All societies define childhood within certain parameters. From infancy to adolescence, there are societal expectations throughout the various stages of children’s development concerning their capabilities and limitations, as well as how they should act and look. Clothing plays an integral role of the “look” of childhood in every era. An overview history of children’s clothing provides insights into changes in child-rearing theory and practice, gender roles, the position of children in society, and similarities and differences between children’s and adults’ clothing.

Early Children’s Attire

Before the early-twentieth century, clothing worn by infants and young children shared a distinctive common feature—their clothing lacked sex distinction. The origins of this aspect of children’s clothing stem from the sixteenth century, when European men and older boys began wearing doublets paired with breeches. Previously, both males and females of all ages (except for swaddled infants) had worn some type of gown, robe, or tunic. Once men began wearing bifurcated garments, however, male and female clothing became much more distinct. Breeches were reserved for men and older boys, while the members of society most subordinate to men—all females and the youngest boys—continued to wear skirted garments. To modern eyes, it may appear that when little boys of the past were attired in skirts or dresses, they were dressed “like girls,” but to their contemporaries, boys and girls were simply dressed alike in clothing appropriate for small children.

Swaddling and Babies

New theories put forth in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries about children and childhood greatly influenced children’s clothing. The custom of swaddling-immobilizing newborn infants with linen wrappings over their diapers and shirts—had been in place for centuries. A traditional belief underlying swaddling was that babies’ limbs needed to be straightened and supported or they would grow bent and misshapen. In the eighteenth century, medical concerns that swaddling weakened rather than strengthened children’s limbs merged with new ideas about the nature of children and how they should be raised to
gradually reduce the use of swaddling. For example, in philosopher John Locke's influential 1693 publication, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, he advocated abandoning swaddling altogether in favor of loose, lightweight clothing that allowed children freedom of movement. Over the next century, various authors expanded on Locke's theories and by 1800, most English and American parents no longer swaddled their children.

When swaddling was still customary in the early years of the eighteenth century, babies were taken out of swaddling at between two and four months and put into "slips," long linen or cotton dresses with fitted bodices and full skirts that extended a foot or more beyond the children's feet; these long slip outfits were called "long clothes." Once children began crawling and later walking, they wore "short clothes"-ankle-length skirts, called petticoats, paired with fitted, back-opening bodices that were frequently boned or stiffened. Girls wore this style until thirteen or fourteen, when they put on the front-opening gowns of adult women. Little boys wore petticoat outfits until they reached at least age four through seven, when they were "breeched" or considered mature enough to wear miniature versions of adult male clothing-coats, vests, and the exclusively male breeches. The age of breeching varied, depending on parental choice and the boy's maturity, which was defined as how masculine he appeared and acted. Breeching was an important rite of passage for young boys because it symbolized they were leaving childhood behind and beginning to take on male roles and responsibilities.

**Babies in Gowns**

As the practice of swaddling declined, babies wore the long slip dresses from birth to about five months old. For crawling infants and toddlers, "frocks," ankle-length versions of the slip dresses, replaced stiffened bodices and petticoats by the 1760s. The clothing worn by older children also became less constricting in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Until the 1770s, when little boys were breeched, they essentially went from the petticoats of childhood into the adult male clothing appropriate for their station in life. Although boys were still breeched by about six or seven during the 1770s, they now began to wear somewhat more relaxed versions of adult clothing- looser-cut coats and open-necked shirts with ruffled collars-until their early teen years. Also in the 1770s, instead of the more formal bodice and petticoat combinations, girls continued to wear frock-style dresses, usually accented with wide waist sashes, until they were old enough for adult clothing.

These modifications in children's clothing affected women's clothing-the fine muslin chemise dresses worn by fashionable women of the 1780s and 1790s look remarkably similar to the frocks young children had been wearing since mid-century. However, the development of women's chemise dresses is more complex than the garments simply being adult versions of children's frocks. Beginning in the 1770s, there was general movement away from stiff brocades to softer silk and cotton fabrics in women's clothing, a trend that converged with a strong interest in the dress of classical antiquity in the 1780s and 1790s. Children's sheer white cotton frocks, accented with waist sashes giving a high-waisted look, provided a convenient model for women in the development of neoclassical fashions. By 1800, women, girls, and toddler boys all wore similarly styled, high-waisted dresses made up in lightweight silks and cottons.

