

**Argument: We all have to dress in ways we don’t want to sometimes.**

**Rebuttal:** Do we? While workplaces or other establishments might require a certain standard of dress, uniforms or dress codes must abide by anti-discrimination legislation. A workplace uniform or dress code cannot legally require a female to wear a dress or skirt. Women can choose to wear pants in all situations, even formal occasions.

Just like women, children should not have to dress in a way that restricts their ability to do what they need or want to do. They deserve to have a choice in what they wear, like we all do.

We are not aware of a situation where, as a grown-up, we have to dress in a manner that is not appropriate for the work we need to engage in. This is what we are currently asking some of our girls to do – to wear clothes that restrict their ability to run and play as they would like to, and that force them to expose their underwear in active play and when sitting cross-legged on the floor – often standard behaviours and requirements in schools.

We believe that girls school uniforms must follow anti-discrimination legislation, and allow girls to choose between dresses/skirts and shorts and pants.

**Argument: Let’s focus on the learning time and not the 40 minutes of play time in the school day.**

**Rebuttal:** Wearing a dress can impact on learning time. In primary school classrooms, students often spend a good amount of their day on the floor, whether it be sitting and listening to a teacher reading a story, using Lego to help with counting, or programming and playing with robots during robotics. Sitting on the floor in a dress or a skirt can be hard to do modestly. It is harder to engage in these activities when you are continually worried about flashing your underwear.

In secondary school, learning is made more difficult when wearing skirts and dresses during agriculture, when out gardening, while sitting up on stools in science class, and in many other activities that occur for students during their school day, including the simple act of walking between classrooms. Reaching to write on a board while wearing a skirt or dress is almost impossible to do modestly. We have heard from teachers who notice that girls are less inclined to volunteer to write on the board while wearing a dress or a skirt.

Further, at this stage in life when girls are growing into young women, being restricted to wearing a dress or a skirt can impact their well-being due to concerns relating to body-image, bullying, and/or feelings of vulnerability.

Being cold in a dress can distract from learning, and tights do not afford the same warmth or comfort as pants. Another distraction from learning can be spending your precious learning time fretting that you may be flashing your underwear.

**Argument: The girls are running around and playing. The dress is not stopping them.**

**Rebuttal:** Many girls say that wearing a dress does stop them from playing, doing exercise and having fun. This has been documented anecdotally, and in a number of recent Australian studies (Stanley, Boshoff, & Dollman, 2012; Watson, Eliott, & Mehta, 2015).

We should listen to girls, respect their voices, and believe them.

An Australian study (Norrish, Farringdon, Bulsara, & Hands, 2012) showed that there **IS** a difference between boys and girls activity levels when a comparison is made between activity in sports uniforms, and activity in dresses for the girls. Girls wearing dresses do less activity compared to when they are wearing shorts; the boys engaged in a similar amount of activity on formal and sports uniform days.

Statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) show that overall girls do significantly less activity than boys. This activity level drops off more significantly at adolescence, which is a significant problem for the health and wellbeing of girls.

**Argument: Girls want to wear dresses.**

**Rebuttal:** Some girls do want to wear dresses, and should be allowed to do so. However, many girls do not want to wear dresses, and they should be allowed to wear shorts and pants. A survey conducted in one Brisbane primary school showed that 55% of the girls from Grades 4, 5, and 6 did not like the dress they were required to wear, and 81% said they would choose to wear shorts or skort and a shirt if this option was available.

Girls’ Uniform Agenda DOES NOT want to ban the dress. We believe that children should be able to choose from a range of suitable options. Increased choice is what we are calling for.

**Argument: We will have too many uniforms in the school and that won’t look good. It will undermine our image.**

**Rebuttal:** Many schools offer girls options of skort, shorts, cullotes, pants, and dresses. They have not reported that their school looks shabby. Having a range of options made in similar material allows the ‘uniform’ look of students to remain. Schools also monitor the wearing of the uniform to ensure students are complying with the dress code.

