

Dressing Boys

Dressing boys presents unique challenges; find the proper solutions, and you'll have an historic wardrobe that suits your boy's personality and activities, without a sacrifice in accuracy. This article is a very brief overview, and is not intended as the "be all, end all" of discourse on the topic!

Infancy

The hurdle in infancy is getting Daddy to accept that infant boys wear dresses. All infant boys wear dresses, and continue to wear them until toilet training is finished. (This tradition actually held for centuries, right up through World War II—most of our grandfathers wore dresses when babies, and it hasn't hurt their masculinity one whit.)

Infant boys are dressed the same as infant girls; some will wear frills, and others will wear fairly tailored things, depending on the preference of the mother.

It is perfectly acceptable to make boy's dresses in darker plaid and checked fabrics, and to set any fullness in pleats for a streamlined, "boyish" look. Still, any father with an accurately dressed infant son should expect compliments on his lovely "daughter." Be prepared with a comment that will give information without breaking a scenario, such as, "Oh, we dress our boys and girls alike until childhood; my son will wear trousers when he's out of diapers."

For additional information on infant clothing, please refer to our article titled "*Dressing Infants.*"

Toddlers & Toilet Training

As a boy grows through toddlerhood, he'll enter toilet training. He'll still be in skirts: dresses hemmed between the knee and mid-calf, and worn with petticoats and mid-calf white drawers, just as for girls the same age. These layers make it fairly easy for him to use the toilet as training progresses, while also allowing for diaper access and camouflage in the early days.

Boy's frocks in the toddler years begin to show some identifiable "boy" styles:

one of my favorites is the smooth-bodied frock in plaid, with the whole garment cut on the bias. This gives a fantastic visual effect, quite different from the trimming use of bias plaids on girl's dresses. Pleats become quite common for boy's things, though gathering is still used.

Boy's frocks are made with high (jewel) or low (bateau or boat) necklines, and may have a variety of long or short sleeves styles suited to the weather and Mother's preference. Wools and cottons predominate in textile options; look for lightweight wools in firm weaves to withstand the rigors of boyhood.

The addition of braided designs, contrasting appliqué, and buttons as trim all add decorative elements to otherwise simple garments, and can be used by the upper working classes or higher.

Another common wardrobe addition for small boys is the sacque jacket. These little hip-length or shorter coats are cut fairly generously, and are often made in the same fabric as the frock or tunic, or a harmonizing solid wool. (Bias-cut plaids and checks work well for them, as well.) The coats are often decorated with braided designs, lending a very boyish and military air to the outfit, without being a replica of any military uniform. Application of strapping across the chest also mimics a military style, without copying a uniform.

Like infants, toddler boys may wear leather boots with a flat sole and minimal stacked heel, or may wear strapped shoes (a "Mary Jane" modern style with a strap either across the foot or from the back of the ankle can work). Most fathers will find boots preferable. Look for plain leathers in black, brown, or even bright red. While no one currently advertises an historically-accurate repro shoe or boot for children, you will be able to find unobtrusive modern substitutes in most areas. (We've had good luck with plain "Buster Brown" brand boots—real leather, good quality, basic styling, and they pass down well.)

Small Boys

The accomplishments of toilet training do not mean an end to dresses... growth spurts around the age of 3-4 years can shorten skirts so far that they become useful as tunics, worn over trousers. Small boys also move into more adult styled shirts worn tucked into trousers, and bodices made with 'shirt like' features, but set to a finished waistband, to which the trousers are buttoned.

With the move to trousers, undergarments change a bit: cotton or linen under drawers cut in a style similar to the outer trousers, and sometimes a white underwaist worn beneath the shirt. The shirt may also be used as the "underwear"—be aware that white cotton will stain, and patterned cotton will fade with laundering. This is normal for boy's things mid-century, and not something to worry over. Cold weather undergarments can be made in similar styles, but in fine wool flannel for warmth.

Both full-length, and short trousers (hemmed from upper calf to below the knee) are options for boys. While the trousers are sometimes made in the same fabric as the tunics, they are often made to coordinate, in a solid fabric (bottom-weight cottons work, though they are far less color-stable than the more common firmly-woven, "hard finish" (not fuzzy) lightweight wools. Save linen sets for use in the hottest parts of the summer.)

Trousers may be cut very full through the body and legs, or cut more narrowly to echo adult styles. Full cut trousers may open at a front fly, or open with plackets over each hip (a "fall" front); more adult styled trousers generally open at a center front button fly. Short trousers may be hemmed plain (creating a wide leg), or set into a band about 1" wide when finished. This band can either be made large enough to admit the foot and leg without an opening, or else made as a shirt cuff, buttoning at an outside-leg placket in the trouser seam.

Short trousers do not always have pockets in the side seam (fall-front

trousers do not, fly fronts may). Long trousers for small boys may or may not have a pocket in the side seam. Be aware that small boys and pockets can be a dangerous combination; you'll want to get in the habit of having him empty his pockets at the end of each event, to avoid problems with forgotten treasures that tend to moulder.

