

# 'AUTHENTIC CLOTHES VS. COMMERCIALISED COSTUMES'

## Weighing up options

McMonagle, A. 2025

Many early childhood settings have consciously moved away from commercialised dressing up clothes and have replaced items with authentic clothing and open-ended resources.

We have all witnessed children spending most of their day in a favourite role play costume, maybe pretending to be a favourite television character or superhero. This blog is not about dampening children's interests or imaginary experiences. Instead, it aims to help educators reflect and think about the value and limitations of specific dress-up resources on offer in their early childhood setting.



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### Multiple textures and sensory stimulation

The vast majority of commercialised dress up outfits are made from polyester or nylon. Easy to wash, quick to dry, cheap to buy.

Against this, let's consider the importance of sensory exploration for young children. As we know only too well, a variety of sensory experiences made available through play boosts brain development by creating new neural connections, memory skills and fine motor control.

Tactile experiences for children who are neurodivergent are vital in developing a sense of security in the out of home environment. A dress up box containing clothing items like soft cardigans, cotton shirts, straw hats, silk scarves, fluffy socks etc will provide a diverse range of sensory and tactile experiences for babies, toddlers and young children.

### Subliminal barriers

Commercialised costumes are designed and manufactured for children, but they are not designed to go over the top of clothing the child is already wearing.

Children of all shapes and sizes can struggle to pull dress up costumes on over everyday clothes like jogging bottoms and sweatshirts. Some costumes by their design, can exclude children due to their size or posture. This causes upset, constantly needing help from an adult or by being conscious of body difference.

As real clothes are bigger, children are more likely to be able to put on items independently. All children know about real clothing as this is part of their lived experience and when watching family members dress and undress. They are more inclined to try dressing themselves and have a go at buttons and fastenings nurturing independence and self-help skills.



## That dress is for girls!

Children will embrace whatever stereotypes their environment presents. Commercialised costumes are usually gender specific and are targeted at boys or girls. This is particularly true of Disney and Princess merchandise which is responsible for heavily influencing gender stereotypes.

Real clothes can be gender free. For example, shirts, scarves, oversized t-shirts, hats and so on, allow children the freedom to create a character and explore different roles without having to stay within gender boundaries.



## Crossing the midline

The Velcro fastenings which are part of the vast majority of commercialised outfits are handy but offer little or no challenge for fine motor development. Alternatively, real clothes have buttons to fasten, hooks to catch and zips to move up and down! This enables children to develop manual dexterity, crossing the midline and dual manipulation. All these skills are vital for coordination, balance, future writing and reading.

## He won't take it off!

There may be a limited number of particular outfits, and of course this is the one all children want. This leads to time limiting scenarios that some children are not yet mature enough to understand. Why place this barrier in the way? An assortment of authentic clothes will lead to children making choices and assembling their own makeshift costumes.



## Cost neutral and diverse!

Of course, you can assemble a varied collection of recycled clothes and accessories for free or very little cost! Do a shout out to parents for specific items, fabric types or accessories. Get staff to have a look at home and bring in any unusual items. Visit charity shops for hats and items of clothing typically worn in different cultures. This way, every early childhood setting will have a different display of clothes instead of the typical shop bought items.

## Display authentically

Think about how you display clothes on offer to children. Why not put items in an old chest of drawers (label drawers with pictures), a low cupboard or an open shelving unit. Add wall hooks to display hats and bags or cut down an old wooden hat stand. Use open baskets for accessories.







### **Undirected, unscripted, uninhibited**

Imagination and creativity is like a muscle, the more open-ended opportunities that children are exposed to, the more children become engaged in real authentic play. Undirected, unscripted, uninhibited. Children should oversee their own imagination to act out a character of interest but without being restricted by a predetermined costume.

**Thinking about offering authentic dress up items which open endless possibilities for play and imaginary experience? Here are some of the things you could start collecting..**

- Oversized clippy-cloppy shoes, bedroom slippers, work boots
- Shopping bags, baskets, rucksacks, handbags
- Oversized t-shirts, check shirts, cotton shirts, satin shirts
- Cut jeans, elastic waist trousers, skirts, jackets
- Sun hats, woolly hats, flat caps, straw hats, hard hats, wedding hats,
- Shawls, patterned scarves, woollen scarves
- Culturally different clothes
- Fluffy socks, mittens, gloves
- Pieces of material/netting to act as dresses or capes
- Dress up role play should be all about triggering the imagination and enabling freedom of choice
- Accessories like watches, beads, sunglasses, glasses frames, belts.



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- Broadford Montessori Preschool, Dublin
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