In addition, where schools are reluctant to offer more options, they can simplify their uniform by allowing the sports uniform of shorts and polo shirt to become acceptable everyday wear for all students.

**Argument: Adding shorts and long pants for girls will increase the cost for families.**

**Rebuttal:** When unisex uniforms are available, and girls and boys wear the same shorts, for example, this allows a cost saving for families with children of both genders, as they can simply pass these items down.

Often, we see that the uniform options for girls are significantly more expensive than the uniform options for boys. Providing shorts and pants for girls may be one way of reducing the cost for families who have daughters, as winter pants usually cost significantly less than winter skirts, tunics, or dresses.

Furthermore, a range of suitable uniform options means that families can choose what they purchase, allowing them to factor the cost into their choice, if this is important in their circumstance.

**Argument: We must retain the formal dress as the formal uniform, as girls look smarter in dresses.**

**Rebuttal:** Girls can look smart in short/skort/pants and blouse options. A number of schools allow girls to wear shorts, pants and shirts as their formal uniform, and they look very smart in these.

Boys in shorts and pants look smart in their uniforms, as do female teachers within the school that wear pants to work.

Looking good should not be the primary message we send our girls. It states that we place a higher value on what girls look like than their equity or what they are able to achieve, how they are able to move, and how they feel about themselves. Mary Barry (2017), the CEO of Our Watch, the national organisation committed to eliminating violence against women and children, argues that continuing to enforce clothing restrictions on girls is one of the many ways they are reminded of their unequal status.

**Argument: The school needs to have a good amount of take-up on shorts and pants for girls to make the production costs to the school uniform supplier viable.**

**Rebuttal:** In one Brisbane school, 81% of the girls said that they wanted and would wear shorts and pants if this option was available. Further, many girls have noted anecdotally and via research that they want to wear shorts and pants to school. For these reasons, we don’t anticipate take-up will be a problem.

Some schools may need a cultural shift to occur for the uptake to be higher. There are plenty of companies that allow small orders of uniforms until such time that demand is increased. Schools should embrace and promote the benefits of pants and shorts for girls whilst also allowing them the choice if they do prefer the dress. Our girls’ comfort, well-being, and their equitable growth should not be dependent on a particular uptake of any choice of uniform.

**Argument: Let’s ask the school community what they think, and if they don’t want girls to have shorts and pants as part of their every day school uniform, then we can leave things the way they are.**

**Rebuttal:** Parents who ask for shorts and long pants to be added to the uniform for girls should be met with support and an agreement to work toward implementing their request. Some schools respond to parents’ requests for this change by arguing that a survey must be undertaken to gather the views of the school community. It is imperative school leaders understand that they cannot override the rights of girls by asking a question such as, “Do you think girls should have the option of shorts and pants as part of their every day school uniform?”

Regardless of what a school community thinks, this right is protected for girls under anti-discrimination legislation and, in the case of state schools, state education department policies. Where schools are not providing girls with the option of shorts and pants as part of their every day school uniform, they are discriminating against and disadvantaging girls. Consultation with the school community regarding school uniform does not mean consulting on the rights of girls, it means consulting on things like the style and colour of uniform options.

**Argument: If you don’t like the school’s uniform policy, leave this school and go somewhere else with a policy more aligned to what you want.**

**Rebuttal:** All families should have the option of choosing their local school as their school preference. For many families, they have bought a house close to this school so they can walk their children there. It is extremely rare that a family would have looked up the local school’s uniform policy before buying their house. As such, parents do not learn of the policy until they arrive to enrol at the school, by which time moving to a new school is not a simple process. All families should be able to choose their local school and know that their children will have access to a range of appropriate clothing options.

For many families around the country it is not a simple process to change schools. Limited choice for rural families may mean there is no option to move elsewhere. For inner city and suburban areas it is common for schools to be zoned and access to be denied unless in the zone. The issue of access to shorts and pants for girls is spread across private, religious and public schools. In some areas, a family can find that all schools around them DO NOT offer girls the choice of shorts and pants. In cases such as these, moving schools will not solve the problem.

