

Clothing & Confidence



A Focus Group Report
2007





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Clothing & Confidence: A Focus Group Report
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Objective

To discover how parents view the role of clothing in their children's lives and to understand the challenges parents face in acquiring suitable clothing for them.

Rationale

Some of our most critical signals to others about who we are stem from the way we look. Research provides substantial evidence that quick judgments about a person's appearance play a central role in the impressions and expectations we form of them.¹ More attractive men and women are judged to be better people, reflecting the often mistaken belief that "what is beautiful is good." For good or bad, what we wear is a vital part of our appearance: people judge us by what we wear.

Children understand that their appearance plays a crucial way other children and adults treat them.



The pressure for children to dress the way their school peers do is often intense.² Arriving on the first day of school in ill-fitting, unattractive, or otherwise inappropriate clothing quickly labels disadvantaged children as outsiders, and research shows that once formed, these initial impressions persist, even in the face of lots of contradictory evidence.³ In other words, once classmates form poor initial impressions of disadvantaged children, there's little chance that those impressions will change.

As children spend more time in school and less with their families, the opinions of their peers become increasingly important to them, affecting their image of themselves. Between ages 6 and 12, children spend more than 40% of their waking hours in the company of children their own age, much of that in school.⁴ Research by Buhs

and Ladd (2001) revealed that when children are not accepted by their classroom peers they are less ready to succeed academically, and tend to be disengaged from school, participating less in classroom activities.⁵ Buhs, Ladd, and Herald (2006) have shown that these children increasingly withdraw from classroom activities. Their academic achievement scores go down. Children who are ignored are also, paradoxically, likely to suffer harassment by their peers.

Because academic success is such an important predictor of better life chances, breaking the cycle of poverty requires helping children to succeed in school. Social inclusion is clearly linked to school performance. Children need to feel a part of things in order to feel good about themselves. Of course, poverty is a complex problem that affects children in a multitude of ways, but evidence clearly suggests that helping underserved children make and form good impressions as school begins may yield positive relationships with classmates that in turn affect their academic performance.

¹Dumas, J. E., Nilsen, W., & Lynch, A. M. (2001). How much does physical appearance say about the psychological adjustment of competent and dysfunctional children? *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 30*, 85–398.

²Attree, P. (2006). The social costs of child poverty: A systematic review of the qualitative evidence. *Children & Society, 20*, 54–66.

³e.g., Adler, R. B., Proctor, R. F., & Towne, N. (2004). *Looking Out, Looking In* (11th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁴Cole & Cole, 2001

⁵Ladd, G. W., Kochenderfer, B. J., & Coleman, C. C. (1997). Classroom peer acceptance, friendship, and victimization: Distinct relational systems that contribute uniquely to children's school adjustment. *Child Development, 68*, 1181–1197.

My New Red Shoes' mission to provide new clothing, chosen by the child, has the potential to empower children to act with confidence and to be perceived as equals by their peers. Through focus groups, we sought parents' perspectives on how we could best understand and meet their own and their children's needs.

Procedures

Laura Ellingson, Ph.D, a specialist in qualitative research methods and a member of the My New Red Shoes board, conducted two focus groups with parents of children who fit within the population served by My New Red Shoes' Clothing for Confidence Program.

Focus groups were held at two sites: a transitional housing unit and an emergency shelter for homeless families. Participants were offered refreshments as a gesture of appreciation for their time.

Participants were recruited by Jennifer Loving, My New Red Shoes board member and COO of EHC LifeBuilders and her staff members. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to audio-record the meetings.

Tapes were professionally transcribed and analyzed by Laura Ellingson.

Key Findings

Kids have strong style preferences. They feel that their clothing choices express who they are.

- I have two daughters. One is a tomboy and into black T-shirts, jeans, tennis shoes, mostly gothic. The youngest loves anything pink, is very girly, girly, loves anything cutesy. Two different streams.
- My daughter wanted a Rock Band T-shirt. She saw a friend wearing it at school, so we had to go to Hot Topic and she must have tried on at least 15 t-shirts that I thought all looked alike, but then she actually told me which one she wanted.
- Yes, my daughter won't wear jeans. She is short and a little chubby, and she doesn't feel comfortable in them.
- It has to fit just this way or they won't wear it.
- I have a problem with my daughter because of the uniforms. She doesn't like pants and wants to wear dresses all the time.
- Kids' preferences change, too. All the time. {My daughter} will change several times before she goes out.



