The current exhibition of Children in Style at the Costume Institute consists of children’s clothes from the sixteenth century to the present, assembled from the collections of the Costume Institute and the Metropolitan Museum. The manikins are posed among paintings of children and small treasures from forgotten nurseries.

Since adults please themselves when they dress children, little clothes always tell exactly what adults think of children. Works of art before about 1750 or so show plainly that adults considered children, when they considered them at all, as miniature adults. Whatever it was that adults wore—doublet and hose, draped yard goods, farthingale, plate armor, or peruke—children wore the same in a junior size. In a fifteenth-century tapestry (see p. 182), the court pages look like their fathers and uncles seen in a diminishing glass. In 1699 the Earl of Bristol bought a costly wig for his seven-year-old son. If a child was really to look like a grownup it also had to act like a grownup, and this was harder. Tiny children had to learn whatever it was that their parents set most store by, and were granted no excuse for not being couth and ruly. The Romans, who valued the public eloquence that gives an oligarchy the power to sway and cajole the mob, therefore forced grammar and correct Latin usage on children from their earliest years. The poet Martial lived near a school that waked him and his neighborhood before cockcrow with the barking and thrashing of the masters and the bawling of the boys. The ferocity of the Roman schools may well account for the rage that erupted in the unquotable vindictiveness of the Roman satirists.

Medieval and renaissance schoolmasters certainly beat their boys as often and as hard, but the boys had the comfort of knowing that Heaven at least would right all wrongs. Medieval schools north of the Alps were established by the church to provide basic training for the clergy, but in
Italy the schools educated future rulers over the fickle and sophisticated cities and over soldiers who were free to change masters for better hire. An Italian city or a little Italian army of the Renaissance could be held together only by magnetism radiating from a fascinating leader. The Italian schools therefore taught whatever could make a boy or girl sparkle and dominate—muscular agility, an understanding of literature and the arts, debate, strategy, and a knowledge of people.

Renaissance schools had to force the pace of their pupils to prepare them for taking on adult responsibilities at what seems to us an impossibly early age. Little princes and princesses were married at six or so to further their families’ fortunes, so that children’s portraits, which sometimes introduced a future wife to her far-away husband, are much commoner after about 1500 than before. Boys of five were painted in the full purple of a cardinal’s robes, and they fought in armor at fourteen. Charles V was fifteen when he assumed the government of the Netherlands, and who shall say that he did worse than our leaders of today? As recent a princess as Catherine II of Russia had her dolls and toys taken away from her at seven because she was thought to have passed childhood. Early maturity was not a monopoly of the ruling class, for many renaissance artists had mastered the knack of their tools before they were ten. When Dürer, at fifteen, decided to become a painter instead of a goldsmith, his father scolded him for delaying his decision until so late in life. In Calvin’s Geneva a small child was indicted for striking its parents, was tried, convicted, and beheaded. Forced growth shows its effects in medieval and renaissance portraits, where a man of twenty-five often looks forty, and a princely adolescent sometimes has that stare of want that we today see only among the poorest. However, a man had no choice but to grow up fast when he was likely to die young.

The rise of absolute monarchy modified the curriculum but not the strictness of a prince’s training. If the eldest son of the King of France needed to do nothing but survive in order to become the next King of France, he did not have to bother to be charming or educated. Yet the very real power that he wielded made his character so worth studying that the babyhood and boyhood of a king like Louis XIII was recorded in hour-by-hour detail.

Since even an absolute monarch had to do a little something to dominate his immediate household, a seventeenth-century prince was laced into corsets and taught deportment with as much severity as the Italian renaissance princes had been taught Livy and Plutarch. The
poor boy Louis XIII once said “I would prefer that you bowed to me less low and addressed me by fewer titles, and that you stopped flogging me.”

In the eighteenth century every person of quality tried to attain the commanding appearance of an absolute monarch. Little children were made straight by harnessing thin boards called monitors to their backs, and little girls in England and America wore bright steel collars that hurt them if they dropped their chins. “With a collar round her neck,” wrote Richard Steele in 1711 “the pretty wild thing is taught a fantastical gravity of behaviour, and forced to a particular way of holding her head, heaving her breast, and moving with the whole body, and all this under pain of never having a husband if she steps, moves, or looks awry.” But grand manners and grand clothes were reserved for grand occasions, and children managed to be children much of the time. The Duke of Lauzun said that he was brought up like most little dukes—dressed fine now and then, but usually left ragged and hungry.

