

# Dressing Girls

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Once a girl is past infancy, her clothing needs change. The individual pieces remain very similar throughout childhood; with careful planning for growth, you can replace garments every two or three years, rather than every season. Patterns for all of the foundational and dress layers may be found in The Sewing Academy: Historic Moments pattern line.

## Undies

The foundation for a girl's wardrobe remains the *chemise*; this may either be cut in a style similar to Mother's, but scaled down to fit the girl's frame, or may also be a combination garment of chemise and attached petticoat. Either way, the chemise is typically white cotton (or white linen), and made to be as multi-sized as possible. Hems end between the upper and lower knee. Chemises serve as a first-line defense, absorbing body oils and perspiration, and extending the wearing interval of the dress and outer clothing.

In the era, many girls wore soft, corded *stays*. These stays, illustrated in dressmaking manuals, articles, and advertisements, are most often in cottons, with cotton or hemp corded channels to provide stability; they may or may not have shoulder straps, and often button to close. Stays are helpful as they provide a place to create a waist, by adding buttons at the "waistline" and suspending drawers and petticoats from them. A girl who reaches physical maturity early on should be moved into stays that match her physical requirements, but should be kept in juvenile dress styles.

Girls also typically wear *drawers* of white cotton or linen (or sometimes wool flannel for cold-weather wear), hemmed between lower knee and mid-calf. This hem may be quite plain, or ornamented, tucks being the most common ornament I've found for all economic classes, with white embroidery and whitework trim (hand or machined) as the second most common ornament, usually for the professional classes (middle class) and above.

Childhood drawers are often made with a closed crutch seam, and plackets over each hip. The drawers sometimes button to stays or an underwaist (chemise top that stops at the waist with a semi-fitted band), or are made with a fitted band and simply fastened around the waist. These drawers serve to keep a girl modest through all manner of somersaulting and play.

*Petticoats* are also vital; these provide loft and softness to the skirts, insulate the wearer from the outer environment, and help complete the "look" of the era. Petticoats and underskirts are again most often white cotton (sometimes white linen, sometimes wool flannel for winter wear), and are cut quite full in circumference. Hems fall between knee and mid-calf all through childhood, but the petticoats and underskirts should not "peek". Tucks and whitework edging, as well as quilting and braiding of winter wool petticoats, are common; plain petticoats are also correct.

*Skirt supports* are also correct to the era. The only "minimum" age I can find for the wearing of hoops seems to be "walking age." Even very small girls are photographed wearing tiny hoops, with petticoats and dress above, and drawers/petticoats beneath. Whether they wore this all day or not is a matter of some speculation, of course... but fashion illustrations, casual sketches, and impromptu photography all suggest that from the age of 5 or so, many girls did use hoops.

Hoops are not, however, very comfortable for play... either a combination of multiple petticoats, or petticoats with multiple rows of cording in the lower third of the length (well starched) also exist as options for the active girl. These do not hamper play so much, and still provide the soft, belled silhouette seen most often in this era.

## Dresses

The options for girl's dresses abound! High or low necklines, short or long sleeves of all varieties, plain or highly embellished, with pleats or gathers, with or without decorative jackets—all are options for the young girl 2-12, and even beyond. (See our Teens article, and *Practical Pinkery*.)

Some constant similarities are an emphasis of the dropped shoulder line, a fairly defined waist, and full skirts. One common problem with reproduced fashions are skirts that appear "tight" or "skimpy." While very small girls (age 2-5) will have skirt circumferences of 60-80", girls age 4 and up will often have skirts between 90" and 120". To condense these large fullness ratios to child-sized waists, hand-gathering (versus machined gathering) is your best option.

One-piece dresses seem to be more common than two-piece sets; these are very conducive to easy wearing. Dresses may or may not have a visible waistband; some dresses without an external waistband do use an internal waist facing.

When two-piece sets are used, most have a bodice with a fitted waistband, and skirt with a fitted waistband, rather than the "tuck in" styles seen on Merchant Row.

Girl's dresses almost universally close at the back; a few variations do use a front closure, but these are not so common as the back buttons or hooks.

Growth tucks in skirts are also common. These are both decorative and functional, adding body to the skirts for a nicer "set" over the foundational petticoats and skirt supports, and building in extra length as a hedge against growth spurts.

## Footwear

*Shoes* are perhaps the most difficult aspect of correct clothing! In general, look for black or brown leather, a rounded or squared toe box, and minimal heel/sole. Shoes or boots may be worn at any childhood age. "Mary Jane" style shoes (with an ankle or cross-foot strap) can also be used.



