



Complex Child E-Magazine

www.ComplexChild.com

Choosing Clothing for Children with Special Needs by Susan Agrawal

I can't even remember how many clothing items I've received as holiday or birthday gifts that I've donated to charity because my daughter simply cannot wear them. Because my daughter cannot play with most toys, a lot of friends and relatives seem to think clothing is a good choice for a gift. What they don't realize is that some items of clothing are next to impossible to get on her due to her muscle tone, while others interfere with her medical equipment.

My intent is to set forth a few guidelines for family and friends to help them choose appropriate clothing for children with high or low muscle tone, or who have motor impairments or medical equipment that makes dressing difficult. Of course, each child has unique needs, but hopefully the following general principles will be helpful in guiding purchases.

Clothing to Accommodate Medical Equipment

Many children with complex medical issues have what we like to call "attachments" and "piercings." These may include feeding tubes in the belly or nose, a trach, oxygen, an IV line in the arm or on the chest, ostomy bags, catheters, and gastric drainage bags, to name a few. Many children of all ages wear diapers or use wheelchairs that may restrict their clothing choices. All of this medical equipment can interfere with dressing and clothing choices.

NG Tubes, Vents and Oxygen

Any child who has equipment on the face, such as a nasogastric (NG) tube or oxygen, will have some difficulty with clothing that pulls over the head, such as t-shirts and polo shirts. In many cases, the equipment must be removed or disconnected to put a pull-over shirt on. For these children, a better choice is a shirt or sweatshirt with buttons, snaps, or a zipper that does not need to be pulled over the head.

Children who use ventilators also require clothing that does not pull over the head, especially if they cannot be disconnected from the ventilator at any time. Similarly, children who use CPAP or BiPAP while sleeping may need pajamas that button, zip, or snap to make clothing changes at night easier.

Trachs

Children who have trachs rely on them to breathe, and the trach should not be obstructed by clothing. Turtlenecks, roll-top sweaters, and any shirts with a high collar or neckline should be avoided. Any clothing that produces "fuzz" or loose fibers, such as wool sweaters that shed, should also be avoided since the fibers may end up in the airway. Any clothing with plastic backing should be strictly avoided, as the plastic will completely restrict breathing if it covers the trach. While some families shy away from white or light-colored fabrics due to staining from trach secretions, others do not have this preference.

Tubes in the Abdomen

Children with feeding tubes in the belly, such as G, GJ, or J tubes, also have clothing restrictions. Avoid high-waisted pants or dresses that may place pressure on the tube site. One piece pajamas, such as blanket sleepers with feet, cannot be used by tube-feeders without adaptation. If you sew, it is easy to sew a small hole for the tubing in one-piece pajamas or other outfits. A commercial product, Tummy Tunnels, is designed for this purpose.

Some families, especially those with younger children, prefer to use one-piece outfits, such as onesies and overalls, to keep their children from pulling on their tubes. Other families, particularly those who need to access the tube site multiple times a day, prefer to use two-piece outfits, dresses, and onesies or pajamas with buttons or snaps that allow the tube to be threaded between buttons. Some tube feeding families also prefer not to dress their children in white clothing due to leakage from the tube site, but this is often only an issue for children with newer sites.

Similar restrictions apply to children who have Mitrofanoffs, supra-pubic catheters, or who have had an ACE or MACE procedure.

IVs and Central Lines

Children with central or peripheral IV catheters often have similar restrictions to children who are tube fed. When the IV is in the arm, such as a PICC line, it can be difficult to change clothing without disconnecting the line. Clothing with buttons and snaps makes dressing a little bit easier for these children. Avoid clothing with tight elastic on the arms for children with PICC lines, and tight clothing of any type across the chest for children with Broviacs, Hickmans and ports. As with children who are tube fed, many families prefer two-piece outfits or shirts with buttons and snaps so the IV catheter and tubing can be accessed easily. Some families with young children prefer to protect the site and lines from little hands, and use onesies, one-piece outfits, and overalls. Blanket sleepers with feet will need to be adapted for children with Broviacs, Hickmans, and ports.

Ostomies and Drainage Bags

Children with ileostomies, colostomies, or who use gastric or urinary drainage bags mostly just need clothing that can accommodate the drainage bags. When the bags are worn on the abdomen, it is wise to choose loose or stretchy underwear, and boys may prefer jockey-style briefs or boxers. Loose-fitting, stretchy pants with elastic in the waist

may work better for many children. Low-ride pants may be especially helpful for those who have an ileostomy or have trouble draining when there is pressure on the ostomy site.

For children who strap their drainage bags to the leg, usually all that is needed is a stretchy or wider leg in pants. An elastic waist can help children who need their pants taken off frequently to empty bags or to pull over the bags.

AFOs and Other Foot Orthoses

Most children who wear ankle-foot orthoses (AFOs) need longer than usual socks. Socks that go up close to the knee, such as knee socks and some sports socks, are ideal, since they cushion under the entire brace. Many children are also sensitive to seams or designs in the socks, as these are exaggerated when under the brace. Socks without seams are ideal. Children who sweat should try to choose a natural fabric that will wick away moisture. While there are specialized AFO socks available, these are very costly.

