

The Transitional Dilemma: Dressing Teens

What do you call a girl who is not a girl, but is not yet a woman grown?

Young women ages 12-18 have a sometimes challenging transition from childhood to adulthood, and the clothing that represents each. With planning and good support (emotional and literal!), any young woman can make the transition smoothly and accurately.

Every young woman should take some role in creating her historic wardrobe! Start with basic skills, enough to assist with seams, hems, and buttonholes. Always consider the family's impression, budget limitations, and scenario needs to set wardrobe needs.

Changing Hems

Skirts in childhood are worn hemmed between the knee and mid-calf in most cases. As a girl progresses through her teens, the length gradually increases, though she should not adopt fully adult lengths until she is of fully adult age—18-21 years.

There is no hard and fast rule on the absolute length of girl's skirts. Indeed, examining photographic images shows a huge range of length! Determining factors include whether the dress is made new, or is a handed down garment, where the girl is in her growth-spurt cycle, local social customs, the amount of responsibility the young woman has to deal with, and her mother's preference (the most dominant in many cases.)

My general observations as to hem length and age are:

- 10-14: lower knee to mid-calf
- 12-15: mid- to lower-calf
- 14-16: lower-calf to about one hand-span above the ankle bones
- 15-18: one hand-span above the ankle bones, to within two inches of the ankle
- 17-21: adult lengths; hemmed within two inches of the ankle bone (for active work) or to the top of the foot for everyday wear.

These hem observations apply to dresses

and petticoats; most skirt supports will end either shorter than the dress, or mid-calf, whichever is shorter.

I firmly believe that a young woman should be dressed in age-appropriate hems, regardless of her other physical development. While men are generally clueless as to women's fashions, they can be conditioned to remember that "short skirts equals girlhood", and will thus be spared the emotional (and sometimes legal) pain of flirting with the unavailable.

Keeping girls dressed for girlhood also frees them from the burden of dealing with pleasant, though inappropriate, friendliness by well-meaning men. Our girls are pressured to give up girlhood in modern society; let living history be a refuge for this wonderful stage of life!

Chemise

The transition in chemises is minimal; by age 12 or 14, most girls will wear a chemise cut very much like Mothers, though sized for their frame. Because chemises are loose and generous, one set will often serve in size for then entire teen era... though they may need replacement from wear.

Drawers

Girls who still turn somersaults on a regular basis should be kept in closed, side-buttoning drawers, usually worn over any supportive undergarment for ease in using the facilities. Those who have begun to wear corsets, however, will find that split drawers are as convenient at this age, as they are for grown women.

With either style of drawers, they are appropriately hemmed between the lower knee and mid-calf; drawers at mid-calf or longer belong to much earlier in the century, and should be re-hemmed to an appropriate, shorter length. Trim should be confined to tucks and good whitework.

Skirt Supports

One of the great cravings of your womanhood is to wear hoops! In many

cases, hoops will be perfectly fine for a young woman, provided they are made fairly narrow, and short enough to fit appropriately under her skirts. For most girls, a cage 70" to 90" in circumference will give support and fullness, but still be manageable and becoming. Shorter girls should stick to the lower end of the range.

Corded petticoats are an ideal supportive garment for girls! Made with multiple (30+) rows of very narrow cording around the hem, and about 60" to 80" around, these petticoats keep other underskirts and the dress skirts from wrapping around a girl's legs, and also provide a pretty amount of "bell" to the shape of the skirt. With starching, they can provide nearly the same support as a cage.

Over either support option are worn petticoats or underskirts. White cotton is very typical, as are ornamental and function tucks. Make two or three for a well-supplied wardrobe with one petticoat to loan out as needed.

The Corset

The other great desire of young womanhood is to need a corset. The good news is, any girl with a developing figure (even the pre-pubescent chubbies), needs a supportive undergarment of some sort. The excellent news is, the addition of a corset (using the term interchangeably with light support "stays") to a girl's wardrobe often provides a compromise in Mother-Daughter fashion conflicts.

It is normal for girls to be shy by proud of their developing figures. It signals the onset of womanhood, and the hope for respect and privilege to go along with bosoms and hips. And, bringing in the "shy" aspect of the process, a girl often desires to hide to some degree behind some additional layers of cloth!

When Mother is sensitive to this complex process of change, she can wisely suggest the compromise between girlhood and womanhood: the young woman will wear appropriately

supportive stays and corsets, but will continue to wear the hems of girlhood.

Corset needs will change rapidly through the teen years; it is best to accept that a new set of stays will be needed each year, and learn to make them at home. Steel boning and busks can be reused in many different corsets, so the new versions have a minimal cost: time and new fabric.

