

But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids

Why Do We Wear Clothes?

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Jane 00:20

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from kids just like you, and then it's our job to offer you some answers. You can submit your own questions by having an adult help you record yourself. We'll give you more details at the end of the episode. Have you ever been threading one leg through a pair of pants in the morning and wondered, why do we wear these? Or how did pockets get invented? And why are the pockets designed for girls clothing sometimes smaller than the pockets designed for boys clothing? Or what's up with underwear? If you have wondered those things? Well, this is just the episode for you. And if you haven't, stay with us; I think you'll find this pretty interesting. Just wait till you hear how shirts were invented and what they were used for!

Bhakti 01:14

Hello, my name is Bhakti. I live in Australia, Queensland, Mudjimba. And my question is why do we have to wear clothes? And I'm nine.

Olivia 01:27

Hello, my name is Olivia. I'm from Barberton, Ohio. And I'm six years old. My question is why do humans have to wear clothes?

Amber 01:36

Many people think we started wearing clothing for practical reasons of warmth and protection, basically. My name is Amber Butchart. And I'm a dress historian. So I spend my time thinking about clothes in the past and what clothes can teach us about history.

Jane 01:57

Amber Butchart is going to guide us through a little bit of the history of the clothes we wear and why we wear them as she answers the questions you've sent us like Bhakti's, and Olivia's.

Amber 02:06

We don't have fur, like a lot of other animals do. So when modern humans began moving away from very warm places like, you know, continental Africa, into colder parts of the world. We need to protect ourselves somehow we need to wear something to keep us warm if it's very snowy outside or if it's very cold. So this is one answer that we wear clothes for protection.

Jane 02:32

But while that might explain why we have to wear something to cover our skin from the elements, there are a lot of other answers that help explain the what the kinds of clothes we wear, or don't wear. And that's the stuff that really interests Amber. Remember, she said she's a dress historian. That doesn't mean she studies dresses, she's using dress as a verb: to dress, to dress yourself, get dressed, dress up, dress down. She studies how the clothes we wear are connected to where we live and what kind of culture we grow up in, and what time period we're growing up and living in.

Amber 03:09

I've always loved old clothes. I love shopping for secondhand clothes; I love rummaging and sort of treasure hunting through vintage stores through markets. All of these places looking for old clothes.

Jane 03:23

Amber's job in a clothing store when she was younger got her started researching some of the old clothes she found interesting. And she liked that so much she decided to go back to school to study history and fashion. And now she does TV shows and podcasts and writes books and teaches. So let's look at that question about why humans wear clothes from another angle now.

Amber 03:45

The other answer is to do with ideas around culture and society, and really to do with ideas around modesty as well.

Jane 03:56

In this case, modesty means what's considered proper or appropriate, broadly accepted as not being too wild or out there, a lot of how we dress comes down to what is considered appropriate in our culture.

Amber 04:10

The idea is that these cultural codes built up across time, and you know, across millennia and centuries and centuries, ideas that certain parts of our body should be covered up. And so we tend to see and I'm sure you can all imagine the areas that I'm talking about, we tend to see particular areas being covered in various different cultures, many different cultures from very, very far back in history. So we have these sort of social ideas to do with what parts of the body should and shouldn't be on display. But we also have that combined with this need, especially in colder parts of the world of you know, protection from the elements.

Jane 04:53

That can change over time, right in some cultures and in some time periods. You might not expose your shoulders, or your, you know, sort of upper neck area? And in some cultures you do, right. And that changes over time. And depending on where you live, and even what family you're in what is appropriate or not appropriate for you?

Amber 05:11

Yes, exactly. So ideas around, you know, what people should and shouldn't expose what parts of their body and these ideas can change hugely, they can change between cultures, they can change across time periods, and you know, various different points in history, different parts of the body have been, you know, believed to be very salacious and areas that should be covered.

Jane 05:35

Salacious kind of means scandalous or too racy.

Amber 05:38

Or alternatively, areas that have not been seen as salacious at all, and that can be left uncovered. And today, all kinds of ideas can feed into this ideas around, you know, religion, ideas around modesty being related to religion or not. And, you know, just ideas around what people are comfortable with it. This all feeds into, you know, what parts of our body we cover and what parts of our body we don't.