**Skeleton Suits for Boys**

A new type of transitional attire, specifically designed for small boys between the ages of three and seven, began to be worn about 1780. These outfits, called "skeleton suits" because they fit close to the body, consisted of ankle-length trousers buttoned onto a short jacket worn over a shirt with a wide collar edged in ruffles. Trousers, which came from lower class and military clothing, identified skeleton suits as male clothing, but at the same time set them apart from the suits with knee-length breeches worn by older boys and men. In the early 1800s, even after trousers had supplanted breeches as the fashionable choice, the jumpsuit-like skeleton suits, so unlike men's suits in style, still continued as distinctive dress for young boys. Babies in slips and toddlers in frocks, little boys in skeleton suits, and older boys who wore frilled collar shirts until their early teens, signaled a new attitude that extended childhood for boys, dividing it into the three distinct stages of infancy, boyhood, and youth.
Nineteenth Century Layettes

In the nineteenth century, infants' clothing continued trends in place at the end of the previous century. Newborn layettes consisted of the ubiquitous long dresses (long clothes) and numerous undershirts, day and night caps, napkins (diapers), petticoats, nightgowns, socks, plus one or two outerwear cloaks. These garments were made by mothers or commissioned from seamstresses, with ready-made layettes available by the late 1800s. While it is possible to date nineteenth-century baby dresses based on subtle variations in cut and the type and placement of trims, the basic dresses changed little over the century. Baby dresses were generally made in white cotton because it was easily washed and bleached and were styled with fitted bodices or yokes and long full skirts. Because many dresses were also ornately trimmed with embroidery and lace, today such garments are often mistaken as special occasion attire. Most of these dresses, however, were everyday outfits—the standard baby "uniforms" of the time. When infants became more active at between four and eight months, they went into calf-length white dresses (short clothes). By mid-century, colorful prints gained popularity for older toddlers' dresses.

The Advent of Trousers for Boys

The ritual of little boys leaving off dresses for male clothing continued to be called "breeching" in the nineteenth century, although now trousers, not breeches, were the symbolic male garments. The main factors determining breeching age were the time during the century when a boy was born, plus parental preference and the boy's maturity. At the beginning of the 1800s, little boys went into their skeleton suits at about age three, wearing these outfits until they were six or seven. Tunic suits with knee-length tunic dresses over long trousers began to replace skeleton suits in the late 1820s, staying in fashion until the early 1860s. During this period, boys were not considered officially breeched until they wore trousers without the tunic overdresses at about age six or seven. Once breeched, boys dressed in cropped, waist-length jackets until their early teens, when they donned cutaway frock coats with knee-length tails, signifying they had finally achieved full adult sartorial status.

From the 1860s to the 1880s, boys from four to seven wore skirted outfits that were usually simpler than girls' styles with more subdued colors and trim or "masculine" details such as a vest. Knickerbockers or knickers, knee-length pants for boys aged seven to fourteen, were introduced about 1860. Over the next thirty years, boys were breeched into the popular knickers outfits at younger and younger ages. The knickers worn by the youngest boys from three to six were paired with short jackets over lace-collared blouses, belted tunics, or sailor tops. These outfits contrasted sharply to the versions worn by their older brothers, whose knickers suits had tailored wool jackets, stiff-collared shirts, and four-in-hand ties. From the 1870s to the 1940s, the major difference between men's and schoolboys' clothing was that men wore long trousers and boys, short ones. By the end of the 1890s, when the breeching age had dropped from a mid-century high of six or seven to between two and three, the point at which boys began wearing long trousers was frequently seen as a more significant event than breeching.