Stays or corsets support the changing figure, and help to minimize fitting issues that result from a developing bosom, soft flesh at the waist, lack of hips as a “landing zone” for clothing (add buttons near the waistline of the corsets, and fasten petticoats directly on!), and may even help to correct some posture issues.

Teen corsets are worn for support, not constriction. They should not be overlaced, or worn for waist-reduction. Simply firming the torso and supporting the bust (however large or small) will provide the appropriate period look. The increasing weight of clothing is well-distributed on the bones of the corset, and will prevent back pain.

Changing Bodices

While skirts can have let-out growth tucks, and corsets will allow for some growth, it can be difficult to keep a growing teen in bodices that fit.

Young teens may wear the open necks and full, loose bodice styles of childhood, as well as short sleeves for day wear. These styles are easy to adjust for a changing figure, and their bodice fullness provides a bit of camouflage as well, which is a comfort to the shy girl.

Also available are the smoothly-fitted open- or high-necked styles of childhood and adulthood. These require more skill at fitting, and more time investment, as they will be outgrown rather quickly.

Yoked bodices are a good transitional style; they are smoothly fitted through the upper chest, but the entire lower bodice is gathered or pleated full across the bosom, and into a fitted waistband. This allows for a great deal of “hidden” development, without a “fluffy” feel.

One common factor of the transitional

dress bodice is a back fastening. Girls should be kept in back fastening (buttons or hooks) dresses until they reach long hems, at age 16 or above. (This feature, along with hems, can be part of the “Corset Compromise.”)

Short sleeves in the day will be most often worn by girls younger than 15, though many images exist showing mill-girls in their later teens with short-sleeves, fashionable dresses, in front and back closing styles.

Party dresses will generally have a lower, wide neckline and short sleeves, though a pretty sheer dress with a high neckline, and half-high lining is also very appropriate.

Teen girls are also in the appropriate range to wear fashionable combinations such as “Zouave” and “Garibaldi” fashions. Still, it is important to remember that while the age is right, the impression is still vital, and these high-fashion garments are most appropriately made in very fine wools and silks—not the easy-on-the-budget cotton prints! Few girls will be able to afford the materials investment for pieces so soon discarded. Still, when done well, and worn in an appropriate scenario, such high fashion is a delight to see!

Pinafores & Aprons

Young women continue to wear covering pinafores and aprons to protect their everyday clothing during work. A functional wardrobe contains more undergarments and protective clothing than any other item—and this holds true for young women as well!

Shoes & Stockings

Because the feet, ankles, and calves will be visible through much of young womanhood, stockings and shoes play a big role in the accurate impression. White cotton stockings are the most washable, and are very typical to the time; hand-knit stockings in wool are also very appropriate, especially for farm girls and other working class impressions. (Black wool does not stain the ankles grey, as does black cotton!)

Shoes may be made in the “Mary Jane” style, or in the styles of adult women, all having a low stacked heel,

predominantly squarish toe box, and a minimal heel. Leather boots are also an option; look for those with a squared toe, minimal sole style, and if the boots are modern, take them to a repair shop to have the speed lace hooks removed.

Hairstyles

A center part is always appropriate! Girls in the younger teens may wear their hair in long braids, or in a shorter, cropped style (straight or waved, depending on the natural state of the hair). Older teens (16 and above) who are also wearing the longer skirts and adult bodice styles, might choose to pin their hair into a more adult style, especially for parties.

Cropped hair was a very typical style for young girls; at some point, the girl must begin to grow this style out, toward the longer styles of adulthood. Decorative hair nets are an ideal accessory at this stage. A center part is still used, but the hair is confined at the base of the neck in a very fine net, usually with ribbon or other decoration trimming the upper edge. (These are not terribly practical in working settings, in most cases. For active wear, a simple ribbon worn to keep the locks out of the face, or pinned-back braids, will be useful.)

Headwear

This is one age group where hats are actually appropriate in some settings! For actual sun protection, a slat or other sun bonnet is best; for formal situations, such as church, a bonnet is considered most appropriate. But, for “play” settings, such as picnics and other fun, fashionable amusements, young women can appropriately wear a brimmed straw hat, with embellishments. Winter hoods in many styles serve well for cold weather.

Outer Wraps

Here, too, the styles are merely appropriately-sized adult shapes. Capes, coats, sacques, paletots, mantles, shawls, and the other permutations of fashion are all equally wearable for the young woman, provided the style and fabrics are suited to her impression and the weather.