly, the 'I want to do it myself' moment, we can support and celebrate their need and wish for independence!