

# Dressing your child for care

by Anne Stonehouse

The clothes we wear and the way we dress are an important part of our everyday experience. Among other things, clothing is one way that many people express their culture, personality and individuality. In relation to child care, the clothes your child wears can make a difference to the quality of their experiences there and can even affect how and how much your child gets involved in the experiences at child care. What they wear can also influence your child's health, safety, comfort, and wellbeing. This Factsheet will give you an overview of some things to consider in relation to the clothes your child wears in child care.

## Dressing for health, safety, comfort and wellbeing

Some issues you may find it helpful to consider when choosing clothes for your child include:

**Temperature.** It is important that children are not over or under dressed, and that clothing suits the temperature. The smaller children are, the more easily they can become chilled or overheated. Natural fibers such as cotton are generally cooler than acrylic fabrics. It is a good idea to send spare clothes for unexpected changes of weather, especially during change of season, when the weather can be unpredictable.

**Footwear.** Children need to wear safe, comfortable shoes that fit well. Shoes must provide support as well as protection for the feet. Shoes that give little protection or support or that have raised heels or soles can cause accidents. Shoes with soles that grip make climbing and other physical activities easier and safer for children.

**Sun protection.** Children need protection from the sun. Tightly woven fabrics such as t-shirt material, long sleeves and long trousers offer good protection. Hats are essential and should have soft brims to allow for movement and to provide for maximum protection. Talk to your child care professionals about what they would like you to provide to protect your child from the sun. They should be able to provide you with information about their sun protection policy, and the clothing they recommend in this.

**Clothing types and accessories.** The design and fit of their clothes and accessories can affect your child's safety. For example, long hems can cause tripping, and items such as necklaces, long drawstrings and ribbons can also be risks. Younger children tend to be more vulnerable to clothing related safety hazards.

**Clothing fabrics.** Some children are sensitive to 'scratchy' fabrics, and some may have an allergic reaction to some treatments on clothes, including particular detergents. All clothes that children wear should be low fire danger.

## Respect for children

Showing respect for children and appreciation of their individuality is important to the development of their self-concept. You show respect for your child when you allow them to make some decisions about the clothing that they wear by offering them choices from several acceptable options.

Young children sometimes have definite clothing preferences. For example, they may insist on wearing a particular colour, refuse to wear certain colours or want to wear the same item of clothing for days on end. You will need to decide what really matters about your child's clothing. For example, issues related to health, safety and your child's play and learning are important. However, fashion, looking stylish or being neat or attractive are usually not so important. Clothing does not need to match or colours be complementary if your child has strong preferences. If your child succeeds in putting on a shirt without help, it matters less if it is back to front or inside out than it matters that your child has succeeded in helping to dress themselves.

Even very young children may take an interest in what they and others wear. Many school-aged children, and some younger children, are conscious of labels and fashions. Some may want clothing that shows favourite characters. Talk about tastes and preferences in clothing and fashion with your child and try to avoid giving them the message that he or she is being 'judged' either positively or negatively by their clothing.

## Dressing to support children's play and learning

Some types of clothing can tend to hinder children's participation in some activities. When clothes fit properly and are not too loose or tight, children can move freely and comfortably and participate in experiences. Dresses and skirts may interfere with girls' participation in physical activities, and wearing trousers or shorts may encourage them to move more freely and reduce their self-consciousness. This may be particularly

the case for older children. It can be helpful to talk with your child about the clothes they feel most comfortable in for different activities, and to help them to choose clothes that will be practical.

The clothes children wear can affect the development of their independence and self-help skills. For example, trousers that fit comfortably and have an elastic waist are easier for young children to pull down and up than tighter fitting clothes, or ones with zips and studs. Tops with large necks, cardigans, slip-on shoes or shoes with Velcro fasteners are easier for children who want to dress themselves. Bigger buttons or toggles are also easier for children to manage than small buttons or press studs.

## Special clothes

Children may sometimes want to wear special clothes, shoes or accessories to child care, such as a birthday dress or new shoes. When this happens it is a good idea to consider how these special items will be kept clean and safe while your child is at care. You may be able to send in an apron or an over shirt to protect special clothes during messy play such as art/craft, sand or water play, or ask the service to make sure that your child wears the protective clothing they supply. Some services may be able to change a child into clothes for messy activities, either ones you have brought or ones belonging to the service. This can be a good solution if you and the child care professionals discuss and agree on it together. Alternatively, you may be able to encourage your child to wear the special items in to the service to show off to their peers and child care professionals, and to then put these away in a safe place for the rest of the day.

It is important to remember that while they will do their best, child care professionals cannot always guarantee that special items will be kept safe or undamaged, in the busy child care environment.

## Communicating with the service

Talk with the child care professionals at your service about suitable clothing. They can tell you about your responsibilities and theirs related to children's clothing, including how they manage dirty or soiled clothing and whether or not they will wash it. It's important that you discuss any questions or concerns that you have and share your views. Equally important is appreciating the points of view of child care professionals, and the responsibilities they have for a number of children.

Child care professionals may make requests about your child's clothing, including that you:

- label all clothing with your child's name
- provide spare clothes in case your child has an accident (especially during the time when your child is learning to use the toilet) or if there is a change in the weather
- supply one or more sun hats
- encourage your child to dress appropriately for the weather and to wear a hat.

As with all issues related to your child's experience in child care, the best outcome is for you to be able to have open discussions with the professionals in the service about your child's needs and how these can be accommodated in the service. It is important for the service to know what you think and about what matters to you in relation to your child's clothing. For example, there may be cultural and religious issues related to the clothing your child wears that child care professionals need to be aware of.

When differences arise, get them out in the open. Honest, respectful, two-way communication can help families and child care professionals learn about each other's perspective, and can increase the knowledge and understanding of both. Working together with child care professionals at your service will help to ensure that clothing and dressing practices support the best outcomes for your child ■

### References and further reading

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