

# Clothing Ideas for Special Needs Children

Keeping up with clothes for growing children is a challenge to all parents and caregivers. But, it's a special challenge if a child has special or unusual clothing needs related to a disability or health problem. Certain features are very important in clothing for these special children.

Clothing should be:

- a design the child likes
- attractive in appearance
- appropriate to the child's age and skills
- a fashionable color or pattern
- a texture comfortable to wear
- designed to foster independence
- easy to put on and take off
- easy to fasten
- the correct size, but easy fitting — not restrictive to movement
- easy to care for – machine washable and dryable
- durable and strong enough to withstand tugs and pulls.

Finding all of these clothing characteristics in the right size can prove to be a difficult task for parents and caregivers. However, knowing the features to look for can help when shopping with a special child for clothes.

## Clothing Design

Garment design can aid or prevent a child's comfort. Unstructured clothing is often desirable. However clothes that don't fit well can get tangled in equipment causing accidents or falls. Be watchful that clothes fit as well as possible. Children grow quickly; the outfit worn one year probably won't fit the next year.

Think about these ideas when helping children select clothing.

- Simple designs with few seams are often best.
- Avoid lumpy seams on body pressure points, such as in the center back.
- Embroidered motifs can add a spark of interest and stimulate conversation.
- A child's face can be emphasized with an interesting neckline or collar.
- Colors should be pleasing to the child.
- Bright colors call attention; darker, dull colors recede.

- Printed patterns, plaids, and tweeds tend to hide soil more than plain colors.
- Elastic waistbands expand as needed, but should not be too tight.
- Elastic cuffs at arms and ankles may make pants or tops warmer, but elastic should not be tight enough to leave a mark on the skin.
- Pullover tops don't need fastening, but need a neck opening that fits over the head easily. Children's t-shirts may have snap openings at the shoulder line.
- Raglan sleeves give freedom of movement.
- Medically required tubes can be threaded through various garment openings such as a shirt that buttons up the front. Another idea is to cut an opening in a pants pocket.
- Attractive bibs or pinafores can be used to protect clothes if drooling is a problem. Terrycloth and quilted cotton print-fabrics are useful for these because of their greater capacity to absorb moisture.
- Iron-on patches can provide reinforcement for areas subject to wear from equipment.

**For children using wheelchairs**, these garments may be especially useful.

- Two-piece warm-up or sweat suits are comfortable to wear, easy fitting, concealing, and warm.
- Ponchos or capes offer warmth and avoid struggles with sleeves for brief outdoor trips.
- Foot-and-leg coverings or bags are easier to manage for warmth than leggings or snow pants.

## Fabrics for function

Fabrics combine fibers in millions of ways. Consider the difference between nylon hosiery and carpets. Clothing fabrics may be non-woven, woven, or knit. They may be dull or shiny, thin or thick, and lightweight or heavy. Fabrics can be water repellent and/or flame resistant, depending on how they are made and finished. Popular fabrics come and go as fashions change.

For your special child, the fabrics in clothing should help rather than hinder the child's growth and development. First, consider texture against the skin. Children do not like scratchy fabrics. Slick fabrics may tend to stick to the skin or allow slipping on some surfaces. Fabrics should feel good against the skin and be pleasing to touch.

**Knit fabrics** stretch more and recover from wrinkles better than woven fabrics. They are especially good for many garments needed by special children. Lightweight cotton jersey fabrics are comfortable next to the skin because they tend to wick away perspiration.

**Tightly woven** fabrics such as denim, flannel, and corduroy are durable because of their weight and thickness as well as their fiber content—usually cotton or a blend. If worn over braces, these fabrics won't snag as knits might. They tend to conceal braces or appliances because they do not drape or cling. Shiny fabrics that drape can emphasize any irregularity.

**For warmth**, fleece, quilted fabrics (with three layers), or napped fabrics are good choices because they hold a quantity of still air close to the body to insulate.

### Clothing labels

Making good use of clothing labels as you shop will help you identify clothes that will meet your child's needs and be easy to manage.

**Care labels** indicate if clothing is machine washable and dryable, hand washable, or can only be dry-cleaned.

**Fiber content labels** indirectly give information about characteristics to expect from fabrics. Use the **Wear Characteristics Chart** as a guide to fiber performance. Fabrics that are blends of more than one fiber have some characteristics of each. For example, a cotton/polyester blend has the absorbency and pleasant texture from cotton along with the wrinkle resistance, strength, and quick drying characteristics of polyester. Usually a blended fabric needs 15 percent or more of a fiber for its characteristics to make a difference in the fabric. An exception is that just 3 percent spandex adds noticeable stretch to a fabric.

**Children's sleepwear** and some fabrics sold as piece goods must be labeled to show that they pass the *Standard for the Flammability of Children's Sleepwear: Sizes 0 Through 6X and 7 Through 14*. Otherwise, all apparel and fabrics must be considered flammable.

Infant sleepwear and snug-fitting sleepwear in other children's sizes are not required to be flame resistant and if cotton, are certainly flammable.

**Shrinkage or Colorfastness** information is usually not found on labels. If mentioned it is usually given in percent; 3 percent shrinkage is usually the difference between sizes.

