

Children's clothing in child care

By Anne Stonehouse

The clothing children wear while in care influences the quality of their experiences as clothes can affect their health, safety, comfort, play and learning. These issues apply to the clothes children wear to child care, the extra clothes provided by families, clothes provided by the child care service and to dress-up clothes.

Dressing children is one of the many aspects of children's care where services and families share responsibility and need to work in collaboration to promote positive outcomes for children.

Daily practice

Clothing and dressing play important roles in children's learning and development. Child care professionals can give children positive messages about clothes, and support their learning through daily practices and programs. Strategies to support positive outcomes for children include:

Discuss clothing with children. Talk about tastes and preferences in clothing and fashion with children. Even very young children can have a keen interest in what they and others wear. As children become older they often also become interested in clothing that shows favourite characters. Many school aged children, and even some younger children, are conscious of labels and fashions. When discussing clothing with children, adults should avoid sending children the message that they are being 'judged' either positively or negatively by what they wear.

Model appropriate dress. For example, adults should wear hats and sun safe clothing while outside. They should wear clothes and shoes that are safe, and that allow them to comfortably and easily interact with and care for children.

Make the selection of clothes and dressing a pleasant experience. When children become interested in dressing and undressing themselves, make the tasks achievable and give as little help as is needed for the child to continue. For younger children, this may mean using strategies such as pulling a sock partially off and asking the child to take it off the rest of the way. Let children try when they want to, and offer them encouragement. Like other routines, dressing activities offer a valuable chance for quality, one to one interactions with children.

Supply suitable dress up clothes. Provide a varied collection of suitable dress up clothes for both boys and girls, including hats, shoes, scarves and necklaces. Starting at about one year of age, children begin to enjoy dressing up. In the beginning it may be a simple act such as putting on a hat, draping a scarf around the shoulders, or attempting to walk around in big shoes. Older



children, from about three years, will want dress-ups for role play, for example, astronaut, doctor, mum/dad, chef, fire fighter. Child care professionals need to consider health and safety issues when choosing dress up clothes, as well as how dress up clothing can support children's developing self-help skills.

Dressing children to promote their health, safety and wellbeing

Children's clothing can have a significant impact upon their health, safety and wellbeing. This can relate not only to the types of clothes that children wear, but also to when and how these are worn. A child's age is also an important consideration for child care professionals when they determine how a child's clothing may affect their comfort and safety. Some issues that child care professionals may consider include:

Temperature. It is important that children are not over or under dressed, and that clothing suits the temperature. The smaller the child the more easily they can become chilled or overheated. Natural

fibres such as cotton are generally cooler than acrylic fabrics. Babies and younger toddlers should be dressed warmly for sleep, and children should be checked regularly to see that they are covered if they are not dressed warmly enough to sleep comfortably without covers. To check if a child is warm enough, touch the tummy or back rather than hands or feet, as this gives a truer indication of the child's body temperature.

Footwear. Safe, comfortable footwear that fits well is essential. 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 in the dress up area, for example those with high heels, can also be a safety hazard.

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 provide for maximum protection.

Clothing types and accessories. It is important that the design and fit of clothes and accessories, including those for dressing up play, are safe. For example, long hems can put children at risk of tripping, and items such as capes, scarves, necklaces, long drawstrings and ribbons also present strangulation or tripping hazards. Child care professionals need to ensure that children engaging in dress up play are carefully supervised to monitor any clothing hazards. The younger the child, the more carefully clothing safety hazards need to be considered.

Clothing fabrics. Children can be very sensitive to scratchy fabrics, and some may have an allergic reaction to some treatments on clothes, including particular detergents. All clothes that children wear, especially those for sleeping, must be low fire danger.

Dressing children to support their play and learning

Clothing can either support or hinder children's experiences and development. Clothes that fit properly, without being too loose or tight, allow children to move freely and comfortably and participate freely in experiences.

For girls, dresses and skirts may interfere with their participation in physical activities. Wearing trousers or shorts may allow for free movement and reduce children's self-consciousness, particularly for older children.

The clothes children wear can significantly affect the development of their self-help skills. For example, trousers that fit loosely and have an elastic waist are easier for young children to pull down and up



than ones with zips and studs. Tops with large necks, cardigans, slip-on shoes or shoes with Velcro are also good clothing choices to support children who want to dress themselves. Bigger buttons or toggles are also easier for children to manage than small buttons or press studs. Child care professionals can encourage and support families to provide children with clothes that will help them to manage some dressing and toileting tasks independently.

Children often pick up adults' messages that certain clothes, shoes or accessories are 'special' and must be taken very good care of. A child who comes to child care wearing something special may be reluctant to take part in experiences for fear of damaging their clothing. This is especially true for messy play, such as water, sand and dirt play, or painting activities. Children should be supported to dress comfortably and appropriately for these experiences, or they should be provided with adequate clothing protection.

Respect for children

All practices in child care, including clothing policies and procedures, need to convey respect for children and an appreciation of their individuality. Child care professionals can show respect for children by building in opportunities for them to make choices in relation to getting dressed, and the clothing they wear.