Kids are extraordinarily sensitive to the way peers evaluate their clothing. One child wore his jacket zipped up all day because his shirt wasn't "right." Lots of stories of shame at being "shelter kids." Several parents said it distracted kids from learning, and even made them want to stay home from school.



- It's hard for them...to fit in at school. Not to have a label makes them 'uncool' and makes them feel "just shelter children." Labels are very important to them.
- My son will keep his jacket on if he doesn't like his shirt – even though it is very hot. He was so ashamed of his shirt that he kept his coat zipped up all the way, all day long.
- On the nights before school they will try on 2 or 3 shirts. "Does this one look better or this one?"
- You feel like you have to buy all the things on the TV
- Other kids know where their clothes were bought and make fun of them: "you must be poor because you shop at Walmart or Kmart."
- My daughter wears the jeans with a big long shirt and a big long jacket down to her knees and they come up and lift up the shirt and jacket to see the label. It just affects her self esteem; she always wears a big jacket.
- It's more like going on an interview. If you are not dressed comfortably, you are going to be more self conscious all the time.
- I just had an issue with my oldest daughter last week because of her jeans. Someone made a comment about them and we had an argument about it. They were almost brand new but she refused to wear them to school. She wouldn't go to school. I think the comment was, "Oh, I think I donated those to Goodwill last year."
- I've always told my daughter to ignore the comments or to tell the teacher, but if they do that they are a tattler and they will call you out and beat you up after school.
- [Moderator: I want to talk about the first day of school. Do your kids talk about what the other kids wear that day?] Yes, they do. My youngest said, "Oh my God, Katie J wore the same outfit as last year!"
- [Moderator: When they go to school wearing the right thing, how does that affect their relationships with the other kids?] It gives them confidence: my son was told he looked cool, which made a difference to how he felt; my daughter was complimented on her skirt, which made her feel accepted and not so much of an outcast. It made her feel important.



Kids will actively refuse to wear clothes they don't like. They will even wear one thing over and over rather than the "wrong" thing.

- My daughter, who is 9, is into blue jeans and her favorite top is a shirt with a fairy on it which she has had for 4 years and always wears over and over again.
- I took my daughter to the Salvation Army to get clothes, but she told me "I'm not going to wear that."
- My daughter will wear the same outfit every day. [Her teacher asked if] something's wrong at home. No, she just likes to wear the same every day; she changes her underwear so she's okay with that!
- [When a child doesn't like a piece of clothing] They won't wear it again.

- [Disliked clothes] will disappear.
- My kids say, "Mum, when am I going to stop wearing Walmart clothes."
- But if I buy it without her being there she will wear it. And she's eight [years old].
- If I go to the store and pick up some tennis shoes, she won't wear them. I bought her a pair of shoes and a pair of tennis shoes for Christmas and she won't wear them. She said, "I don't like them, Mom, can we take them back." ...I like them but she ...won't wear them, so I said okay, you're right. So she went and picked them out herself.

Kids really relish the opportunity to choose their own clothes and parents support this whenever possible.

- My kids are older; I buy dorky clothes – so I get, "I am not a dork, mum, only dorks wear that."
- Yes, especially the girls. They like to go to the store and pick at the racks and spend hours.
- They like to look and look and look. I hate going to the store with my daughter because, like the last time, she spent 4 hours and got only 3 things.

Moderator: Do your kids like to do their shopping themselves?

- My kids do!
- My daughter loves to shop.

- My kids love to shop, too.
- My daughter just loves to wear brand new stuff. She loves to go into the store, look in the mirror, try it on.

Parents added that standardized sizing is impossible, that kids need to try clothes on, especially children who are overweight, so gift cards are best, not clothes. Many parents also stressed the importance of discount stores such as Target for basics and of places like Marshalls and TJ Maxx for finding name brands at off prices.

Parents are grateful for assistance.

- It takes the burden off your shoulders.
- **In our situation, every little bit helps – an old cliché, but it's true.**

Conclusions

Parents recognize that clothing has a tremendous impact on their children's experience of school.

By enabling children to select their own clothes, My New Red Shoes Clothing for Confidence Program is well situated to address needs expressed by parents.

