

## Dressing the Part

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Once upon a time a little girl named Eliza was finger painting at preschool. Her teacher was on vacation so there was a sub that day. But when Eliza looked up, there she was! Her teacher! Her *real* teacher! She immediately stopped painting, scooted her chair back and jumped up like a cat out of a bag, running to her teacher with arms wide open coming in for a long overdue hug only to be stopped with a gruff, “Don’t touch me!” as her teacher, her *real* teacher, backed away from those small painty hands.

Just as we fight the good fight for children to come to school dressed in play clothes, you too, gentle reader, must dress for play. Save the fancy nightclub designer clothes for locations where they are appropriate, not preschool. Now maybe you spend most of the day in the office, interacting with adults more than with the kids, well then by all means, you might be a little more dressed up! But I would still advise against any attire which would make you BACK AWAY from a child running in for a hug - painty hands or not! And if you are in the classroom all day I am going to lovingly remind you that no matter how passionate you are about your work with children, if you are overdressed you are going to be worried about your clothes. You will shy away from engaging interactions and explorations, you might “forget” to put something in the sensory bin or “forget” to put paint out at the easel or “forget” the key to the hose on the playground. And when we start backing away from the easel, the shaving cream, the mud or the sandbox out of fear of “getting dirty” guess what the children are going to do too?

You can look put together without it costing a fortune. Go buy a bunch of pants, skirts, overalls, dresses, shorts (as long as your butt is covered) and shirts from the local thrift store! I’m serious. And if you don’t want to be seen there, let me know and I will go for you. Back in the day I wore that overalls, while not always flattering, were the BEST option for preschool teachers. Why? P.O.C.K.E.T.S. All those pockets come in handy for tape, scissors, band aids, markers, tissues... It’s not a fashion contest, we are here to be with the children and must take care that our clothing and accessories don’t get in the way of that!

I expected my staff to be clean, fresh smelling and dressed – meaning: body parts covered, no boobs or butts or underwear hanging out. Other than that my rule was as follows: **Clothes, accessories, shoes, hair, nails and jewelry should not interfere with your interactions with the children.**

I have seen teachers who do just fine with long acrylic nails and some who now find it impossible to zip zippers, set out nap mats, clean the table, empty the trash, change a diaper or tie shoes. I am not going to make a NO LONG NAILS policy, I am going to have a conversation.

One of my past employees wore 3-inch wedge sandals to work every day. I kept my mouth shut about them. Know why? They didn’t inhibit her ability to do her job. She was able to play tag, chase, plop down to read a book and in all other ways interact with the children. Then we hired a new teacher who wanted to wear big shoes too! But alas, she couldn’t walk in them, she wobbled around looking like a drunk baby giraffe. I respectfully told her she needed to please start wearing different shoes to work and she said THAT’S NOT FAIR and I said, you are right, it’s not. But when you learn how to walk in them and they no longer interfere with why you are here, we can revisit the issue. Done.

You DO NOT need a No Perfume Policy.  
You need to politely tell Karen she smells great and to please tone it down.

You DO NOT need a No Thong Underwear Policy.  
You need to calmly inform Elizabeth to please pull up her pants.

You DO NOT need a No Jeans Policy.

You need to respectfully tell Samantha that her new jeans are wicked stylish, and they are great for the club, but not preschool. But don't leave her hanging! Help her out! Talk with her about what she *can* wear. Stop holding people accountable to what is in your head!

THAT is what will solve the issue. Communicating. NOT spending hours and hours on policies that are just disguised attempts at easing management duties and circumventing uncomfortable conversations. We write memos when what we need are meetings! But we don't do this. We write the blasted memo. Why? Who knows. Some of us just want to avoid conflict, some might be worried that the person we need to talk to might get mad / walk out / quit but let's consider the flip side: You now have a rule that impacts ALL of your employees but was written with only ONE of them in mind. Do the math. 99% of them don't need the rule and the one you wrote it for doesn't realize it's for her, which is a very long winded way of staying that **you are going to still have a problem**. And to make matters worse, when we keep carrying dead weight it is the "good ones" who actually get mad / walk out / quit because it looks like admin doesn't have a back bone.

We need to stop making knee-jerk policies that target the lowest common denominator but get applied to everyone else.