The younger the child the more control adults usually have over their clothing. However, even very young children should have opportunities to make choices. To give children these opportunities, adults need to decide what genuinely matters. For example, issues related to health, safety and the child's play and learning are important, whereas fashion, aesthetics, and sometimes even convention are usually not of great importance to what young children wear. Items of clothing need not match, or colours complement if a child has strong

preferences about what he or she wears. If a child succeeds in putting on their shirt, it does not matter if it is back to front or inside out. What matters is that the child has accomplished the task.

Toddlers in particular may have specific clothing preferences, such as insisting on wearing a particular colour or piece of clothing. It is important that child care professionals give the child a choice whenever possible and to ensure that the choices offered are among items that are suitable. Offering a variety of acceptable options will ensure that the child's preference can be accepted. Unless there is a health or safety issue involved, it's best to go along with children's fads or strong preferences, as these are not harmful, and will eventually pass.

Child care professionals also need to be aware of individual children's and families' attitudes regarding privacy and modesty when children are having their clothes changed or are dressing themselves. Older children need access to safe comfortable and private spaces for dressing and changing. Services need to work with individuals and families to ensure that individual needs and preferences are understood and catered for.

Respect for families

Respect is important in addressing issues about clothing with families. Sometimes there are differences in the views of child care professionals and families about appropriate clothing for children in care, and being respectful and understanding of families' choices is essential.

Children often come to child care in clothes that may be considered to be 'too good' for care, and these children may be reluctant to participate in experiences because of what they are wearing, or their clothes may interfere with their play. Some services may feel that the best solution is to change the child into spare clothes from the service, and to change the child into his or her own clothes before they are collected. This is a good solution if the service and families discuss it and agree on it together. However, if this is done without collaboration with the family, it is disrespectful and dishonest and may give confusing or negative messages to the child.

If the child is worried that his or her clothes will be soiled or damaged, try to work out a solution that respects the precious item, respects the family's choice of clothing and allows the child to participate in a range of experiences. Even if the child doesn't appear to be inhibited by the special clothing, talk to families about the issue. Let them know that the reality is, even though you would like to, you cannot ensure the clothing will not be soiled or damaged.

Avoid criticising or judging families. They may dress their child in their 'good' clothes to demonstrate to you or to other families that they care about their child or that they are doing well financially. They may send the child in good clothes out of respect for the service, much in the same way that people dress up for a special occasion.

Alternatively, some families may not have the resources for their child to have a variety of suitable clothes, or they may not always have access to a washing machine. Children who are dressed in too many or too few clothes may come from families who are adjusting to a new climate, or from families who have particular cultural traditions regarding clothing. There may be a range of cultural and religious issues related to dress that child care professionals need to be aware of, although it is important that child care professionals avoid making assumptions about families based on cultural background or religion.

Communicating with families

Effective communication with families is central to promoting positive outcomes for children. Services should ensure that families are provided with information about the service's clothing policy and procedures, using strategies such as enrolment and orientation processes, noticeboards, notes and newsletters, e-mails and the service handbook. Services may find it helpful to provide families with gentle reminders as the seasons change about appropriate clothing for children.

When differences arise between families and child care professionals about any aspect of a child's care, there needs to be discussion with families. 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 each party.



As with all communication with families, whether written or verbal, aim to ensure that it:

- is friendly and non-judgmental;
- conveys a sense of shared responsibility and working together;
- is clear. For example, displaying some appropriate items of clothing or pictures of them may assist families;
- invites families' feedback and comments;
- is communicated to those who need the information. Sometimes a 'blanket' communication is less effective than targeting the specific families who require particular information; and
- respects individual differences in families and children.

Families usually have a significant influence on the way their children are clothed for child care. Child care professionals and families need to work together to ensure that children's clothing supports positive experiences for the child.

Clothing policies and guidelines

Clear policies and procedures about appropriate dress for children are important, both to guide practice in the service and to ensure that families and professionals operate with the same understandings. A clothing policy should include information about the clothing that families and the service are expected to provide, the responsibilities the service will take in this area and how children's health, safety, comfort and freedom to play and learn will be promoted through appropriate clothing practices.

It is also helpful to have a clear procedure for how the service will deal with children's dirty or soiled clothing as this can prevent misunderstandings. This procedure should be clear about whose responsibility it is to wash dirty clothing.

The service needs to ensure that the information included in the clothing policy is current and in line with recommendations from recognised authorities. The source(s) of the information used to develop the clothing policy should be clearly written in the policy, and the policy should also include, in writing, the date it was developed or reviewed. To access information for the development or review of their clothing policy, services may consider seeking advice from organisations that have expertise in areas such as:

- sun safety;
- safe sleeping;
- children's health and development;
- general child safety; and
- hygiene practices.

Clothing and dressing is a key part of every person's daily life experience. Clothing can provide protection from hazards and the elements, it can support or hinder participation in certain activities, and it can be a key aspect of an individual's expression of their culture, taste and personality. Child care professionals can work with children and families to ensure that clothing and dressing practices maximise each child's experiences and development in child care ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

Principles: 1.3, 1.4, 2.2, 5.3 and 6.5

References and further information

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