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*Stockings* for girls can be cotton, wool, or silk; for the majority of families, cotton or wool stockings are the most economical choice. These generally reach the knee, and are worn in white, sometimes black (though black cottons fade quickly), and less commonly, other colors.

There is a fad during the era for horizontally striped stockings, which can also be very fun in limited circumstances, mostly for fashionable wear. The stripes generally contrast well, and are about 3/4" to 1" wide.

Stockings may be made with the tops knit to stay up alone, or may be worn with garters above or below the knee, though most girls will prefer stockings that stay up on their own. Stocking generally reach to at least the knee throughout childhood.

## Headwear & Outerwear

As with dresses, head and outerwear styles abound for girls! Suit the headwear to the environment and activity: *sunbonnets* (corded, quilted, or slat) for outdoor summer use, quilted *hoods* (wool with cotton or silk lining, wool wadding) for cold weather use, and a range of fashionable straw and buckram *bonnets* for use in the mild seasons, and for fashion. While learning bonnet-making does take time, it is possible for families to create these scaled-down fashion bonnets, or to commission a custom-sized frame from a good milliner. Recently, Timely Tresses ([www.timelytresses.com](http://www.timelytresses.com)) has begun producing patterns, kits, and finished bonnets in child sizes.

*Hats* are also an option for young girls (braided straw, with a low crown and moderately wide brim), though it is very hard to find an accurate straw hat in a child's size. While craft hats are too tall for the era, some straw hats intended for the Amish and other Plain dressing populations can be adapted. However, hats don't offer much as sunbonnets and hoods in the way of sun and element protection; the other warm and cold weather headwear options are a better choice for protection.

Girls also have the options of a wide range of outerwear for protection, warmth, or fashion, from pinafore varieties (see our free pinafore patterns!) to shawls, mantles, coats, and cloaks made very similarly to Mother's, on a smaller scale. A quick look at fashion engravings, "casual scene" illustrations, and photographic images show just how wide this range can be.

## Hairstyles

One question we frequently have is "how do I do my daughter's hair?" Again, options are all the rage!

One very common girl's style in the middle 19th century is a crop: cut bluntly just below the ear (or to the top of the shoulder), and held back from the face with a band of ribbon, or simply tucked behind the ears.

Short curls are also seen, as are longer (mid-shoulder) ringlets, again, held back from the face with ribbon bands or other ornaments.

Braids are seen: three-strand, typically starting just behind the ear so as to lie flat down the back. Sometimes, with very long

hair, these braids are twisted round the head in a coronet. I do not find much documentation for a single braid down the back in photos, though many long-haired girls wear their hair loose and wavy for the image (indicating it may have been braided right up to the last moment.)

I have not found evidence of "French" braids used in the mid-19th century.

One common hair element is a center part, without bangs. This is nearly universal for the era, and can be easily copied today, regardless of the age of the girl. Pomade is helpful in smoothing back bangs or wispy bits.

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This article is, of necessity, a brief overview. Supplement the basics with your own inquiry and research, and feel free to ask additional questions! As always, two of the best ways to learn about girls clothing are to look at original photographs for cues as to style combinations and the overall look when dressed, and look at original dresses for construction tips and shapes.

When planning a functional wardrobe for your favorite girl, consider:

- Multiple sets of undergarments are more useful than multiple dresses. They extend the laundry interval of the dress, and are generally less expensive and less complex to make at home.
- Pinafores serve a similar purpose, and should be made in multiples. Pinafores do not need to match the dress at all, and can be done in fine white cotton or colored silk for "best", white cotton, cotton or linen check, and even cotton prints, for everyday.
- Build growth into dresses and undergarments with tucks, hidden bodice length, and other period techniques (these are detailed in *Historic Moments* patterns.)
- Keep in mind the personality and preferences of your girl: if she is not a "frilly" girl, don't make her wear frills! Most any preference can be accommodated in a period-appropriate way.
- Get your daughter involved in her own wardrobe construction as early as possible. Small girls of 5 and bigger girls of 11 can be taught a running stitch, to set in pressed hems. Girls who are involved in their wardrobe generally take better care of their clothing. Even toddlers can choose from two or three pre-approved fabric options!
- Plan one set of undergarments and pinafore per day, plus one spare, and one or two dresses, for a 2-4 day event.

A girl in functional historic clothing is comfortable, happy, and healthy... as well as a great addition to any historic scenario!



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