



Girls School Uniform Choices

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Introduction

In Australia in 2017, some schools offer girls a range of options in their formal and sports uniforms, while a surprisingly large number do not. The haphazard way in which choice for girls may or may not be offered, and the fact that a change of principal at a school can result in a removal of choices in girls uniform options, highlights the need for clear policy and legislation in this area to protect the right of girls to receive an education free from discrimination. The arguments for girls having shorts and long pants as an option as part of formal school uniforms, in addition to the sports uniform options, centre around the issues of health, learning, wider social issues, social norms, legal issues and equality. These arguments are set out in detail below.

Negative impact on girls' health

Wearing a dress to school is an inappropriate choice for young girls, and research shows that this results in girls doing less physical activity. An Australian study by Norrish, Farringdon, Bulsara and Hands (2012) recorded the number of steps undertaken by primary school girls and boys over a one month period. For two weeks the students wore their formal uniform (dress for girls, shorts for boys), and for two weeks they wore their sports uniform (shorts for both genders). The results showed that only the girls' physical activity levels were affected by the type of uniform they wore, with girls doing significantly less exercise when wearing a dress than when wearing the shorts.

In an Australian study that explored children's perceptions of the factors that impact on their ability to engage in lunchtime play at school, 10 to 13 year old girls reported that their uniform was a factor (boys did not mention uniform). When girls were asked why they chose certain activities over others, uniform was identified as a significant restriction to playing significant types of activities, such as basketball (Stanley, Boshoff, & Dollman, 2012).

A similar and more recent study conducted in Australia in 2015 by Watson, Elliott, and Mehta, reported on focus group discussions with girls from two South Australian co-educational primary schools (aged 12 to 13

years). The children were asked what they thought was the most important facilitator and barrier to engaging in physical activity during their lunch times. A key theme that the girls identified as a barrier to their participation was the gendered school uniform. The researchers write that, “most girls acknowledged the restrictive nature of dresses and skirts when engaging in physical activity, stating that clothing more appropriate for physical activity would encourage participation. The girls also recognized the gendered nature of the school uniform, making it easier for boys to be active” (p. 261).

A reduction in physical activity of 50% of the population can have enormous health and economic consequences. Obesity is a major health epidemic and chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are increasingly becoming a burden on our public health systems. Toward the end of 2016, Active Healthy Kids Australia (AHKA), a collaboration of physical activity and health researchers from around the nation, released its second Report Card on Physical Activity of Children and Young People. The Report Card assigned a grade of D- for both Overall Physical Activity and for Sedentary Behaviours. While the Report Card does show that as a nation we are lucky to be well equipped with physical activity facilities, supports and infrastructure within the home, school and community environments, it seems that Australian children are not using them. Dr Schranz, Active Healthy Kids Australia (AHKA) Co-Chair and Research Fellow from The University of South Australia, and Vincent (2016) argue that the “solution to this problem ... requires the involvement of parents, schools, communities, local, state/territory and federal governments. We need a culture shift that sees physical activity being prioritised every day”. Making girls wear skirts and dresses is an obvious factor that plays into the lack of physical activity we see in girls. Allowing girls to wear shorts once a week as their sports uniform, as if that is the only time they should be active, completely undermines the cultural shift that Schranz and Vincent describe, and sees schools actively undermining the physical activity of girls. Changing into a sports uniform 1-2 times per week does not adequately cater for an active lifestyle.

Negative impact on girls learning

Particularly in the younger years, students are often sitting on the floor, cross-legged. This is difficult to do in a dress, and requires girls to ensure they are ‘being modest’ and not flashing their underpants. In classes like robotics and Lego (often used to help young children with counting), the girls are further hampered as they are restricted in their ability to crawl around on the ground. This is a difficulty that only affects girls and their learning.

During a school day many occasions arise for which the wearing of skirts is impractical, for instance playing sport at break times, clearing up classrooms, helping to mount pictures and other work on walls, and sitting on high stools in the science lab. Given that one of the aims of the school is to promote equality of opportunity for all, and given the recognised need to actively encourage girls to participate in sport, it would seem logical to include shorts and long pants as a school uniform option for girls.

Practicality issues

Warmth in winter and cool in summer.