Further, children often have a range of support networks in the community and school that they are based. Parents are very reluctant to move their children to a new school and risk disrupting these supports for their children. Would we really expect that a child should have to start over at a new school because they want to wear a pair of shorts to school? We would not expect this of a boy, as we would let him wear pants. But if the child is female, some schools refuse to accommodate her needs and would rather see her and her family leave.

Ultimately why should one simple request, that girls at a school be able to wear shorts and pants, as they do in every other area of their lives, require a whole family to move schools?

**Argument: How ridiculous, next you’ll want the boys to wear dresses.**

**Rebuttal:** Girls’ Uniform Agenda believes that all children, regardless of their gender, should be allowed to choose from the range of uniform options. Research clearly shows that girls are disadvantaged by being required to wear a dress or a skirt. We are working to remove this disadvantage. Boys, already able to wear pants and shorts, are not disadvantaged in this way, and are therefore not part of this campaign.

Modern cultural norms in Australia include females wearing shorts and pants whenever they choose. The same could not be said for males wearing skirts and dresses. If over time there was a cultural shift and boys and men wanted the choice to wear skirts and dresses, we would be supportive of this choice.

Women and girls wear shorts and pants in society everywhere, including the workplace, often because they are practical. It is time that girls were given this option in schools.

**Argument: You are trying to make all children look the same, as if they have no gender.**

**Rebuttal:** We don’t agree with this proposition at all. While some schools choose to have a unisex uniform that all students can wear, which ensures that girls are not disadvantaged, we do not advocate for all schools to have unisex uniforms if they do not want that.

We advocate for appropriate options for girls, which means providing girls’ pants and girls’ shorts if the uniform is not unisex. Many schools suggest that if girls don’t want to wear a dress they can wear the boys’ uniform. However, in general, girls do not want to wear the boys’ uniform, as they do not identify as boys, do not wear boys’ clothes outside of school and do not want to be perceived as doing something unusual.

Girls wearing pants and shorts to school is not an issue about gender identity, it is an issue about discrimination and disadvantage. Girls should not have to dress like boys in order to be able to participate in the same way as boys.

**Argument: You are raising brats who will be anti-authority.**

**Rebuttal:** There is no evidence, or reason, indicating a choice between trousers and skirts increases the likelihood of children exhibiting anti-authority attitudes or behaviour. To the contrary, comfort in school wear will enable children to focus more in lessons, fidget less, and be distracted less.

Raising children who have a strong sense of justice and a commitment to equality is key to making positive gains in outcomes for women and girls in our society. Raising children who believe they must always do as they are told will just maintain the status quo, and our society will never move forward.

We all need to seek to change policies and practices that are unjust. No progress would have been made on important societal issues such as segregation and women’s right to vote if people did not stand up and fight against beliefs, community positions and cultural and gender norms that were inequitable.

While schools maintain unjust policies that disadvantage girls, we will never reach a position where men and women are treated equally. We have a moral responsibility to stand against unjust policies.

We believe that there is nothing brattish in requesting equality or equity - we support women voting, working, and having equal opportunity in play through childhood.

**Argument: I had to wear it and I’m fine. Toughen up.**

**Rebuttal:** Ancedotal evidence does not trump methodical research on a topic. To suggest you turned out fine is to dismiss the experience of those who are not happy being forced to wear a dress or a skirt.

You might not have minded wearing a skirt or dress, but for some girls it is genuinely distressing, and for many girls it is annoying, uncomfortable, impractical and prevents them from doing things they’d like to do.

When we tell girls at the age of 4, that they must wear attire that limits their type of play, or forces them to expose their underwear in certain activities (which they are later told they should keep private due to the child protection curriculum), we tell them early that they are different to their boy peers. This encourages segregated play early on, and reduced engagement in physical activities as the girls get older. It also increases their self-consciousness and/or body image anxieties.

The research supports the position that wearing a dress or skirt to school disadvantages a girl. Being disadvantaged is not something girls should just have to put up with.

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