

What is All the Kafuffle about a School Dress Code?

Well, it is all a matter of virtue ... specifically, modesty. Modesty is closely related to the virtue of humility – the opposite of pride. A modest or humble person recognizes that their attributes and talents are gifts from God to be used wisely, with respect, and for His glory. Modesty is apparent in the way one dresses and behaves. A modest person understands that, having been created in the image and likeness of God, they are to treasure and safeguard both their body – the “temple of the Holy Spirit” – and their soul – the intimate ‘core’ of a person.

Modesty guides us to present ourselves with dignity and decency. St. Augustine wrote, “In all your movements, let nothing be evident that would offend the eyes of another.” Sometimes, the way one dresses can be offensive and, at the very least, distracting. As Christians, we do not want to lead others into temptation or encourage them to think impure thoughts. Nor do we want to send the wrong message about who we are and invite inappropriate attention from others. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 2522), it states: *Modesty protects the mystery of persons and their love. It encourages patience and moderation in loving relationships; it requires that the conditions for the definitive giving and commitment of man and woman to one another be fulfilled. Modesty is decency. It inspires one’s choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet.*” A modest person does not reveal to others what should remain hidden.

Generally, today’s society does not encourage modesty. Our young people are bombarded with and misled by images of scantily clad and physically attractive individuals. Advertisements encourage us to flaunt our bodies and our sexuality. The media places extreme emphasis on the physical and sexual and often ignores the spiritual part of who we are. It is easy for our young people – and us – to become desensitized to the inappropriate messages and uninhibited sexual expression presented in movies and on billboards. Needless to say, some of the fashions of today do not promote a sense of decency or modesty. Many people may not even recognize the concern with some of today’s flimsy fashions. In this case, ignorance is *not* bliss. The truth is that our clothes very much reflect who we are, and that includes our spiritual disposition. Modesty is countercultural.

In her video, *Take a Look in the Mirror*, international speaker Pam Stenzel asks teenage girls to reflect on the image they are portraying and the kind of male attention they are attracting by the way they dress and behave. By revealing more than we should, we could be inviting unwelcome attention and behavior. As individuals we must question our intentions when choosing clothes to wear. One’s intentions are dishonorable if he or she dresses so as to accentuate or expose particular body parts and draw undue attention to one’s physique, to sexually arouse or tempt others, or to ‘show off’ one’s body.

Concerning our children, whether they are boys or girls, we want them to live wholesome lives and to enjoy respectful and loving relationships. We can foster this, in part, by instilling the virtue of modesty. What exactly can a parent do to achieve this end? I would suggest the following regarding modesty: Model it. Talk about it. Insist upon it. In warm weather, suggest lighter and loose-fitting clothing rather than less clothing or more-revealing clothing. Your child may want to debate the issue and, as a parent, you will need to exercise your authority ... all for the sake of your child and, specifically, the respect they deserve and their own protection. Remember: modesty promotes chastity. The human body is beautiful but, because each of us is created by God, it is sacred and deserving of dignity and respect.

Be aware of your school’s dress code. Many schools have formalized, written policies regarding appropriate dress at school. Most do not allow clothing that exposes any of the three ‘B’s: breasts, belly, and butt. That includes the once ‘fashionable’ belly shirts. Clothing should cover underwear as well as one’s shoulders, and students should refrain from wearing tank tops and tops with spaghetti straps. If there is any question as to what is acceptable school attire, contact your school administration and ask for clarification. As a parent, you are in a position to positively influence the choices your child makes in terms of their wardrobe. To instill modesty is not prudish (or old-fashioned); it is *prudent* (and wise).