

An Evidence-Based Dress Code Approach: **SEPARATING GIRLS' BODIES FROM SHAME**

Based on data collected from a
study of 7,000 women for the book
She Deserves Better

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BARE MARRIAGE

HEALTHY, EVIDENCE-BASED, BIBLICAL ADVICE FOR SEX & MARRIAGE

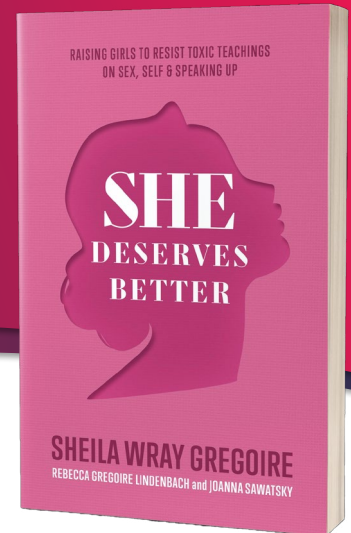
with Sheila Wray Gregoire

SO YOU'RE TRYING TO CREATE A DRESS CODE.

You're worried about what the kids will wear—especially the girls.

In fact, usually when dress codes are created, the aim is to make sure girls cover up for the sake of the boys and men who are with them.

This handout is based on findings from a survey of 7,000 women, investigating how modesty messages given to them as teens affected them as teens and in adulthood.



BEFORE YOU HAND HER A SWEATER...

Studies have shown that Black and Latina girls are dress-coded far more often than their white counterparts. Also, this research found that girls who hit puberty earlier or who developed larger chests were more likely to be singled out for dress code violations simply because the same clothes fit differently. Assess carefully if judgments regarding a girl's dress would be the same if she were a different shape or a different race.

THE SURVEY MEASURED MODESTY MESSAGES INCLUDING:

- You have a responsibility to protect the boys around you by wearing modest clothing.
- Boys will struggle with their visual nature in a way that girls will never understand.
- Girls who dress immodestly are worse than those who don't.
- Boys can't help but lust after a girl who is dressed like she is trying to incite it.

All of these messages are based on the assumption that girls' bodies are inherently dangerous to boys: boys can't help it, girls are bad if they are immodest, and it is the job of girls to cover up so that boys are not inconvenienced. Additionally, although each of these messages was believed by over 75% of respondents while they were in high school, an average of only 23% of people believe them today. Enforcing dress codes on the basis of girls' modesty is now likely to be seen as prejudicial and sexist, but why the sudden drop in belief?

Women who grew up believing any of these messages fared worse than their counterparts who were protected from the belief that their bodies were problematic. Believing these modesty messages in high school means a girl is:

- **32%** more likely to have **below-average self-esteem in high school**
- **20%** more likely to have **below-average self-esteem as an adult**
- **1.68** times more likely to end up in a **sexually abusive marriage**
- **1.57** times more likely to end up in a **verbally abusive marriage**
- **1.52** times more likely to experience **sexual dysfunction** (pain during sex)

Girls deserve better than this. And there is a better way—one that doesn't focus on girls protecting boys but instead encourages everyone to be appropriate without it being about shame, modesty, or lust.

WHEN TALKING ABOUT CLOTHING CHOICES, HERE ARE SOME "DON'TS" TO AVOID:

1. Do not make it about lust.
2. Do not make it gendered unless absolutely necessary.
3. Do not imply that the way the child dresses could give people permission to mistreat them.

WHAT ABOUT BIKINIS?

The most common question regarding dress codes is about two-piece swimsuits. Rather than putting an emphasis on covering up body parts, instead discuss appropriate clothing for the activities expected. String bikinis and bathing suits without adequate support are not athletic swimwear and are inappropriate for most athletic activities in the water. However, recognize that many athletic two-pieces exist, and asking girls to wear one-pieces when they are difficult to find, expensive, and not culturally necessary may make girls feel uncomfortable and be a barrier to girls from families with less disposable income.

HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR WHAT TO DO INSTEAD:

1. Focus on the types of clothing required for the activity versus the kinds of clothing to avoid (e.g., “This will be a hiking trip, so make sure to wear long pants without holes that can be tucked into socks to avoid ticks,” or “We’re going to be very active, so make sure to wear clothes that aren’t going to show anything you don’t want to show if you’re playing sports!”).
2. Give gender-neutral guidelines that are about appropriateness rather than covering up the proof of puberty. Don’t talk about covering breasts, hips, curves, etc. The fact that a person has a body that is not straight up-and-down does not mean that they are immodest, and they do not have to hide the fact that they have a body. Young people need to learn to exist respectfully in a world with people they find attractive; they do not need to learn to hide from attractive people or be angry at them for causing desire.
3. Rather than talk about sexual attraction and lust, discuss consent. Some parts of our bodies require consent to see. Talk about how, in our clothing choices, we cover up certain areas in order to be polite to everyone, not to prevent lust.
4. Discuss how our clothing choices can affect how others feel around us without mentioning sexual attraction, lust, or anything related. Instead, discuss abstaining from brand-name flaunting, purposefully mean or vulgar clothes, or clothes worn for shock value.

As much as possible, use gender-neutral examples if an image or list of clothes is necessary.

For example, here is a dress code model from Roanoke County Public Schools about what clothes are appropriate to wear to class:

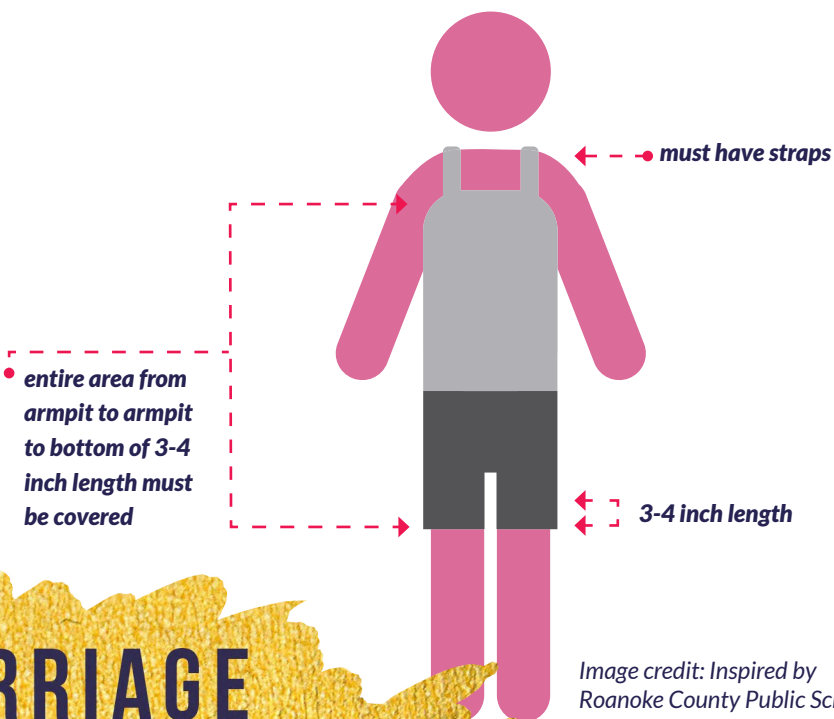


Image credit: Inspired by Roanoke County Public Schools



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INSTEAD OF THIS

Focusing on **how much of the legs** the shorts should cover.

Having **different rules for the sexes**.

Focusing on preventing lust.

Talking to the child who is breaking the dress code, or having them wear an oversized sweater to cover up their outfit.

Discussing **modesty as a girls' issue that protects boys**.

Pointing out examples of who is being modest and who is not.

Hyper-fixating on clothing choices.

Making modesty about **which body parts are covered** and that alone.

Worrying about how the **boys will be affected** by girls' immodesty.

DO THIS!

Have a basic required inseam length regardless of the person's height. That way if a taller girl has more leg showing, it's recognized that it's just because she's tall. Her body is not "less modest" than the short girl's. She does not have to cover up more than her shorter peers.

As much as possible, **make rules gender neutral**.

Emphasize practicality and **appropriateness** for the occasion.

Let it slide and discuss it with their parent or guardian, away from the child.

Don't. This topic is inappropriate and should not be discussed.

Model not being judgmental of other people's clothing choices, and treat all children with equal respect regardless of clothes, money, popularity, or anything else.

Focus on personal development and **see the goodness in every child**, even if they never stop wearing clothes you don't like.

Also **discuss flaunting wealth** with expensive designer brand-name clothing as a way of being immodest because it makes people feel excluded or unwelcome if they are poorer than you.

Remember that boys are used to seeing girls in clothing you may consider immodest. It will not be weird unless you make it weird. **People have to be taught how to treat others with respect no matter what they wear**, because outside of church or school there will be people who will not adhere to dress codes.

Previous generations of women are now bearing the effects of body dysmorphia, shame, and stained relationships with the opposite sex due to modesty messages they heard as teenagers. We must do better for the next generation.

Thank you for your consideration.



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