Little Girls' Dresses

Unlike boys, as nineteenth-century girls grew older their clothing did not undergo a dramatic transformation. Females wore skirted outfits throughout their lives from infancy to old age; however, the garments' cut and style details did change with age. The most basic difference between girls' and women's dresses was that the children's dresses were shorter, gradually lengthening to floor length by the mid-teen years. When neoclassical styles were in fashion in the early years of the century, females of all ages and toddler boys wore similarly styled, high-waisted dresses with narrow columnar skirts. At this time, the shorter length of the children's dresses was the main factor distinguishing them from adult clothing.
From about 1830 and into the mid-1860s, when women wore fitted waist-length bodices and full skirts in various styles, most dresses worn by toddler boys and preadolescent girls were more similar to each other than to women's fashions. The characteristic "child's" dress of this period featured a wide off-the-shoulder neckline, short puffed or cap sleeves, an unfitted bodice that usually gathered into an inset waistband, and a full skirt that varied in length from slightly-below-knee length for toddlers to calf length for the oldest girls. Dresses of this design, made up in printed cottons or wool challis, were typical daywear for girls until they went into adult women's clothing in their mid-teens. Both girls and boys wore white cotton ankle-length trousers, called pantaloons or pantalets, under their dresses. In the 1820s, when pantalets were first introduced, girls wearing them provoked controversy because bifurcated garments of any style represented masculinity. Gradually pantalets became accepted for both girls and women as underwear, and as "private" female dress did not pose a threat to male power. For little boys, pantalets' status as feminine underwear meant that, even though pantalets were technically trousers, they were not viewed as comparable to the trousers boys put on when they were breeched.

Some mid-nineteenth-century children's dresses, especially best dresses for girls over ten, were reflective of women's styles with currently fashionable sleeve, bodice, and trim details. This trend accelerated in the late 1860s when bustle styles came into fashion. Children's dresses echoed women's clothing with additional back fullness, more elaborate trims, and a new cut that used princess seaming for shaping. At the height of the bustle's popularity in the 1870s and 1880s, dresses for girls between nine and fourteen had fitted bodices with skirts that draped over small bustles, differing only in length from women's garments. In the 1890s, simpler, tailored outfits with pleated skirts and sailor blouses or dresses with full skirts gathered onto yoked bodicas signaled that clothing was becoming more practical for increasingly active schoolgirls.

**Rompers for Babies**

New concepts of child rearing emphasizing children's developmental stages had a significant impact on young children's clothing beginning in the late-nineteenth century. Contemporary research supported crawling as an important step in children's growth, and one-piece rompers with full bloomer-like pants, called "creeping aprons," were devised in the 1890s as cover-ups for the short white dresses worn by crawling infants. Soon, active babies of both sexes were wearing rompers without the dresses underneath. Despite earlier controversy about females wearing pants, rompers were accepted without debate as playwear for toddler girls, becoming the first unisex pants outfits.

Baby books into the 1910s had space for mothers to note when their babies first wore "short clothes," but this time-honored transition from long white dresses to short ones was quickly becoming a thing of the past. By the 1920s, infants wore short, white dresses from birth to about six months with long dresses relegated to ceremonial wear as christening gowns. New babies continued to wear short dresses into the 1950s, although by this time, boys only did so for the first few weeks of their lives.

As rompers styles for both day and night wear replaced dresses, they became the twentieth century's "uniforms" for babies and young children. The first rompers were made up in solid colors and gingham checks, providing a lively contrast to traditional baby white. In the 1920s, whimsical floral and animal motifs began to appear on children's clothing. At first these designs were as unisex as the rompers they decorated, but gradually certain motifs were associated more with one sex or the other-for example, dogs and drums with boys and kittens and flowers with girls. Once such sex-typed motifs appeared on clothing, they designated even styles that were identical in cut as either a "boy's" or a "girl's" garment. Today, there is an abundance of children's clothing on the market decorated with animals, flowers, sports paraphernalia, cartoon characters, or other icons of popular culture-most of these motifs have masculine or feminine connotations in our society and so do the garments on which they appear.

**Colors and Gender Association**

Colors used for children's clothing also have gender symbolism-today, this is most universally represented by blue for infant boys and pink for girls. Yet it took many years for this color code to be come standardized. Pink and blue were associated with gender by the 1910s, and there were early efforts to codify the colors for one sex or the other, as illustrated by this 1916 statement from the trade publication *Infants' and Children's Wear Review*: "[T]he generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl." As late as 1939, a *Parents Magazine* article rationalized that because pink was a pale shade of red, the color of the war god Mars, it was appropriate for boys, while blue's association with Venus and the Madonna made it the color for girls. In practice, the colors were used interchangeably for both young boys' and girls' clothing until after World War II, when a combination of public opinion and manufacturer's clout ordained pink for girls and blue for boys-a dictum that still holds true today.