For children with any type of foot orthoses, shoes can be very difficult to find. In almost all cases, shoes must be tried on over the brace for fit, so it is best not to give shoes as a gift. Shoes need to be extra-wide and extra-deep, and open up completely for ease of fitting over the brace.



Wheelchair Cape from Adaptations by Adrian

TLSOs and Other Back Orthoses

Children who wear any type of back orthoses have a very difficult time with clothing. There are two ways to wear clothing with a back orthoses. One is to put a thin layer under the brace, and a regular shirt over the brace. The other is to put a medium weight layer under the brace. In either case, the shirt worn under the brace needs to be free of

thick seams, embroidery, and any decorations, as these items will be pushed into the skin under the brace. Avoid any shirt with a collar. It is also best to choose a natural fabric that will wick away moisture as much as possible. Shirts that are to be worn over a brace need to be oversized, with a wide cut through the chest.

Wheelchairs

Children who use wheelchairs often have difficulty with coats fitting into the wheelchair. When purchasing a coat, choose one of the thinner models, which will more easily fit into a positioning wheelchair without needing to adjust the chair each time the coat is put on. A hoodless model or one with a zip-off hood is ideal, since some hoods interfere with head and neck positioning in certain wheelchairs. The coat should also end near the waist so that the child is not sitting on it in the wheelchair. Many children who use wheelchairs prefer cape-style coats, which can be purchased either through specialty companies or sewn easily.

Other Medical Equipment

Children may have other medical equipment, such as leg casts, wrist splints, a neck collar, a dialysis catheter, and so forth. Each of these requires thought and an individualized approach to clothing selections.

Children Who Are Difficult to Dress

Children with abnormal muscle tone, especially children with tight arms and legs, can be very difficult to dress, especially as they get older and heavier. For these children, it is best to choose clothing that is loosely cut with elastic.



Shirt made by Circo with elastic around the neck and chest

Shirts with elastic around the top, a wide boat-cut neckline, or a loose cut at the neckline are easiest to get on a child with high tone. Sleeves should also be wide, with extra fabric at the shoulder area for getting tight little arms into armholes.

Pants made out of stretchy material with elastic waists work best for most children. While many children simply wear sweat pants, there are other styles of pants available, especially for girls, which are a bit more fashionable. Work-out pants are helpful for children of both genders, especially if they have zippers on the lower leg, which help to go over braces and tight hamstrings. Girls often are comfortable in skirts and dresses.



Stretchy Lycra pants for girls by Champion

Skin-tight pajamas that are worn tight to prevent injury during a fire can be really hard to get on a child with high tone, and should be avoided. Similarly, fabrics that do not stretch easily, such as corduroy, may be very difficult for some children to get on. Stretchy fabrics, such as a poly-cotton blend with a bit of lycra, work really well.

Many children of all ages wear diapers. While toddler-size pants are cut to accommodate a diaper, larger sizes typically lose this feature. Look for pants that are wider in the rear end, such as sweat pants or work-out pants, preferably with elastic in the waist, so that they can be pulled over the diaper with ease.

Some children are able to dress themselves, but have difficulty with the fine motor tasks required to do so. For these children, choose items with a looser fit that can be pulled on and off easily. Avoid any clothing items with lots of snaps and buttons, as these may be difficult to manipulate. Snaps and buttons can be removed and replaced with Velcro to make things easier. Shoes should also have Velcro closures, and will be much easier to get on if they can be opened all the way to the front of the shoe.

Custom and Adaptive Clothing

While custom adaptive clothing for children with varying disabilities or medical equipment is available, it tends to be very costly to purchase. Most families only purchase a few specialty items, such as a wheelchair cape or AFO socks, which are not easily found otherwise.

If you or another family member or friend is a good sewer, you may be able to adapt off-the-shelf clothing items for your child. Adding buttonholes for tubes, replacing snaps with Velcro, or sewing a wheelchair cape are not particularly difficult for someone with a sewing machine and a moderate level of sewing skills.

With just a little bit of thought, any child can look cute and be comfortable!

Adaptive Clothing Sites

- Sweet Lemonade: <http://sweetlemonadefashions.webs.com/>
- Adaptations by Adrian: <http://www.adaptationsbyadrian.com/>
- Special Clothes: <http://www.special-clothes.com>
- Smarty Pants Workshop: <http://www.smartypantsworkshop.com>
- Rackety's: <http://www.tanniandanni.com/kidsclothing/specialneeds.htm>
- Easy Access Clothing: <http://easyaccessclothing.com/>
- Able Apparel: <http://www.ableapparel.com/>
- Able2Wear: <http://www.able2wear.co.uk/>
- Epiphany Designs: <http://www.epiphanydesign.ca>
- CG Designs: <http://www.deshyland.com/catalog/index.php>
- Mini-Miracles: <http://www.minimiracles.ca/index.htm>
- Specially for You: <http://www.speciallyforyou.net/sfychildren.html>
- Adaptive Clothing Showroom: <http://www.adaptiveclothingshowroom.com/>