

The Clothing Wars, Part I

It began with a bargain – bribery, really.

“Collin, if you get yourself dressed for school, I’ll get you a donut.”

I know what you’re thinking – bad parenting – and in many ways, you’re correct. Promising food as a quid pro quo token is a big no-no. Offering a sugar-laden pastry for breakfast is worse yet. But with two other little ones to dress, I was thinking I’d save a little time. I was mistaken.

“Look, I already put your clothes out on the bed,” I said, gesturing to the underwear, socks, khakis, long sleeved t-shirt and rugby jersey beside him. I held up the underwear, and indicated which part is the front and which part is the back, like a flight attendant demonstrating how to use an oxygen mask. “You can do it!” I cheered.

“I’m just wearing that gentleman shirt,” Collin said. (Definition: any shirt with a collar and/or buttons, in this case the white and blue rugby shirt). I’m not wearing that other shirt with it.”

“Collin, it’s really cold outside, so you have to wear two shirts.”

“No! I’m just wearing that gentleman shirt.”

I pictured him, coloring in class, with the placket wide open bearing his chest, like he was John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever.

“You have to wear some sort of a T-shirt underneath,” I said, tearing through his T-shirt drawer.

“Okay, then how about my sharp (shark) shirt?”

“That’s fine,” I said. After a minute of sifting through 5T tees, I realized that it was in the wash. I tracked down another shark shirt. It was bright red and wouldn’t match his other shirt, but at this point I didn’t care.

“Here’s a shark shirt,” I told Collin.

“I don’t want the pirate sharp shirt,” he said. “I want the president sharp shirt.”

And he lost me. After a minute I realized that he didn’t like the shirt with the skull made of sharks on it, he wanted the shirt in the wash, which his godmother brought back from Puerto Rico. It had the Puerto Rican flag on it, and Collin calls flags “presidents.”

My son’s wardrobe has its own language, and translating it takes time. With each passing second, our Dunkin Donuts window was closing. Instead of having a carload of warmly dressed children, I was standing before a boy in race car pajamas.

“Collin, do you still want that donut?” I asked.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Then you have to wear your pirate sharp shirt and your gentleman shirt and get

dressed."

I departed to change a couple of diapers and stumble my fingers over a few dozen onesie snaps. Despite the amount of work involved in dressing an infant and a toddler, within five minutes, I was putting on Frank's shoes as he sat on the washer in the mud room. I didn't hear Collin approach over the rumbling.

"Ta-da!" Collin said. He was wearing his khakis, underwear (I presumed), and pirate sharp shirt. "I even fingered out how to put on my socks!"



They were inside out, but I didn't care. He was 85% dressed. "Great job, Collin! I'm so proud of you!" I smiled at him as I wiggled Leo into his snowsuit. Then, I had to get serious. "Where's your gentleman shirt?"

"I'm not wearing my gentleman shirt. I'm wearing my pirate sharp shirt," he said.

"It's really cold outside, so you need to wear both shirts," I explained, as calmly as I could. There would be no donut, even if he did dress himself. We'd be lucky to get to school on time.

"I'M NOT WEARING TWO SHIRTS! I'M JUST WEARING ONE SHIRT!"

"Collin," I calmly began. "Like I said, it's really cold outside." I opened the back door for emphasis. He briefly covered his upper arms with his hands before returning them to fists at his side. "When it gets really cold like this, you can get sick really easily if you don't have on enough clothes. I don't want you to get sick, so I'm going to go upstairs and get your gentleman shirt so you can wear it because we are running really late now."

"I can wear my coat," he said, stopping me as I passed to point out his parka on the hook on the wall.

"Great thinking, Collin! You are going to wear your coat...on top of your gentleman shirt."

"NO! I'm just going to wear my pirate sharp shirt and my coat and that's it."

"But you'll have to take off your coat and put it in your cubby at school and your arms will get cold during class."

"No, because everyone wears their coats during class."

"Then, why do I see them in their cubbies when I drop you off and pick you up?"

I'd stumped him. But, I'd also come up with a solution.

"What if you wear your Jake and the Neverland Pirates sweatshirt with your pirate sharp shirt? It has a zipper in the front, so we can still see your sharp shirt."

"Uh-uh," he said, shaking his head "no" and putting his hands on his hips.

I was halfway up the stairs before he could display his full pout. I grabbed the sweatshirt and presented it to him like I was on "The Price is Right."

"Okay," he said, a tinge of resignation in his voice.

Once Collin was finally dressed appropriately for the weather, we headed off to

school, our Dunkin Donuts trip on hold for now.

When I picked Collin up, he was wearing his red sharp shirt. His sweatshirt and his coat were in his backpack. He wore a victorious smile, instead. I let him think he'd won until the frigid air hit his bare arms and cheeks and he begged for something warm with sleeves. I was happy to reach into his backpack and oblige, wearing my own victorious smile.

I know that this was not the last battle Collin and I are going to have over clothes. I imagine him wearing the same T-shirt three days in a row or wanting to head off to homecoming in jeans and a sweatshirt some day. On the other hand, he might want to wear designer clothing we can't afford. Either way, I know that someday Collin is going to make choices for himself that contradict what I have in mind. And, for now, we're just talking about what to wear.