In those long hours when children throughout the ages have managed to be absent without leave from adults, they have played variations on the same basic games. In about 1870 Unamuno, like other Spanish boys, used to tie a thread to the leg of a June bug and make it fly by singing to it, just as Aristophanes described Athenian boys doing over two thousand years before. In some parts of England boys still ask each other “Buck, buck, how many on hand do I hold up?” without dreaming that they echo little, long-dead Romans whom Petronius heard calling “Bucca, bucca, quot sunt hic?” In the seventeenth century adults began to cater to the child’s persistent way of life by publishing the first books made specially for children. These early nursery books were far from today’s flatness of prattle, for Perrault’s Mother Goose Tales in 1697 achieved an ironical innocence that makes every other
John Locke’s love of children brought him to a new understanding of them, which he expressed in 1693 in Some Thoughts Concerning Education, a pamphlet which was gradually accepted as a kind of children’s Bill of Rights. Locke’s ideas have become so much our own that it is hard for us to realize how deeply it must have startled some of his contemporaries to read that “severity of punishment does but very little good; nay, great harm in education . . . . If you once get into children a love of credit, and an apprehension of shame and disgrace, you have put into them the true principle which will constantly incline them to the right.” The tutor should help each child to develop its individual aptitudes harmoniously. As an outward sign of inner balance, nature should “have scope to

children’s story seem fumbled. An English book, John Cotton’s Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes in either England: Drawn out of the Breasts of both Testaments for their Souls Nourishment, was reprinted in Boston in New England in 1684 as one of the first books for American children.

A slow ground swell of change had been gathering. Christianity had done something for children, as it had done much for slaves, by defending the uniqueness of each person. The next step came with the gradual discovery that children are something other than imperfect little adults. Shakespeare’s children speak the first credible child’s talk in all literature, and Romeo and Juliet are the first sympathetic adolescent delinquents, the first juvenile offenders seen through the eyes of youth.
fashion the body as she thinks best . . . . Narrow breasts, short and sinking breath, ill lungs, and crookedness are the natural and almost constant effects of hard bodice, and clothes that pinch.”

Locke's ideas conquered Europe and America, especially when Rousseau dramatized and sentimentalized them in his novel Émile, ou de l'Éducation in 1762. After thousands of years of being little devils, or, at best, nuisances, children became little angels, trailing clouds of glory from God, who is their home. The change came clearly to view when eighteenth-century English children started to dress more simply than their parents, in looser, freer clothes, which evolved into the first children's fashions that really differed from grownups'. By 1750 a little English boy rarely wore knee breeches like his father, and never a wig. An open collar (which Lord Byron later popularized for grown men) spread out over his high jacket, and his long trousers were like those that sailors had worn for at least a century because they were so easy to roll up around the knee when swabbing down a deck. A little English girl differed less from her mother, but her waistline was apt to be higher.

These English boys' styles went to France, along with other English customs, after Voltaire had pricked French curiosity by reporting on the exotic doings across the Channel. In July 1787 the first of all fashion magazines, the Parisian Cabinet des Modes, stated that “little girls follow women's fashions, but little boys have their own and dress like sailors.” During the French Revolution Parisians began to dress the way boys and girls had done for years, as though the Revolution had instated children as legislators along with the bourgeoisie. French women began to wear little girls' cotton dresses with high waists. French men put on boys' long trousers, which they claimed to have adapted from their wild free ancestors, the Gauls; they threw away their wigs and snipped their hair in a "Brutus" haircut such as boys had worn for years without calling it anything so virtuous and declaratory. Maybe it was easier for adults to dress like children at a moment when the Revolution had thrown many men to power while they were still young, and
one could say with more truth than ever that men are but children of a larger growth.

