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Paper 2 - Middle School Should Have Programs to Help Young Girls Deal With
“Fashion Bullies”

Help Them Be Who They Are, Not Who They Wear

Every night, together with her daughter, Susan Reinhardt picks out an outfit for the next school morning. “I’m wearing it” her daughter insists, ignoring the more conservative skirt and top that Susan picked out. “The kids have been making fun of me when I wear what you pick out”, she justifies (Reinhardt, 2007)¹. With more and more fashion labels targeting younger, more impressionable kids, middle school kids are facing more and more scrutiny by their peers solely based on fashion.

This sort of scrutiny ranges from pleasant comments like, “you look nice today” to the more severe acts of social exclusion and personal attacks. Is this something we can shrug off with a simple “it’s just a phase” or is this a red flag that we should stand up and take notice? Enter the world of fashion bullying, where a happy middle school girl can be reduced to low-self esteemed, distressed and miserable girl, simply by choosing the wrong brand or fashion.

This is where I say “Yes” that middle schools must have programs to help these young girls, who are in a phase of defining their identity, cope with the detrimental effects of being ostracized by fashion bullies.

Yes, there are programs in place to curb bullying in schools but the weakness in these programs is that they are not gender focused. Boys and girls express themselves very differently and this is the same when it comes to bullying. Unlike boys, girls use methods that are more subtle and covert (Hauldcroft, 2002)². They tend to become very

personal like character assassination and bad-mouthing to an extent where the victim resorts to skipping school just to avoid her tormentors.

This is why a program that focuses on early detection of bullying and steps to prevent this from happening among girls is so important and should be made part of the education system. High emotional Intelligence or EQ, has been concluded by researchers to be synonymous to high performers. And one of the five dimensions of EQ is “the ability to manage your own emotions and impulses”(Robbins & Judge, 1998)³. For a young girl, it means her ability to keep her self-esteem up in the face of peer ridicule and seclusion. If she succumbs to this, her low self-esteem is carried forward through high school, college and into adulthood. An extreme case is that this might lead to thoughts of suicide or even suicide itself.

Because fashion bullying, most of the time, comes in the form of verbal and emotional abuse, programs that teach children the proper way to respond to taunts especially when it involves the clothes they wear will help prevent a full blown bullying incident from happening in the future. The program will not be able to eradicate fashion based bullying all together from schools but what it can do is give children the tools that can help them defend themselves.

It will also serve as a place where girls who feel that they are being left out because of the way they dress can go to seek help. Unlike normal conflicts where most of the time, the solution is confronting the source of the conflict, fashion bullying requires a different approach because in the eyes of a “selected few”, the victim is not fitting in the social norm and therefore is ridiculed for not conforming.

As related by guidance counselor, Tammy Breymaier, instead of feeling embarrassed or ridiculed for her choice of her brother's basketball shoes instead of her normal "girl" shoes, responded "Is that a problem with you?", when questioned about it. In this case, this girl exhibited confidence which will cause someone to rethink the next time they think to place judgment on her (Nancy L, 2007)⁴.

A program like this will not solve the problem immediately or permanently, because there will still be kids who feel compelled to define themselves through fashion, no thanks to the bombardment of media from fashion labels. However, it will serve as a way for girls to learn empower themselves and appreciate individual differences, as mentioned also by current middle-school teacher, Abby Roesch (Abby, 2007)⁵. After all, don't we all want our children to be defined by who they are and not who they wear?

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