



## Helping Children to Help Themselves - Dressing and Undressing

by Mercedes Paine Castle

Supporting your child's independence in dressing and undressing at home can make a difference in how successful they are in such activities at school. An inconsistent expectation between home and school might create disharmony. If we are asking a child to do something that they have limited experience with at home, this may be frustrating, and this learning process may take longer. When parents and teachers work together in service of the child, we can limit these frustrations and misunderstandings.

At school, the teachers start breaking down the steps to pushing off pants, removing diapers, and sitting on the toilet from infancy. Our expectation of the child changes as they grow and mature, and we are always observing each child for their signs of readiness for the next level of difficulty. Together, we work towards a goal that elicits a maximum effort, gained through cooperation and effort towards a new or higher skill level. In our experience, children under two years of age are successful in taking off and putting on their shoes and clothing. Regardless of age, the teachers approach dressing and undressing as a practical life skill, and encourage children to be as independent as possible in these endeavors.

At All Roads we support each child in their unique place of their own development. Important growth and development happens when children negotiate and overcome challenges. The feeling of accomplishment that one gets when a challenge is overcome is the reinforcer and the independence that the child achieves is their reward for successfully negotiating a problem or acquiring a new skill.

This feeling of accomplishment is what encourages perseverance in the face of difficulty. These relatively small accomplishments of basic skills reward the curious, encourage problem solving as transformative play, and they form the solid foundation on which a healthy sense of self is built. They will become the kind of person who challenges themselves in learning new skills and exploring new cultures throughout their life. They will try even when they are not positive that they will succeed. They will be carried forward by their intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation will authentically motivate an individual to successfully negotiate the world around them.

We focus on encouragement as opposed to praise at All Roads. When we encourage the children their intrinsic motivation is supported through thoughtful words and caring gestures. When supporting this idea of intrinsic motivation we recognize that feedback that places value on the teacher's approval or disapproval is counterproductive. Instead of saying "Good job" we might instead say "Wow, you worked really hard and you got those pants on all by yourself! Now you are ready to go play outside." or maybe "Was that 'I can' or 'I can't'?" or "Who put those pants on? You did! All by yourself!"

Along with encouragement we are sure to give them the time that they need to negotiate the task at hand. When we do things for the child that they are capable of doing on their own we rob them of the experiences that they need to grow. Specifically, we take away opportunities for them to negotiate their own needs and practice being independent. Becoming proficient at dressing is a process, and children need lots of practice in order to get better at it. The more practice the better. Many young children are drawn to their cubbies and the bathroom driven by their own unconscious desire to understand and become proficient in this process.

Here are some ways that you can support your child in dressing and undressing at home:

- **Place your child's clothing in a place that they can easily access.** Jackets and rain pants on low hooks in an appropriate area for them to change. Daily clothes in a dresser or low shelf that can be easily accessed and operated. If they pull all their clothes out they have just created an excellent opportunity to learn how to put their clothes away. Remove any weather inappropriate clothing. Bringing parent and teacher expectations into harmony serves the child in their growth and development.
- **Supply your child with clothing that can be operated successfully.** Buttons, zippers and snaps are difficult but not impossible. Practice at home until your child is familiar with the challenge presented before you bring those jeans to school. When your child can operate their overalls successfully at home all by themselves they are ready to come to school in them.
- **Eliminate stretchy type pants from your girl's wardrobe.** Sweat pants with bunched ankles, stretch pants with narrow openings are frustrating for both the children and a teacher. Feet often get stuck going through. Make sure that the foot hole is wide enough for a foot to go into and out of easily.
- **Lay out clothing for school the next day the night before to avoid morning conflict.** Involve your child in choosing their clothes for the next day and even laying them out. The more children are a part of the processes governing their lives the more they will want to participate in those processes.
- **Allow time in the morning for your child to take the time that they need to be independent in dressing.** This can be quite difficult but everyone will have a happier morning if you can schedule enough time. No one likes to be rushed. It can feel extremely frustrating to a child that is trying to accomplish a task.
- **When dressing, establish an order in which clothes go on and stick to it.** Try to include your child in setting the order even let them take the lead. This order helps reinforce the routine, and brings comfort when familiar. Once it's been established don't change it arbitrarily – shifts happen gradually over time, honor these by observing and respond confidently once a new strategy is planned and discussed.
- **Isolate the difficulty in taking off each item of clothing.** When removing a shirt, show your child how to pinch the end of the sleeve and pull their arms out one arm at a time. Then let them push their shirt up over their head themselves.
- **Isolate the difficulty in putting on each item of clothing.** When putting on a shirt, start by stretching the neck hole a bit and place it just over your child's head. Let them pull the shirt down themselves. Hold the shirt at the bottom, so that the arm holes are easily accessible.

– **Push pants off at the waistband.** We don't really pull pants down, rather they are pushed. Tuck a finger in your child's waistband and say “ Push here, can you feel my hand? “

– **Lay pants out on the floor.** Show your child the waistband, and the tag goes in the back. Crouch behind your child, pinch the waistband so that they can see the opening. If they get both legs in one hole, let that happen. When your child notices, you can say “I see you have both legs in one hole, let's try again.”

– **If your child gets stuck, acknowledge their feelings. If they ask for help, say “What part do you need help with?”** Something that I say is “I am helping you with my words.” Sometimes, all it takes is you putting your hand on their clothing to move forward. You might say “Can you feel my hand at your waistband?”

– **Enjoy this time with your child.** Use laughter and tickles to diffuse tension. Caregiving routines are esteem building moments truly they are moments when we connect and grow together.

You can support your child at school in dressing and undressing by making sure that their clothing is weather appropriate, media free (except for underpants), and hold the promise of successful independent operation. The best type of pants have an elastic waistband and wide leg holes. The best shirts have a large neck opening, free of snaps and buttons, and are loose enough to operate independently. Slip on or velcro fastened shoes are ideal. Clothing and shoes should fit properly.

With parents and teachers working together to bring our expectations of the child into harmony, we serve the child in their growth and development. We support the child in learning how to dress and undress. When we liberate the child from their dependence on adults for these self-care routines, we free them to experience a deeper sense of connection with the adults in their lives and a sense of accomplishment that they carry with them on their life journey.

*Mercedes Paine Castle founded All Roads Learning Community in 2003, and has since been guiding infants and toddlers towards independence.*

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