Children's styles became so important after 1800 that they have ever since figured in fashion plates. In about 1810 a clever unidentified Parisian designed the first set of fashion plates devoted exclusively to children (see below). This set is also peculiar in that many of the clothes are for babies, who had for centuries worn an unchanging uniform of long skirts and padded caps called puddings to cushion their heads when they fell over (see p. 183). A boy baby dressed like a girl baby until he was about seven, when he was "breeched" with a little graduation ceremony. Fashion-plate draughtsmen had long been deforming the adult body into elegant abnormalities, but this series of fashion plates provided them with the first children to reshape into roguish grubs.

Adults modeled their clothes on children's just when they were throwing aside the court etiquette of the old regime in order to create new manners modeled on the child's naturalness and sensibility. After Rousseau had coated the child with sugar and spice and everything nice, schools were started in Switzerland and Germany by Pestalozzi and Froebel to develop the child's natural goodness by letting it learn through play. When the first kindergarten, or nursery for human seedlings, opened in 1837, it expounded the whole theory of what we call progressive education—the sympathy between the teachers and the taught and the development of a harmonious person by learning through doing. As Bismarck, somewhat surprisingly, said, you can do anything with children if you play with them. The new education spread least toward France and most toward the United States, where it gathered strength after 1900, but its theories were perhaps most widely exploited by fascists and communists. Alas, the children's heyday abruptly ended when their innate goodness soon began to look as dubious to the Victorian paterfamilias in England and the United States as it did to the Bourbon and legitimist reactionaries on the Continent. The child saved only one treasure from its brief triumph, and that was the fascination—one might say the authority—of its fantasy. Nineteenth-century publishers made children's books a major enterprise, and some of the ablest writers felt their way into the child's inner life. Tom Brown came to embody the English schoolboy's code of honor, Stalky & Co. his slang and his passwords, while Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn were just every boy in his natural cussedness. Poor Maisie, all alone, knew too much for her own good. The nursery became what Max Beerbohm called "the darkened scene of temporal oppression, fitfully lighted with the gaunt reflection of hell-fire."

Children's clothes showed the regression by going back to where they had traditionally been. The Eton suit fossilized a fashion of the 1830's; by the 1850's girls of seven put on hoop skirts, and in the 1880's, bustles. But even in clothes some of the child's fantasy managed to exercise itself, maybe because the child's brief romantic holiday left it some small say in choosing what to wear, or maybe because the eclecticism of
LEFT: Laure, lithograph by Gavarni, 1840. This is one of the first pictures that seems to surprise a child in its own private world. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929.

RIGHT: Water color for a fashion plate by Jules David, July 1891. The boat “La Mode” is taking aboard passengers wearing the naval and military fashions that clearly expressed the political ambitions of nations during that period, which was the heyday of colonial power. Whittelsey Fund, 1951.
nineteenth-century furniture and decoration expressed itself in variegated clothes for children when it could not do so in adult’s fashions. Whatever the reasons may have been, boys and girls began to play at being Scots after Queen Victoria dressed the royal princes in kilts for a visit to Balmoral in 1854. Boys could also be hussars, sailors, or spahis (see p. 187), and after 1886 they had the doubtful pleasure—rarely the option—of little Lord Fauntleroy’s curls, lace collar, and black velvet knee breeches, while little girls went into Kate Greenaway’s poke bonnets, and greenery-yallery Empire slips. Literary modes (if comic strips be literature) continue today, when boys dress as Hopalong Cassidy or Davy Crockett. Little girls, as always, are less adventurous.

And the future? In most of the world it would seem as though smaller children from now on will always have clothes that let them grow naturally and move impetuously, for they can never again seem mere adults in miniature, after Pestalozzi and Froebel crusaded for the child’s right to be a child, and after Freud demonstrated how totally the child is father to the man and how the health of either determines the health of the other. Older children will dress more like adults when timidity holds tight to the past, and will be more on their own (especially boys) when there is courage to let youth experiment. But the decorum of “Sunday best” is gone, never to return until the maid-of-all-work returns, and until mothers no longer have so much to do that they rush out to the butcher in a mink coat thrown over dungarees. For most of us this would seem to be indeed never.

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