

## The Great Dress Code Debacle

**W**hen I was in elementary school, back in the late '60s, I remember dressing for school was stressful for me. There were so many rules. One school I attended said I couldn't wear a skirt that looked like shorts unless we went on a field trip. Another school had regulations regarding the length of skirts and whether or not we could wear pants or shorts underneath our dresses.

I worried that I would have to kneel on the floor for the principal (to determine the proper length) in a skirt that I seemed to have outgrown since the previous week. I wore pants to school because the walk was cold, but could I get to the bathroom to take them off before my teacher caught me? Overnight, the rules changed and we could wear almost anything. However, the worst we could come up with pales in comparison to what stores offer our children today.

### An issue again

**W**hat did these well-meaning Lutheran schools teach me about my appearance? I heard only law and lived in a state of worry because of it. For a long time schools have not worried about dress codes and uniforms, but now discussion is back.

Some of our students are put in dangerous situations by wearing the wrong clothing or a gang color. Some want to rebel by dressing like the hoodlums they admire. Some are sadly mistaken by the world view that sexually suggestive clothing looks cute on little children. The end result is that schools are reworking their

dress codes, keeping up with current trends, and regulating what children are allowed to wear in school. Still other schools are abandoning this cumbersome procedure and requiring all students to wear uniforms.

As parents our goal regarding dress involves teaching our children respect. We want our children to choose appropriate clothing styles for appropriate reasons. The clothing options at stores do not always support this goal. Styles that are not appropriate for high school students are increasingly being pushed onto younger and younger students. One clothing manufacturer caught flak from a mother's group for making skimpy underwear in child sizes, and boys as young as 5 want to look cool in the baggy pants drug dealers wear to hide weapons.

### Setting boundaries

**M**ost young children do not understand the meaning behind these styles, but it is our duty as parents to set standards for dress that teach our children what is appropriate. We need to be strong and not give in to trendy styles when those styles are clearly inappropriate. Children respect and appreciate these kinds of boundaries.

The intent of dress codes and uniform



policies is the same—to create an environment that is conducive to respect for school, teachers, class-

mates, and God. The goal is not the problem; it is in the regulation and enforcement of dress codes or uniform policies that problems can and do arise. Dress codes are law and as Lutherans we are more comfortable with grace. God tells us in 1 Tim. 1:8,

*"We know that the law is good if one uses it properly."*

And in Gal. 3:24,

*"So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."*

All law, even the law found in dress codes, must follow these directives.

The first challenge with dress codes is in determining what is and isn't appropriate. Students have a myriad of choices in today's society. As soon as a school makes a rule about a particular style, the style changes and new guidelines have to be considered. The Lutheran middle school my son attends has nearly three pages in the student handbook devoted to the dress code. It does not take long before the rules become cumbersome, but if things are not spelled out clearly, students

are quick to find loopholes.

The amount of teacher time and effort it takes to enforce the rules is another downside to this system. Because rules are law, it is also easy to forget the directives of Scripture. We are committing a disservice to our children if even the school dress code becomes a burden of law. The law must lead children to Christ or it leads them away from Him. If children are humiliated through the enforcement of the dress code, then law is being misapplied. The “law” inherent in a dress code should be a standard, a mirror, and a curb. If the enforcement of the dress code only encourages children to rebel, the law is ineffective.

One alternative is uniforms. Schools that have adopted uniforms tell the students exactly what to wear. The benefits of uniforms are many:

- They achieve the goal of creating a respectful learning environment.
- They eliminate bullying that can occur regarding clothing.
- They make enforcement of the dress code easy and fair to all children.
- It makes the morning routine a little easier—one less decision has to be made.

Many school communities have found that uniforms are the best answer to the goal of a respectful learning environment.

There is a downside to uniforms too. Children want the opportunity to express themselves and uniforms make this more of a challenge. Children have to look to other areas—sports, drama, academics, or music—to show what makes them unique. It can be an unfortunate thing that the only way we can teach children to dress respectfully is to require them all to wear the same thing.

However, we need to remember that school is not where children learn to be respectful. School is the place where children practice this skill. Children are taught respect at home. For some schools, the only way to achieve a respectful learn-

ing environment is to require the children to wear uniforms.

## A sensible compromise

Some schools have found middle ground between uniforms and dress codes. Instead of dictating what clothes children cannot wear, they use a list of acceptable clothing, sometimes called a “standard mode of dress.”

For instance: khaki pants, skirts or shorts, long sleeve blouses and shirts, short sleeve polo shirts and sweaters, or jackets that button or zip. They may also limit the color choices to more closely follow the prescriptions of a uniform.

This solution eliminates the need to police the halls and the need for pages of dress code rules, provides healthy guidelines that help parents teach children to dress with respect, and still allows some measure of individuality. This compromise can afford a good solution to schools looking to improve the dress code but not willing to go with uniforms.



The issue of uniforms can be a divisive one for a school community. The saddest result to a heated debate regarding uniforms would be to model a lack of respect for school authorities, students, or fellow parents. This is a time to remember the common goals of creating a respectful learning environment, teaching children to show respect, and modeling respectful attitudes and actions.

Schools do well to remember the proper use of Law and Gospel in accomplishing these goals, and parents do well to remember to trust those in authority over their children. If you, as a parent, have an opinion regarding uniforms at your child’s school then definitely get involved. Please do so with an open mind and a trusting

heart. Whether or not your child wears a uniform for a few years of his life is not as crucial as what he learns about respect. Our children are watching us and learning from us all the time.

## Questions for discussion

1. What do you remember about dress codes or uniforms when you were a student?
2. How does what a child wears promote or detract from a respectful learning environment?
3. What do Ezek. 13:17-18, Luke 16:19-31, and 1 Peter 3:3-4 tell us about how our clothes affect our respect for others?
4. What do Dan. 5:29, Matt. 11:7-9, and Luke 20:46-47 help us understand about how our clothes affect others respect for us?
5. What does Eph. 6:10-18 teach us about clothing?

## Recommended reading:

- “How to Raise Totally Awesome Kids” by Dr. Chuck and Jenni Borsellino (available through Concordia Publishing House).

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