Even with this mandate, however, blue continues to be permissible for girls' clothing while pink is rejected for boys' attire. The fact that girls can wear both pink (feminine) and blue (masculine) colors, while boys wear only blue, illustrates an important trend begun in the late 1800s: over time, garments, trims, or colors once worn by both young boys and girls, but traditionally associated with female clothing, have become unacceptable for boys' clothing. As boys' attire grew less "feminine" during the twentieth century, shedding trimmings and ornamental details such as lace and ruffles, girls' clothing grew ever more "masculine." A paradoxical example of this progression occurred in the 1970s, when parents involved in "nonsexist" child-rearing pressured manufacturers for "gender-free" children's clothes. Ironically, the resulting pants outfits were only gender-free in
the sense that they used styles, colors, and trims currently acceptable for boys, eliminating any "feminine" decorations such as pink fabrics or ruffled trim.

Modern Children's Wear

Over the course of the twentieth century, those formerly male-only garments-trousers-became increasingly accepted attire for girls and women. As toddler girls outgrew their rompers in the 1920s, new play clothes for three-to five-year-olds, designed with full bloomer pants underneath short dresses, were the first outfits to extend the age at which girls could wear pants. By the 1940s, girls of all ages wore pants outfits at home and for casual public events, but they were still expected—if not required—to wear dresses and skirts for school, church, parties, and even for shopping. About 1970, trousers' strong masculine connection had eroded to the point that school and office dress codes finally sanctioned trousers for girls and women. Today, girls can wear pants outfits in nearly every social situation. Many of these pant styles, such as blue jeans, are essentially unisex in design and cut, but many others are strongly sex-typed through decoration and color.

Clothing From Childhood to Adolescence

Adolescence has always been a time of challenge and separation for children and parents but, before the twentieth century, teenagers did not routinely express their independence through appearance. Instead, with the exception of a few eccentrics, adolescents accepted current fashion dictates and ultimately dressed like their parents. Since the early twentieth century, however, children have regularly conveyed teenage rebellion through dress and appearance, often with styles quite at odds with conventional dress. The jazz generation of the 1920s was the first to create a special youth culture, with each succeeding generation concocting its own unique crazes. But teenage vogues such as bobby sox in the 1940s or poodle skirts in the 1950s did not exert much influence on contemporary adult clothing and, as teens moved into adulthood, they left behind such fads. It was not until the 1960s, when the baby-boom generation entered adolescence that styles favored by teenagers, like miniskirts, colorful male shirts, or "hippie" jeans and T-shirts, usurped more conservative adult styles and became an important part of mainstream fashion. Since that time, youth culture has continued to have an important impact on fashion, with many styles blurring the lines between children's and adult clothing.

See also Children's Shoes; Teenage Fashion.

Bibliography


Calvert, Karin. *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992. Excellent overview of child-rearing theory and practice as they relate to the objects of childhood, including clothing,
toys, and furniture.

History of vintage children's clothing for girls and boys, baby and toddler sizes from the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Plus where to buy kids clothing. Besides history and pictures, I also have a few tips on where to shop for vintage and new vintage style children's clothing. Vintage Baby Clothing – 0 to 1 year. 1920s baby clothes- vintage knit bonnet (esty) and vintage white baby gown (antique store). Bissonnette states in her introduction, "The history of children's clothing reflects the attitude of adults toward childhood, as, until very recently, children had no voice in the matter." This is a major contention of HBC and one reason the study of children's clothes can provide valuable social and economic insights on the period as a whole. British Schoolboy Uniforms. This fascinating site provides a pictorial survey of uniforms worn by British schoolboys over the years. Our primary interest in the retail page is companies offering the classic clothing styles for children that HBC and HBC describe and assess. We have decided to create links for other companies which have contacted us. This is primarily to increase HBC's visibility.