

Do Clothes Make the Child?

“**W**HO WORE IT BEST?” You may be familiar with magazines that line up photos of female celebrities in identical dresses and ask readers to decide which woman looks the most attractive in it. This probably isn’t a practice that makes anyone happy, least of all the women who hope to look nice in new apparel. Perhaps most affected, however, is a population that doesn’t even see the pictures, young girls growing up in a culture that encourages everyone to try to look like a celebrity—even if she is only in preschool.

And what girl (or parent) wouldn’t want to buy the chi-chi hair paraphernalia, outrageously large tutu-ruffled skirts, or new knee-high lace-up boots that permeate fashion for girls? One of the sales clerks at Nordstrom actually told me that when a celebrity’s child is photographed in an item, they automatically raise its price. This link to celebrity status is only part of this phase (it really is a phase) when companies vie to make the latest designer look for kids.

Once upon a time, children dressed for climbing trees and playing in mud. Moreover, out in the neighborhood, we didn’t notice what anyone else was wearing because our focus was on the activity. Today girls often lose out because their cute clothes make active play more difficult.

Young girls also stress more about what they are going to wear. Do clothes make the child? Moms have complained that it can take 40 minutes and countless tears for their preschool daughters to decide which outfit will garner peer approval that day. On the other hand, when we buy an adorable rock-star outfit for a child, who thinks about the stresses it may cause classmates because they feel their own outfit is lacking?

Peggy Orenstein, author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter—Dispatches from the Front Line of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, notes how emphasizing princess clothing and toys sets up barriers between girls and boys, making play more difficult. This is a time when our goals include creating more expansive identities for children and confidence in their individual uniqueness.

It’s wonderful for parents to talk with each other about pressures they feel to buy things that the latest advertising promotes. There is no right or wrong way to approach these subjects, but there are ways for families to have active discussions about the importance of feeling acceptance of one-self and compassion toward others regardless of the brand they wear.

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