Boys who have adopted trousers can also adopt coats and vests; sack and other casual coat styles predominate for boys (though a few upper class boys will have very small tailored frock coats, it is rare.) Coats and vests are made very commonly in firmly-woven wools with smooth or glazed linings, just as their adult counterparts. Boys coats may button all the way down the front, or may have a single fastening at the neckline. Dark colors are the most practical in coats, vests, and trousers, as anyone who owns a boy will know. Tweeds can also be a good option.

Neckties done in a simple knot or bow with ends left to hang are also worn with vests and coats. While it seems counterintuitive to use silk on a boy, a small amount of black silk, hemmed narrowly around, makes a very nice neck cloth, and doesn't fade so readily as black cotton will.

Caps are an essential element of boyhood: they serve as a covering for the head, but also as an auxiliary pocket, frog-catcher, dipper, berry bucket, and peg-pitching goal. A wool exterior and glazed lining, in a "newsboy" or "mechanic" cap style will render any young man stylish among his peers. Straw farm hats and small versions of adult hats are options, but the latter is the more rare of all the chapeaux available to a lad mid-century. Avoid allowing boys to wear obviously military caps.

Boys do not always keep on a coat; it is perfectly acceptable for a mid-century boy to wear his shirt, trousers, and an overshirt or work shirt of wool; these are styled very like an adult work shirt.

"Russian" and other over-tunics are another option: these are wool shirts cut generously through the body, with bishop style sleeves, and hemmed about the lower/mid hip level, worn belted with a simple leather belt and buckle.

Wool "jumpers" (sweaters) are another option for cool weather; plain hems, rather than ribbed hems, seem more common. If you're a knitter, look for books on "historic" sweaters like Ganseys, Jerseys, and other historic British jumper options. Be sure to use 100% wool for these, in a good grade (to reduce the itch factor.)

For very cold weather, boys do need a warm overcoat; it can be cut in a generous sack style, with wadded and quilted chest and sleeves, and buttons down the front. Adding a wool scarf in some cheerful pattern is a good idea, as well as mittens or gloves.

Older Boys

As a boy moves from eight or nine to twelve or fourteen, he begins to fully adopt the styles common for his father. This transition happens a bit sooner in working class families, a bit later in the leisure classes. Avoid dressing older boys in miniature uniforms; the most common role for a young boy mid-century is that of "boy," not mini-soldier. At the very beginning of the war, there was a short fad for military-influenced styles; these employ braid, buttons, and appliqué similar to that used on military uniforms, but not duplicating insignia or fabrics. Boys attending military academies during the war should wear a carefully researched version of that institution's cadet uniform rather than adult military issue clothing.

Older boys can still wear some of the youthful styles, such as Russian tunics, overshirts, and jumpers for cool weather. Most older boys are dressed in long trousers regardless of the season.

Fabrics for trousers, coats, and vests (and all outerwear) again will tend toward wools, as with adult men's clothing. Look for very firmly-woven wools in light (summer or "tropical" weights for the most general use; going to a mid-weight wool for winter use is good, but avoid the heavy "coating" weights, as they are very bulky and constricting to boys at play. Several light layers of wool will keep him warmer than one thick layer.

Caps and hats remain an important accessory; an older boy's head will approach adult sizes, so finding ready-made "citizen's" caps will become easier and easier. A good cap will last several years.

Shoes and boots take on fully adult styling; again, there are no historic repro shoemakers advertising 100% accurate children's shoes or boots, so until your boy can wear small women's sizes in a plain (unisex) boot style, you'll want to find unobtrusive modern boots; one option is the "paddock boot" often sold in western or riding shops. This is a simple leather boot with smooth leather sole and short stacked heel, lacing up the front. Often, there is a small, removable fringe tab at the base of the laces (remove it); speed lace hooks can be replaced with plain eyelets by a good boot repair shop.

Buy boots for growing boys a bit large (stuff the toe with some soft wool fabric at first), and plan to hand them down or sell them when he outgrows them—the resale market is one place where the investment in real leather boots will be seen, as the boots will retain a great deal of their sales value for other families. (Too, leather boots are healthier for the feet, as they do "breathe" a bit, where vinyl shoes will not.)

For boys of all ages, wool and cotton socks (ankle to knee length) in durable colors are good options. Both machine-made (store purchased) and homemade stockings are options for mid-century; if you are knitting at home, be aware that the yarn weights and needle sizes are both very fine, even for utilitarian stockings

Dressing boys for mid-century activity ensures they will look appropriate and have the comfort and accurate clothing system their mid-century counterparts enjoyed. Plan to do a fair bit of mending, and prepare yourself mentally for the grime boys seem to collect at any event. An accurately dressed set of boys at play is one of the most impressive "first person" impressions you will ever see.