Jane 06:06

You know, it's interesting to think about, also how old we are changes things, you know, a baby running around with no clothes on might be fine. But when you're five, or six or 10, or 20, then you're gonna look differently about running around naked.

Amber 06:20

Definitely, yeah, definitely. And it's interesting, actually, we do have so, in the past, there were some markers of age, that we could tell through clothing that we don't have any more. For example, this idea of breeching really up until the sort of early 20th century, little boys would always be dressed in dresses, up until the age of around about seven, and this age could vary. But if you have a look at paintings from the past, from the 18th century, from the 17th century, if you look at royal families, all of the very young children will be dressed in dresses, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they're all girls.

Jane 07:00

And you're talking specifically there about cultures in Europe.

Amber 07:03

Yes, this is definitely cultures in Europe. And what would happen is that at the age of around seven, the boy would be breeched, we call it breeched - to be put into breeches for the first time, taken out of dresses, and put into breeches.

Jane 07:20

And breeches are like pants?

Amber 07:21

Exactly. They're like short what we would today call short pants, I suppose? Well, I certainly wouldn't call them that, because I'm English. And I say trousers. But yes, exactly they're pants, they're pants. And, and this was quite an important moment in a young boy's life. And it was a moment that was where he was a step closer to being a man, a moment that might mark a period in his life where he would spend more time maybe with his father with the male members of his family. And it's just a sort of

rite of passage that we just don't have anymore, and shows how these ideas just shift and are always in flux.

Hope 08:00

Hello, my name is Hope. I live in Virginia. I'm five years old. And my question is, when did people invent shirts? Thank you.

Amber 08:12

Well, shirts is a great item to talk about. Because we think today of shirts as an item of outer clothing, something you wear, that you will show off to everybody else, you know, everyone can see. But originally, when shirts were developed, it was actually underwear. So this was not items that were meant to be seen on display. And for men, especially shirt was a really important item, because it would usually be made of linen, something that's very easy to clean. And so it's an item that's really heavily associated with hygiene, it's the first thing that you put on next to your skin. And it's an item that can soak up your bodily fluids, you know, if he gets sweaty anything like this, the linen will soak all of this up, and you can very easily change and wash your linen shirts. The shirts at this time also were quite long, would come down to almost the knees. And in fact, could, the bottoms of them could be drawn up between the legs. So they sort of functioned as underpants as well as if you can imagine that. And so certainly it's important that this item is being changed very, very regularly. So it's an item that's really closely associated with keeping the body clean. And this is a period as well in the past when people didn't wash as much as we do today.

Jane 09:38

You mean wash their bodies, let alone wash their other clothes.

Amber 09:40

Yes, exactly, exactly. People did not shower every day in the way that we are maybe used to doing now. So the body is not being kept as clean. So the shirt is has a really important function. Now one of the earliest examples it's not I'm not sure if it's exactly a shirt but it's certainly a linen garment that's very much like a long shirt or a long dress was found in Egypt. And it's actually been radiocarbon dated to the late fourth millennium BCE. So it's one of the oldest garments of clothing that has ever been found like that is, you know, that is woven that is sort of a whole garment essentially.

Jane 10:27

Well, I'm glad you're kind of talking about underwear because we have some questions about underwear.

Athena 10:32

Hello, my name is Athena and I live in Milan, Italy, and I am six year old. My question is, why do we have to wear underpants?

Jane 10:47

And you kind of explain that a little bit that it's a part of hygiene, cleanliness?

Amber 10:52

Yeah, exactly. I think that's really very much it's, um, you know, parts of our bodies, especially as we grow up, as we become older, certain parts of our body will generate more secretions than others, essentially, you know, we sweat from our armpits, things like this. There are secretions going on, which means that we might want to keep that area clean. And certainly regularly change the clothing that's being worn around there.

Jane 11:21

That's one thing. But you know, you mentioned that shirts. Initially, when they were first invented, were not supposed to be seen they were under shirts and underwear, under pants are also designed to go under your pants or under your skirt or under whatever you're wearing. So Graham wants to know, why are underpants pretty if they're covered by pants?

Graham 11:44

I am five years old, and I live in Potomac, Maryland. My question is, why are underpants pretty if they're covered by pants?

