

Uniformity vs. Conformity: How to Nurture Creativity and Dress for Success

Does the colorful array of back to school fashions make your khaki-clad youngster green with envy? The new school year is just on the horizon—and for some parents and children, so is the great uniform debate. From babyhood, children are taught that life is a series of choices. While parents guide their kids, they also want to celebrate their increasing autonomy and creativity. So what can you as a parent do when that most basic choice, what to wear, is taken out of your child's hands by a uniform policy? If the mere sight of navy blue pleats sends your child into fits, remind her that self-expression doesn't have to be confined to the closet. Here's how to help her find new avenues for originality:



Explain and uphold the policy.

Unless you have some deep concerns about your school's uniform policy, now is probably not the time to support fashion anarchy. Support your school's uniform policy, and help your child see the rationale for it. Uniform proponents argue that one of the best reasons to wear a uniform is that it prepares children for uniforms in their adult life, whether official Air Force dress blues or the unofficial suit and tie "uniform" of the business world, for example. Uniforms can also promote unity and equality and uphold a neat standard of dress. Talk with your child about the message his school wants to send through its uniform. Figure out how your own personal philosophies fit into that message—maybe your teenage basketball player has been so hung up on having to wear the same color as everyone else during the school day, that she's overlooked the way it encourages team spirit off the court.

Find flexibility.

Just because your son has to wear a uniform doesn't mean he's relinquished all choice in his appearance. Look for some leeway in the school's dress code: Your son needs to wear a forest green shirt? Let him choose between collared or v-neck. Your daughter has to wear black bottoms? Perhaps she can pick from capri pants, a skirt, or a jumper. Even if the clothing policy is fairly rigid, allow your kid to have choice in other aspects of his appearance whenever possible. This may mean surrendering some parental control over things like hair. In the long run it's best to be both flexible and sensible when children assert their independence this way. It's one thing if your child will be shivering at the bus stop in January wearing handpicked shorts and a t-shirt. But what harm does it do if your first grader wants to braid her hair herself this time? Push all images of What Not To Wear out of your head and let your kid experience some pride of ownership.

Offer other choices.

If the uniform policy is so rigid as to allow little variation, think of other places you can offer creativity. Strict adherence to protocol might mean that your daughter has to relinquish her favorite fuchsia tights—let her pick out pencils and a backpack in her trademark shade of pink instead. If the school's uniform policy includes a no-logo clause, let your son stick his favorite band logos on school folders. If you feel like you've exhausted all possible appearance avenues, think about other ways your child might exercise his free will—making his own lunches, perhaps, or choosing what radio station to listen to in the car on the way to school. Parents who make a constant effort to present their children with choices, however small, may find that the uniform debate cools off quickly, and what they originally assumed was about fashion may be more about personal freedoms.

Find outlets for creative expression.

Children, especially during those critical teen years, crave uniqueness. Don't overlook the fact that your child's rebellion against uniforms might be part of a bigger need for creative expression. Help him find that outlet, be it art, music, theater, or dance. If your child is hesitant to explore his creativity in a group setting, try to find something more individualized or low-key. Even if it's just something as seemingly insignificant as letting your daughter choose a new bedspread, or a different color paint for her bedroom walls, offering opportunities for artistic decision making can go a long way to fostering a self-directed, well-rounded child.

Don't let regulation khakis have you singing the blues this fall—instead, look for other ways to nurture originality in your child's world.