

I recently found a notice in my daughter's backpack informing me that her elementary school is considering adopting uniforms. Though St. Patrick's Day was still a few weeks off, I couldn't help dancing a jig.



Those of you who caught my recent column about little girls and the celebrities they worship will understand my enthusiasm for this proposal. Every time I take my daughter shopping for clothes, I become angrier and more frustrated. It's like pop culture and the fashion industry are in cahoots, an evil conspiracy to rob our children of their innocence while robbing us of our hard-earned cash. Try convincing your five-year-old she'll look great in that cute gingham sundress over there, when it's surrounded by spangly, low-rise jeans and sparkly, high-rise tee shirts flashing inspirational phrases like "Spoiled Rotten" and "Super Brat." That's assuming you can even find the cute gingham sundress in the first place. It's maddening! Almost enough to make a girl take up sewing.

Crazy talk, I know, but desperate measures for desperate times, right?

Thank goodness, now it looks like I might not have to resort to such radical behavior. The innovative folks at Lady's Island Elementary, always eager to improve on a good thing, have done the research on school uniforms and are bringing the idea before the parents for a vote. For me, it's a no brainer.

How do I love thee, school uniforms? Let me count the ways. I love thee with the desperate enthusiasm of a mother grown weary of arguing about clothes with a child who has no business caring about them yet... a woman disgusted with the increasingly brazen culture in which that child is being reared. I love thee with the wary optimism of someone who hopes it's possible to keep that culture at bay for a while... someone fed up enough to place her faith in the cleansing power of the Pleated Skirt and the Peter Pan Collar...

Don't you just love it when I wax poetic or philosophical or whatever that was? I know you do. Anyway, school uniforms seem like a terrific idea to me for many, many reasons. Some of them are obvious. At my daughter's school, the administration is hoping to foster a productive environment that encourages students to focus on learning instead of looks. They want to inspire a greater sense of school spirit and pride, which can translate into self-respect and respect for others. Another of their admirable goals is the reduction of stereotyping based on clothing. If everybody's wearing virtually the same thing, no one's being judged for the presence or absence of some trendy, expensive logo. Thus, students are free to like, or dislike, each other, not based on economic status, but on the "content of their character"... or the coolness of their hair. From a safety standpoint, faculty and staff will have an easier time identifying outsiders in the school or on the school grounds.

In my view, these are all good reasons to adopt school uniforms, but I can add some others to the list. During my regular ramblings through cyber space this week, I came across two articles, ostensibly unrelated, that seemed germane to this discussion.

The first was a piece by my column-writing hero Kathleen Parker, who wrote, in her inimitable, witty way: "When it comes to figuring out what's gone wrong with our culture, we can usually rely on the American Psychological Association (APA) to catch on last. Thus, it came to pass a few days ago that the APA released its findings that American girls are sexualized. And that's bad."

So the APA has finally made official what Ms. Parker, myself, and mothers across the country have known for years. Their report found that young girls are sexualized in almost every

medium and product, from ads and video games to clothing, cosmetics and even dolls.

Duh. Tell us something we don't know, APA.

Parker continued: "We shouldn't need a scientific study to tell us that sexualizing children is damaging, but apparently common sense isn't what it used to be. We can now assert with confidence that most of the primarily girl pathologies – eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression – can be linked to an oversexualization that encourages girls to obsess about body image and objectify themselves."

Again, I say, duh.

Short of sending her off to a convent – or, even more drastic, removing the magazines, TVs, and computers from your home! – there's really no way to shield your daughter altogether from these sexualized images of girlhood. You can refuse to buy those odious Bratz dolls, but some kid will inevitably bring one to school. You can make her turn off "Zoey 101," but she'll just discover "Hannah Montana." You can take her to an animated children's movie like "Arthur & The Incredibles," but it'll undoubtedly feature some sexy, sloe-eyed warrior princess wearing hip-huggers and a belly ring. You can discourage her from playing "Fashion Fever" on the Barbie.com website... until she catches you playing it yourself one afternoon.

But school uniforms – that's a step in right direction. It's one small, consistent thing we can do for our daughters every day – force them to dress like the children that they are, removing any pressure to look sexy. (Did I really just use that word in reference to grammar school girls?) It'll be a relief to us parents, and, I suspect, to the girls, as well. My daughter's actually excited at the prospect. At five, she's still young enough to equate uniforms with costumes. She looks forward to "dressing up" like a School Girl. I haven't seen what the administration has in mind yet, but as far as I'm concerned, there's no such thing as too prim.

The other relevant article, which I found on the Huffington Post, was about a study of almost 20,000 college students who, between 1982 and 2006, who completed an evaluation called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. According to this study, students' NPI scores have steadily risen over the past 25 years. By 2006, two-thirds of the students had above average scores, 30 percent more than in 1982.

According to the study's lead author, Professor Jean Twenge of San Diego State University, "We need to stop endlessly repeating 'You're special' and having children repeat that back. Kids are self-centered enough already." She cites a song commonly sung to the tune of Frere Jacques in preschools across the country: "I am special, I am special, look at me, look at me..."

Twenge and her researchers traced the upsurge in narcissism to what they call the "self-esteem movement" that sprang up in the 1980s. They believe the effort to build self-confidence has gone too far, and that parental permissiveness is part of the problem. In her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, Twenge asserts that narcissists tend to lack empathy, react aggressively to criticism and favor self-promotion over helping others. They are also more likely to commit infidelities in their personal relationships, be emotionally cold, lie without remorse, and exhibit violent behavior.

But hey, at least these kids'll be ready when it's time to audition for American Idol.

Again, it seems this study is telling us what we already know in our heart of hearts. Children are full of themselves these days. In our well-meaning efforts to free them from Victorian "seen and not heard" mode, we've gone too far in the opposite direction, creating a generation of kids who range from slightly self-satisfied to obnoxiously self-important, and it

doesn't bode well for their future... or ours.

So let's bring'em down a notch. Let's put them in uniforms and teach them three important lessons: 1) Self-esteem is earned through accomplishment and has nothing to do with clothes; 2) They haven't done anything, yet, to warrant all that self-esteem; and 3) We're the grown-ups, and they'll wear what we tell them to wear.

Will school uniforms rob them of their individuality? Cramp their creativity? Turn them into boring little conformists? I've heard all these arguments, and I think they're bunk. Our children live in an era when individualism, much like self-esteem, is encouraged and rewarded beyond all reason, and often at the expense of other important qualities. (Humility and respect for authority come immediately to mind.) They have their entire lives to celebrate how distinctive, unique and, yes, special they are. What's wrong with reminding them, at this tender, impressionable age, that they're just plain folk, too?

It'll be good for them. Trust me.