Amber 12:01

Wow, this is a good question. And I think a lot of people like to wear really pretty underwear, because it just makes them feel nice. If you know you're wearing something nice. It doesn't necessarily matter that other people can't see it. It just makes you feel confident. It makes you feel happy. Maybe if you've got a pair of pants in your favorite color, it will put you in a good mood when you put them on. So I think that is a reason why people make underpants that look pretty. Rather than just underpants that look ugly. No one wants to get up every day and put on something that looks really dreary and miserable as the first thing you put you know against your closest to your body. You want to put on something that's going to immediately make you feel good.

Jane 12:50

In just a minute, why clothing designed for girls sometimes has pockets that are smaller than the pockets and clothes designed for boys if they have pockets at all. And why do we bother with fashion to begin with?

Jane 13:04

This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. Today we're tackling questions about clothing and culture with dress historian Amber Butchart. Two different Molly's sent us these questions.

Mollie 13:19

I am 6 years old. I come from Buffalo, New York. And my question is, why do boys dress differently than girls?

Molly 13:27

I'm nine years old. I live in Beverly, Massachusetts. And my question is, why are boys allowed to run around in the summer without a shirt on, but girls aren't?

Amber 13:38

So this really comes down to culture again, and how different cultures decide to communicate ideas around gender through clothing. And also comes back to those ideas about modesty and what we can and can't reveal as well. I think it's unfair that boys are allowed to run around in the summer without a shirt on and girls aren't. It's really not fair. And it's a cultural idea that different cultures throughout history have expressed gender through clothing in very different ways. In European culture, European history, the main way we express gender through clothing is with trousers versus skirts. Historically, this skirts versus trousers divide is something that we see an awful lot and we even see it on things like bathroom signs still, rightly or wrongly, this is still something that we see an awful lot. Many people in the fashion industry are trying to change, trying to bring about lots more gender neutral clothing, so clothing that can be worn by both boys and girls and that is comfortable. People can move in and run around in and just have fun in work and play in all of these same items essentially.

Jane 15:00

Well, then Megan might be happy to hear that.

Megan 15:03

And I am from Massachusetts. And I'm five. And my question is flat girl pockets smaller than boy pockets?

Jane 15:11

Megan is wondering why girl pockets on clothes are smaller than boy pockets?

Amber 15:17

This is a really good question. And actually the history of pockets is surprisingly interesting. Women's pockets haven't always been this small. If we look back into history, a periods in, say, the 18th century where women were wearing very wide skirts, what you would often find is that pockets would be a separate item, you would have these two pockets on a string, or you know something that you would tie around your waist, basically. It's almost like carrying two handbags around your waist. And this wouldn't be worn on the outside of your clothing, it would be worn underneath your overskirt. And then you would have slits or gaps in your overskirt so that you could put your hand in to put things in your pockets. So women used to be able to carry around all kinds of stuff in their pockets. This has changed in much more recent years. And I think there are a couple of reasons for that. Firstly, the way we all shop for clothes now, fast fashion, the whole sort of idea behind fast fashion is that there are fewer details so clothing is cheaper. So one of the reasons that sometimes women's clothing doesn't have pockets at all is that it's simply more expensive to make clothes with pockets. It's an extra detail so it takes more fabric. And it takes more work with it for the people who are making your clothes who was stitching them together.

Jane 16:50

Amber says Another reason is that some women's clothes are made to be tighter than men's clothes often are. So if you put anything in a pocket, it creates a lumpy appearance and something that's pretty tight. Now, this isn't really fair, because of course, girls want to carry stuff in their pockets too. And Amber says designers are getting that message and are starting to make bigger pockets. Now that

we've learned a little bit about how clothing has a lot to do with history and culture, not just about staying warm and dry, or having certain parts of our bodies covered up, Anya has a question about the big picture.

Anya 17:24

I am eight years old and from Brooklyn, New York. My question is, why do we have fashion?

Jane 17:33

I mean, we know now why we wear underpants, we know a little bit about pockets. We know how shirts were invented. But why do we have fashion?

Amber 17:42

Well, that is a great question. And what it really comes down to is this difference between clothing and fashion, this word fashion. Now this word doesn't just mean items that you put on your body, it doesn't just mean garments, this idea that some things are in fashion, and some things are out of fashion. That's what we're talking about, really when we say fashion. Now, why do we have this? I think that that goes down really to questions about humanity, and the very nature of humanity itself.

