What's Fair and Unfair About Student Dress Codes?

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events

Topic Summary

Over the years, schools have implemented student dress codes to address a wide range of issues, some of which have been quite controversial. For example, in the late 1960s and 70s, young men with long hair were sometimes physically attacked by their classmates and, as a result, many schools required boys to wear their hair cut to their ears or shorter. In the 1990s, there was a push for dress codes to prevent promotion of gang-related violence. In recent years, a desire to stop conflict over designer labels and create a more “professional” school environment resulted in dress codes and uniforms becoming more popular.
A few years ago, student dress codes made headlines because several groups of students—predominately girls—began to question and protest school dress codes because they thought the policies were unfair. Their words quickly traveled via social media and news articles. The young spokeswomen said that: (1) the dress codes unfairly target girls and transgender students; (2) they send a message to girls that if they are harassed by boys, it is their fault; (3) they feel judged and shamed by the dress codes; and (4) that a different standard is applied to girls who are more curvy and developed than other girls.

One example took place at Haven Middle School in Evanston, IL where over 500 students signed a petition opposing what they'd been told was a full ban on leggings and yoga pants. Many girls wore yoga pants or leggings in defiance of the ban. “Not being able to wear leggings because it’s ‘too distracting for boys’ is giving us the impression we should be guilty for what guys do,” said Sophie Hasty, a 7th grader at the school, “We just want to be comfortable!”

**Age**

11 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**

- What do you think about students who protested their school’s dress codes?
- Do you agree that dress codes unfairly target girls and why?
- Why do schools have dress codes?
- What do you think should be included in a dress code?
- What is on your school’s dress code that you don’t agree with and why?

**Question to Dig Deeper**

(See the More Information section for articles and information that address these questions.)
- How can principals, staff and students work together to come up with a dress code that feels fair?
- If students don’t agree with school policies, what should they do about it?
- What are other ways that sexism is perpetuated in schools?

**Idea for Taking Action**

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Conduct a survey to find out what students think about your school's dress code. Distribute the survey to friends, classmates and online friends and compile and share the results, along with recommendations.
- Talk to a teacher or school administrator about convening a committee (comprised of students and staff) to explore an update of the school's dress code policy.
- Write a letter or article for the school newspaper about dress codes or another school policy for which you have a strong point of view.

**More Information**

- **Student Dress Codes: What's Fair** (ADL lesson, grades 6-12)
- **The Unspoken Messages of Dress Codes: Uncovering Bias and Power** (ADL’s Rosalind’s Classroom Conversations)
- **Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media** (ADL lesson, grades 6-12)
- **How School Dress Codes Shame Girls and Perpetuate Rape Culture** (Time)