School uniform improves pupils' behaviour both in and out of school

By LAURA CLARK

Wearing a uniform improves pupils' behaviour both inside and outside school, a study suggests.

Having a uniform helps to reduce bullying in school, makes children better behaved outside the school gates and even aids concentration in class, researchers said.

Pupils at schools without uniform codes were liable to be bullied for the way they dressed, the study found.

Teenagers who took part in the Oxford Brookes University survey said dress codes acted as a social leveller and reduced the risk of children being picked on for wearing "weird" clothes.

Youngsters also admitted they were less likely to misbehave outside the premises because their uniform instantly identified their school.

Pupils were more conscious of their behaviour in public and aware that "old ladies will ring up and report it if you've dropped an apple core in the street".

Others noticed that security guards were more likely to follow children around shops if they were wearing their uniforms.

Professor Margaret Harris, who led the study, said uniforms "often directly contributed to a feeling of school pride, which they did not want to compromise by misbehaving outside the school gate".

She added: "The easy identification also acted as an important preventative factor."

Overall, pupils favoured uniforms because they instilled a sense of pride in the school and prevented them having to choose fashionable outfits each morning.

Professor Harris, head of the psychology department at Oxford Brookes, added: "Students tended to be most in favour of smart and distinctive school uniforms."

Pupils at one school without a compulsory dress code hankered after a "proper uniform - with matching socks and blazers".

But one pupil from a school perceived as "posh" voiced concerns that they became more attractive targets for muggers because "people expect you to have a fancier phone or more money".

Ministers have been keen to encourage uniforms but as many as one in five schools does not have them.

The Government has also said schools should scrap exclusive deals with uniform suppliers and ensure clothing is widely available on the High Street or at supermarkets.

This will enable parents to take advantage of massive savings on uniforms offered by supermarkets and over the Internet, but there have been warnings that it could spell the end of distinctive uniforms steeped in tradition, for example sweaters with crests.

The Oxford Brookes study, which involved interviews with 13 to 17-year-olds at a range of schools in Oxford, found they welcomed uniforms because they stop "some pupils wearing Ralph Lauren school jumpers."

One participant said: "There cannot be any, 'Let's group up and laugh at the weird person'."

In schools without uniforms, "students tended to adopt one of a series of dress codes labelled chavs, skaters and preps - and were seen as part of that group". Chavs are known for wearing fake designer sportswear and ostentatious jewellery, while skaters refers to skateboarders. Preps dress more smartly, for example in polo shirts, and boys may have floppy hair.
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Girls particularly appreciated uniforms because they prevented male classmates and teachers considering their dress inappropriate and removed a potential source of harassment.

Uniforms were also claimed to improve behaviour in lessons themselves. Pupils reported being more focused on their work because a significant distraction - whether their clothes were "cool" enough - had been removed.