## Wear Characteristics Chart of Textile Fibers for Children's Clothing

Natural Fibers	Absorbency	Durability	Wrinkle Resistance	Care
Cotton	Excellent	Good	Poor	Washable
Linen	Excellent	Good	Poor	Washable
Ramie	Good	Good	Poor	Washable
Silk	Fair	Good	Good	Hand wash*
Wool	Slow**	Good	Excellent	Hand wash*
Manufactured Fibers				
Acrylic	Poor	Fair	Good	Wash
Lyocell	Excellent	Fair	Fair	Wash
Nylon	Wicks	Excellent	Excellent	Wash
Olefin	Poor	Good	Good	Wash
Polyester	Wicks	Excellent	Excellent	Wash
Rayon	Good	Fair	Fair	Wash***

\* Fabric structure (weave, knit) and dyes used affect washability.

\*\* Wool tends to resist water at first, but can absorb lots of water and is slow to dry.

\*\*\* Read care label. Many rayons are not washable.

**Clothing brand labels** may help. If you have had a good experience with a brand, a new item in the same brand will probably perform similarly.

**Fiber brands** also may appear on clothing labels. One example is Tencel, a lyocell fiber that is similar to rayon, but has better washability and does not shrink or stretch as much as some rayons.

### Fasteners

If a child can dress him- or herself, then front openings are easy to use. If someone else must dress the child, then back or shoulder openings are good. Small buttons and ties are difficult for persons with limited manual dexterity.

Clothes can be fastened in many ways. For example:

- Zippers with large pulls to grasp. The pull will be easier to grasp if a ring or yarn tie is tied to it.
- Velcro® is easier to close than buttons.
- Large buttons or hooks & eyes are easier to use than small ones.

### Shopping for Special Clothes

A good way to start the shopping process is by looking at magazines and catalogs that you can bring to your home. Children who are old enough to look at pictures may be able to show you their preferences in a photo, even before they can read. If the child is unable to go along on shopping trips, at least you can shop with his or her favorite color in mind. If they are able to go along, you don't have to waste time on clothes that are not appealing. Chances

are children will respond favorably to a color they like. Internet and mail order shopping are especially convenient for families who can't easily get to stores. A list of Internet sources is given at the end of this publication.

## **Dressing Independently**

Many children with disabilities learn to dress and undress themselves if their clothing is not too complex. The physical movements involved in dressing are grasping, pulling, and pushing. Clothing with large or stretch openings at the neck, armholes, sleeves, waist, legs, and ankles usually make dressing easier. Shoes with Velcro fasteners are easier to put on than those with ties. Parents and caregivers can help a child learn to dress independently by being patient while he/she learns how to do it.

Additional information on clothing for children and adults with special needs can be found online at <http://www.iastate.edu/~tc-ext/>. The series on children's clothing publications found there addresses clothing with regard to developmental stages.

Other clothing publications are at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs/cl.htm/>.

## **Other Internet Sources**

**AbleApparel** <http://www.ableapparel.com>

Children's clothing for special needs of cerebral palsy. Bibs, ponchos, fleece jackets, sweat and cargo pants, thumbless mittens, body blockers, pillows.

**Accessible Threads** <http://www.accessiblethreads.com/home.html>

Source of design and alteration services. Products include ponchos and harness to help children sit upright in chairs.

**Adrian's Closet** <http://www.adrianscloset.com>

A variety of clothing and accessories for young men who use wheelchairs. Includes jeans with Velcro® fly, back-opening tops

that slide on from the front, capes, footwear, "SmarTee," with all-in-one-piece long-sleeved shirt/snap-crotch briefs.

**Easy Access Clothing** <http://www.easyaccessclothing.com>

Outerwear, shirt, robes, protective vests/bibs, pants, undergarments, sportswear, dresses and sleepwear designed with various modifications for various special needs of adults and children. Some items custom produced after order is received.

**EaseWear™** <http://www.easewear.com>

Lapwrap™ designed in polyester fleece with a Thinsulate® lined pocket for wheelchair users.

**Finally It Fits** <http://www.finallyitfits.net>

Children's front neck opening polo shirt and pull-on shorts.

**Gabby's Swim Diapers** <http://www.swim-diapers.com>

Pool Pant Diapers™ designed for incontinence during swimming for children, youth, and adults. Links to other incontinence products such as absorbent pads.

**Special Clothes for Children** <http://www.special-clothes.com>

Bibs, bodysuits, jackets, diapers, pajamas, ponchos, and other items for children with special needs. Latex-free waterproof over-pant [diaper cover].

**Specially For You** <http://www.speciallyforyou.net/>

Rain ponchos, bodysuits, playsuits, one-piece underwear, rompers for children. Pants, shirts, dresses, underwear, and nightwear for adults. Custom made after order received; ship in 4-6 weeks.

**Talon Adaptive Clothing** <http://www.talonclothing.com>

Back opening polar fleece jackets, rain capes, leg warmers for adults and children.

**Trisha's of Acton MA** <http://www.trashasofacton.com>

Adult and child-sized t-shirts and flannel nightshirts with side or back openings and Velcro® closures; terry-cloth ponchos, clothing protectors [bibs].

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