In winter (and often at other times of the school year) it can be cold and students need to be warm and comfortable. In recognition of this, many schools have fleeces as a uniform option. Long pants are warmer than skirts and it would seem logical to extend the principle of warmth and comfort and include long pants as a school uniform option for girls. Similarly, in summer (and often at other times of the year) it can be hot and students need to be cool and comfortable. Shorts are often the preferred option for both genders in summer months outside of the school yard, and it makes sense to allow both genders the option of wearing shorts in the school yard as well.

Modesty and decorum.

The wearing of skirts does not protect girls from the accidental or inadvertent public display of their underwear. This can happen when they accidentally slip and fall. On windy days skirts blow around. It is easy to see up girls skirts when they climb steps or bend over. Lifting up a girl's skirt is a recognised and irritating boyish prank (which one could call sexual harassment). The inclusion of shorts and long pants as a uniform option for girls would be advantageous in many ways. Those girls who are concerned about decorum can cover their legs completely. It would also reduce (and hopefully eliminate) the amount of time spent on monitoring and measuring the lengths of girls skirts, leaving teachers more time to focus on actual teaching. In addition, it prevents boys from lifting girls' skirts and embarrassing them.

Wider social issues

Rigid gender stereotypes are harmful.

'Change the Story' is a framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and children, developed by Our Watch, the Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), and VicHealth in 2015. In their words "what this framework makes clear is that gender inequality is the core of the problem and it is the heart of the solution (para 3)". From the time children begin school they

are shown that girls look and behave in a particular way (proper) and boys look and behave in a manner that allows them more freedom (Weaver & Proctor, in press). School uniforms are one way in which these unhelpful and unfair gender expectations are reinforced.

Imagine the impact on our most impressionable young people of a policy that REQUIRES schools who have uniforms to offer options that do not discriminate based on gender. In effect diminishing core gender stereotypes before they even begin. If we ever hope to have equal pay for women, if we ever hope to have equal representation of women in STEM careers, if we ever hope to enhance the pathways for elite women's sports, we need to engage our young girls. We can engage them by asserting that they are equal to their male peers; equal in the playground, equal on the sports field, and equal in the classroom.

Expectations on women in society have changed.

Historically women were always expected to wear dresses – in society, in the home and in the workplace. This is no longer the case.

- Nurses in hospitals were expected to wear dresses. How impractical and absurd that seems now. Nurses are no longer expected to wear dresses at work.
- Teachers in the past were expected to wear dresses. Now they are not. They have choice.
- Police women were expected to wear dresses. They now are not.

In fact any woman walking down the street and in any home or workplace in Australia has the right to be protected from discrimination in regards to dress.

As stated by the federal Australian Human Rights Commission in regards to dress code, “discrimination is against the law if a person is treated unfairly because of a protected characteristic, such as his or her race, sex, age, disability... (para 2)”. Requiring girls to wear skirts and dresses to school, and preventing them from wearing shorts and long pants is discriminatory, and is a rule not applied to their male peers.

As the wearing of dresses is no longer an expectation of women in society, why do we continue to force this archaic stereotype on our school girls?

Breakdown of relationships between schools, parents and students.

Where many parents and students do not wish for girls to wear a skirt or dress to school, the result is often a contracted and confrontational disagreement between families, P&C's and school leadership teams. Parents report feeling ignored and sidelined when they attempt to raise their concern around lack of

choice for girls in school uniform options. Many mothers report having raised the issue for themselves when they were a girl at school some 30 years ago, and feeling frustrated and angry that they now have to have this “fight” again for their daughter/s. Female students also report receiving detentions and being continually in trouble for wearing the “boys” uniform instead of the required skirt or dress option.

Giving girls’ detentions and calling them into the principal’s office because they are wearing shorts or long pants instead of the skirt or dress can negatively impacts on girls’ self-esteem, their sense of justice, their learning, and their relationship with the school and education system. Sometimes students end up leaving the school where they have friends and connections due to the extended conflict that has occurred between their parents, the P&C and school leadership team. These conflicts undermine the important connection that needs to be established between schools and families in order to support a child’s learning and development.