Jane 18:19

Woah, the T-shirts, we wear, say something about our humanity, that's pretty deep.

Amber 18:23

Totally, totally, I stand by that comment, I really do. Because there are a couple of different arguments as to why we have this system of fashion. Now, one of them is that it is this means of communication. And it is a way of saying I am like these people, and I'm not like these people. For example, a band t shirt, if I wear a T shirt with my favorite band on it, I'm signaling to everyone else who likes that band, we have something in common. I'm like you. Whereas if you don't like this band, I'm definitely not like you. So it's a way of not only showing your identity but showing your allegiances to certain groups of people. Now, another argument as to why we have fashion, especially historically, not so much now, is all to do with status and display, the more current your fashions are, or the more expensive your clothes are, the more money you have, and therefore it's likely in the past, the more power you have. So it is all very closely related into these ideas around power, who is ruling who and really who gets to make decisions that affect all of us. So in the past, the people that were the leaders of fashion who would influence what other people wore, were leaders in society, members of royal households, for example, members of you know, court circles, the monarchy, people like that would influence what other people wore. So it's very closely related to ideas around power.

Jane 18:33

Fashion now is maybe a little less about power, but it still can signify wealth or other things. But what our clothing choices say about us today is different from what the clothing choices of people in the future will be, and what they will say about them.

Amber 20:18

These ideas change across time, they change across different cultures. They're not set in stone. These aren't, quote unquote, natural, but these are socialized ideas. These are ideas that we get from culture, basically. And these ideas are mutable, they shift they change.

Jane 20:37

And is that still true today that the way we dress is telling other people, how we see ourselves what culture we think we belong to, it's telling people something about us just by what we're wearing.

Amber 20:49

Certainly clothing today can communicate a lot of different ideas, can even communicate ideas such as I am not interested in the way that I dress. You often hear this from people who aren't interested in fashion, they say, well, you know, it's, it doesn't matter to me, I'm not communicating anything. But everybody makes a decision every morning when they get up as to what they're going to put on their body. And with some people, the communication is very, very clear and very definite, especially with some kinds of T-shirts. So really simple garments, but it can communicate all kinds of things, you'll may be wearing a slogan T-shirt, you'll may be wearing a T-shirt with a political slogan, you may be wearing a band T-shirt, that's telling people what your favorite band is, this is a very literal way of communicating something about you and your identity.

Jane 21:41

What a treat to get a little insight into how clothing ties into so much more than just a way to cover our bodies. Now, before we go, I can remember a couple of times when I was a kid being teased because of something I was wearing that I really liked, or something I wasn't wearing that all the other kids my age, thought was really cool. And I just didn't like. So I asked Amber, if she has any advice for those of us who dress a little differently sometimes.

Amber 22:09

Absolutely. My advice is stick with it. It is those style Mavericks that are going to be the designers, the stylists, etc., etc. of the future. I remember wearing some outfits when I was a kid or when I was, you know, a teenager and being laughed at for it being ridiculed. And, and it's not a very nice experience. But I sort of always stuck with it because it was something that for me was very important to me, and to how I express myself. And I just think it's hugely important to cultivate your own sense of style. It's important on a personal level. It's also important on an environmental level, I don't think we should all be blindly following fashion trends and buying stuff all the time. Think about secondhand clothing, think about these more individual ways of dressing and really cultivate that is such a fantastic skill. And you have so many career opportunities ahead of you as well. So really stick with it. Don't listen to the haters.

Jane 23:16

That's Amber Butchart a dress historian, podcaster, broadcaster, instructor and author. Thank you so much, Amber. And that's it for this episode. If you have a question about anything having adult record it, you should be able to do it on a smartphone. Try to be somewhere quiet and put the phone up pretty close to your mouth, but not so close that you're blowing on it when you talk. Tell us your first name, how old you are, where you live and what you want us to investigate. Then have your adult email the

file to questions@ButWhyKids.org. If you don't want to talk or you don't have a smartphone that you can use, it's totally fine to have an adult help you email that question to us.

Jane 23:57

But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio and distributed by PRX. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.