Sizes Turn to the Tapeline

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Gertrude Dieken, extension associate, tells of research in clothing size standardization.

I'll bring in some of these 14's and 18's, too. You can't tell from the size..." This from the saleswoman, whereupon the woman who wears size 16 usually ruins her hair-do, her disposition and her well-planned shopping afternoon by trying on, of necessity, a half-dozen each of 14's, 16's and 18's.

Homemakers, salespeople and manufacturers have long known that the size on the label is no assurance of fit. The "perfect 36" has been as much an illusion as the Fountain of Youth. There is no perfect 36 (nor a perfect any other size) because nobody knows what a "perfect 36" is.

A slim woman of 52 may wear a 14, while her not-so-slim 14-year-old daughter wears a 20. Or she'll be buying by bust measure—which incidentally, is no guarantee of hip girth in spite of ideas to the contrary. Something, finally, is being done about sizes. The U.S. Bureau of Home Economics recently completed a study in which body measurements were taken of 147,088 children scattered over 15 states, representative of all sections of the country, and the District of Columbia. Funds for the research were provided by WPA, and 19 state colleges and universities cooperated, among them Iowa State College and the State University of Iowa.

The weight and 35 trunk measurements needed for constructing patterns and garments for the trunk of the body (other than shoes, gloves and hats) were taken for each child. Measuring was not a simple process of using a tape line. It meant the adapting of anthropometry (the science of body measurements which is chiefly concerned with research on primitive races) to live, active boys and girls from four to seven years.

The problem of sizing garments is to find the measurement or combination of measurements which best predicts what other body measurements will be. At the same time the measurements to be used in buying garments need to be usable. It would be impractical to introduce into the clothing trade, for example, the selection of garments by measuring the "front arc of the chest" or the slope of the shoulder.

When a child's height is known, his other lengths were predicted fairly accurately—with a variation of less than an inch on the average, for both boys and girls. Weight was rejected as one of the usable factors because all families do not have scales, but all can have a tapeline and it is a simple matter to take a few measurements before starting on a shopping trip.

A system of sizes was worked out by marking off different height and hip measures and considering the number of children among the 147,088 that had various combinations of height and hip measure. So, before long, when Dad goes to the store to buy a play-suit for his son and heir, he'll probably say, "He's 40½ inches tall and his hip measure is 21½ inches," instead of "He's 8."

Manufacturers have been interested in the project, because poor sizing and lack of national standards have meant expensive headaches for them as well as for the consumer. Distributors and manufacturers met from time to time under the sponsorship of the American Standards Association. Other meetings are being held now to study the results and work out a possible new sizing system.