The undermining of relationships between schools and families that can occur as a result of school uniform policies was highlighted in the Final Report of the Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools created by the Education and Training Committee for the Parliament of Victoria. As stated in the Chair’s (2007, pg. v) foreword,

“The Committee found that **dress codes and school uniform policies can have a significant impact on the relationship between schools and their communities**. Discussions regarding dress codes or school uniforms provide a readily accessible forum for cooperation between stakeholders, which may also help establish a foundation for schools and communities to work together on more complex educational issues. On the other hand, **the Committee found that dress codes and school uniforms can sometimes become the subject of bitter disputes**. The Committee believes that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has a key role to play in providing both guidance and mediation, to ensure that dress codes and school uniforms engender cooperation rather than conflict between schools and their communities”.

Supporting Government initiatives

Australian Federal Government’s “Girls Make Your Move” campaign.

The Australian Government, in 2016, launched a campaign aimed at getting girls to do more physical activity – “Girls Make Your Move”. They have done this in direct response to the appalling numbers of girls and young women who do not do enough physical activity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). There are

many reasons posited for this, and what stands out is the fear girls have of being judged, put on display, and ridiculed.

A girl trying to do any kind of physical activity in a dress is far more open to ridicule. Girls know that they are flashing their underpants. This is embarrassing and causes them to focus on how they are viewed by others. Even with bike pants on underneath their dresses, a girl is conscious of flashing to others. For a girl, it becomes far easier to not engage in physical activity and avoid the potential ridicule.

The forced wearing of dresses simply puts another barrier between girls and their likelihood to participate in incidental physical activity. The message sent to girls that how they look is more important than how they move can set them up for a lifetime of inactivity.

Respectful Relationships Education in the Australian Curriculum.

The inclusion of Respectful Relationships Education in the Australian Curriculum represents an unprecedented opportunity to create positive change for a whole generation of young people and across the education sector. It is argued that this program will be successful if schools embed the understandings found in the program across their whole school, taking a whole of school approach. It is hard to see how schools can demonstrate the necessity for equity between male and female students, and a need for each to treat the other with dignity and respect, when schools refuse to allow female students choice in the uniform options they wear at school. The Final Evaluation Report on this program, conducted by Our Watch highlighted that “schools are ‘mini communities’ where respect and equality can be modelled to help shape positive attitudes and behaviours at an early stage of life”. For as long as female students are told they must wear skirts and dresses to school, and are not provided with the option of shorts and long pants like the boys sitting beside them, schools are undermining this message of equity between male and female students.

Negative legal ramifications

Schools are vulnerable to being sued under the Anti-Discrimination Legislation.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, published guidelines to clarify schools’ legal obligations under the Equal Opportunity Act 1995 and the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. The Education and Training Committee recognised gender differences in dress codes and school uniform policies as an area of risk with respect to discrimination.

The guidelines state that: “School councils are... advised to formulate, as far as practicable, dress code requirements that are similar for both sexes. **In general, where options are to be available, they should be available to both boys and girls**” (p. 48). The Committee notes that many schools, particularly in the government sector, give girls the option to either wear skirts or dresses, or shorts or long pants similar to those worn by boys.

The Committee agrees that **choice may be the most important factor in equality for female students**, as it should not be assumed that all girls have the same preferences. Girls may feel equally strongly about wearing shorts or long pants to facilitate their participation in physical activity.

Conclusion

A large number of schools in this and other countries now have shorts and long pants as a uniform option for girls. There is no evidence to suggest that girls wearing shorts and long pants is likely to lead to a decline in academic standards and/or behaviour. School outfitters make shorts and long pants for girls as well as for boys. Given that girls’ shorts and long pants are now such a widely recognised and popular item of school uniform, it is difficult to understand why any school which prides itself on its forward thinking (as most do) does not include shorts and long pants as a formal option for girls.

The arguments for girls having shorts and long pants as a uniform option centre round the issues of health, learning, wider social issues, social norms, legal issues and equality. There is no *rational* argument which can be used against the inclusion of shorts and long pants as a uniform option for girls and therefore continued refusal to allow girls to wear shorts and long pants in any school could be interpreted as prejudice and an example of gender discrimination. A uniform policy which is based on a stereotyped view of what is appropriate wear for school girls has little place in a modern society that espouses equality of opportunity for all. We argue that all schools should be required to offer a range of formal uniform options, and that these need to include long pants and shorts for girls.

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