**\*\*breathe\*\***

Please know I am both aware of and respect the fact that certain religious systems dictate and regulate the clothing worn by its members. These religious requirement and choices are not what I am talking about. What I am talking about here are mandates of khaki pants, collared shirts, jackets & ties, dresses, heels, skirts and nylons all made in the name of PROFESSIONALISM. (Sorry, did my eyes roll out loud?) I often wonder how people who are barely paid a livable wage are expected to spend such a large percentage of their money on clothing. I wonder if their organizations are now providing a clothing allowance for required items. Once I was slated to give an evening staff training for a relatively large child care organization. I was on the agenda after the all school board/staff meeting so I was just hanging out in the audience, half listening, until, unbeknownst to anyone, the board rolled out the new dress code policy. Now I was totally listening. It bordered on ridiculous. After they covered all of the expected changes they asked if anyone had any questions, I threw caution to the wind, raised my hand and asked how much the dry cleaning reimbursement rate would be.

I worry that these kind of mandates, supposedly made in the name of increasing professionalism, are really just clever attempts at trying to push **play** out of the picture. And I think it even goes deeper than that. Awhile back we were enjoying a post workshop dinner with a group in Indiana and our server asked what we were all in town for. "Teacher training!" we enthusiastically replied. "Neat! What grade?" "Preschool!" She looked at us and laughed as she said, "So you're not *real* teachers..."

I looked around our table. Who did I see? A family child care provider of 15 years, a former preschool teacher now program director, myself, and a woman who has a Ph.D. and teaches child development at the local college. But somehow we are not really "teachers" because we work with younger children. So I guess the logic goes that if we aren't really teachers because we work with young children, and we are only really teachers if we teach a "grade," then if we dress and look the way the grade school teachers do, then we can be considered *real* teachers. Is that it?

Right. And follow my train of thought here - it's not just some random free association. It's not that they don't want me in jeans per se, it's that they want me to look like the image in their head of the teacher they remember. Many don't remember their early providers and caregivers. But most remember the general image of their elementary, middle and high school teachers. Right down to the pressed pants and the funky ties. Why does their memory get to dictate what we should be wearing to do our job? Am I less capable when I am in overalls, a clean T-shirt and sneakers? Maybe they are jealous because they are required to be in a suit and they associate my appearance with a casual day or the weekend or a day off and therefore think that I am not really "working"??? Is that it?

I am told that clothing requirements are designed to promote professionalism thus encouraging parents to treat the teachers with *respect*. Yes it is true that folks dressed up for a night on the town will get a nicer table, possibly faster seating and more than likely better service. If you have a nice car (and it's washed) it will get staged when you valet. And no one questions the influence of the power suit or the red power tie. But we are talking about people who are working with babies! With toddlers! How can you dart after a runaway preschooler if you are in heels? We need to be able to move around, clean up spills, change diapers, be burped on, be thrown up on, run after children, roll on the floor, play in the mud and water and provide creative art experiences each and every day. This is our job! And I like to believe that by virtue of doing our job we would be worthy of respect. But the *respect* conversation is a slippery slope which I'll reserve for another day. For now I will remind whoever needs reminding that if you are going to make a dress code policy, you need to take our actual job into consideration, not the one you remember your high school history teacher doing.

You do not become professional by wearing certain clothes. Respect for the self translates into respect for others. Pride and professionalism comes from within. If a teacher really is a "professional," his or her "professionalism" will present itself daily during interactions with colleagues, parents, directors and children whether they are in jeans, a skirt, coat and tie, sneakers or high heels. Remember my colleague with the wedge sandals? She was (is) an amazing teacher. And guess what? Her shoes did not change her amazing-ness! I used to wear dresses, Converse sneakers, overalls, sometimes cut off pants and Birkenstock sandals... did that make me less professional than a colleague in a suit? If we put poopy face in a nice dress and heels will she finally start interacting more respectfully with the children?

If we think we are creating good teachers with nice clothes, does it follow that we might be disguising bad teachers with the same?

"Sit down!"

"Be quiet!"

"Stop that!"

"I will call your mother!"

"Don't make me come over there!"

"NO! NO! NO!"

"Get over here!!!"

But damn she looks *nice!*

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