

## To Parents: Let It Go

*by Ruby Allen Short*

It's an unavoidable moment for every parent: the day that their child, boy or girl, demands to start dressing themselves in the morning. They could pull on an old pajama t-shirt and a feather boa, or last year's Halloween costume, already beginning to fall apart with wear and tear—either way, they insist on struggling into whatever they want every morning, ignoring the baffled looks of their classmates and teachers. Many people react to this milestone with instinctual embarrassment. After all, there are few social circles as judgmental as that of parents, where children are often seen as a reflection of their guardians, and a child showing up to school in a Disney princess dress can be scrutinized. However, suppressing a child's desire to decide how they present themselves can have profound negative effects. Parents should give their children more room to experiment with their interests and appearance, as this is the key to forming, reclaiming, and expressing one's identity.

When children are young, they have little control of the world around them. Up until middle school, most decisions are made by parents, teachers, and other adults. This can leave young people feeling like their identities are dictated by the authority figures in their life. One of the first ways that children exert control over themselves is by choosing what they wear and how they look. This most often manifests in the form of experimentation; many parents can remember a time when their child cut their own hair, usually with disastrous results. However, they'll probably also say that their child was proud of the style they created. The reason for this is simple: *they* created it. As children try new things, they reclaim the parts of their appearance that had previously been directed by their parents. This is an important and necessary part of development. Children feeling like they are in control of their own lives is the key to a healthy adulthood, and this begins with an exploration in style.

Another way that experimenting with one's appearance is good for development is through the connection it has to a child's individuality. Many celebrities and media characters are recognizable by their distinctive "look," like Kim Kardashian or Lady Gaga. For a young person, especially during the formative years of middle and high school, the creation of identity is closely tied to the development of a sense of style. When it comes down to it, the way a person presents themselves represents the way they want to be perceived: teenagers are discovering who they are, and one of the main things they need to consider is how they want to signal that to others. This can be anything from meticulous morning makeup to an interesting haircut—or just wearing whatever feels comfortable. More often than not, identity manifests itself in appearance. When people try out new looks, they are getting closer to figuring out the person that they want to be. For example, a different haircut can allow someone to see themselves in a new perspective, because visual change feeds into emotional and psychological change. This is also true of things like piercings and new types of clothing. If parents suppress their child's experiments in style, it stifles the development of individuality, which can impede their child's ability to become a unique and happy adult.

Although forming an identity is a crucial step for a young person, *expressing* that identity is equally essential. Being able to display the things they are passionate about with visual cues can be an outlet for many people, because it allows them to feel proud of and connected to their interests, whether that is a sports team they like or a particular style movement they identify with. Many people meet their closest friends through a shared enthusiasm for something. This is evident in the many groups, both in person and online, that are centered around an appreciation for a certain franchise or sports team. It may not completely make up who those people are, but it is an important part of the way they express themselves. Because these aspects of a personality change frequently, so too will a person's appearance. It is critical for parents to accept these changes as a part of their child's life. If parents are not supportive of their child's choices in self-expression, it sends a message that they are not supportive of their child's identity, which is incredibly harmful to someone still discovering themselves.

Many parents are unsure how to react when their child, young or old, begins to take command of their own appearance and experiment with how they look. It can be difficult to relinquish control and let a young person discover who they want to be. However—barring a case in which a child is in actual danger—the best thing that parents can do is step back and let their child try new things. Trying to suppress someone's sprouting individuality can only lead to feelings of inferiority, shame, and self-doubt. A parent who supports their child in trying new things is taking an active part in the development of a healthy, happy individual—which, in the grand scheme of things, is the most important thing they can do.