

## School dress codes can be harmful to autistic people.

We received a DM the other day from an autistic student who is not allowed to wear a bandana at school (around their nose/mouth or anywhere else), even though it's a useful sensory tool for them.

So here's an incomplete list of clothing items autistic people might need to wear for sensory reasons, that are against certain school dress codes:

- **Sunglasses (indoors)**- many autistic people wear sunglasses because they're sensitive to light, particularly fluorescent lighting, which is very common in schools.
- **Bandanas**- autistic people might wear bandanas over their faces to protect from smells. Or, they might wear a bandanna on their wrist or around their neck as a comfort item/ stim toy.
- **Hooded sweatshirts**- most schools ban students from wearing hoods inside. However, autistic students might use hoods as a tool to block out visual input in their peripheral vision, and to slightly dampen sound in the classroom. Hoods can also be very comforting in that they provide the sensation of being held in a soft cocoon.
- **Chewelry and other wearable stim toys**- some schools have policies that restrict the type of jewelry students can wear, if any. In addition, many schools have restrictions on stim toys, thanks to neurotypicals abusing things like fidget spinners (which originated as tools to help neurodivergent people) 😞.
- **Earbuds/headphones**- many schools ban students from listening to music in class, even during quiet individual work. However, some autistic people need to be able to listen to music to block out all of the distracting, uncomfortable auditory input of the classroom.

**Schools also often have bans on chewing gum**, which is understandable because they don't want students putting gum in irresponsible places. But some autistic people need to be able to stim by chewing on gum, so this ban can do more harm than good in those circumstances.

*Fortunately, autistic students may be able to request accommodations under 504 plans or IEPs, which would allow them to make exceptions to the school dress code and wear what they need.*

But the official dress codes are one thing. **Another aspect that isn't often talked about is the way that autistic students are treated by peers based on the things they wear.**

Autistic students may be stigmatized by classmates for wearing certain things like ear defenders, sunglasses, or chewelry. This is because these sensory tools (and dare I say, staples of autistic fashion) are not worn at school by the vast majority of people.

This makes it more difficult for autistic people to meet their sensory needs. Even if certain things, like ear defenders, are perfectly acceptable and allowed under the school dress code, autistic students who wear them run the risk of being socially ostracized even more than they would have been just by virtue of being autistic. **This can create a situation where autistic students feel that they have to choose between meeting their sensory needs, and being accepted by their peers.**

Even fashion choices that have nothing to do with sensory needs can result in judgement from classmates. For example, some autistic people wear items of clothing related to their special interests. They may wear graphic T-shirts with their favorite cartoon characters, or homemade gadgets that mimic the things certain characters wear. Especially if their interests aren't widely deemed "age appropriate," the risk of being teased for this type of clothing is unfortunately high.

Autistic people may also have a habit of wearing the same clothes every day, of wearing clashing colors, or wearing seasonally inappropriate clothes. **All of these things can contribute to social isolation- but that's not autistic people's fault.**

What autistic people wear, and whether or not it conforms to dominant standards, can make it more or less obvious that we're "different" in some way. The key thing to remember is that **being different isn't a bad thing**, even though other people often act like it is.

*Autistic people deserve to live in a world where we can wear whatever we want, and whatever we need, without other people misunderstanding us.*

~Eden 🐸