GUIDE

Choosing VBS shirt colors for an outdoor week: heat, sun and the schedule

On an outdoor VBS week, shirt color is a heat and sun decision. CDC heat advice and Skin Cancer Foundation sun advice point opposite ways; here is how to choose.

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Most churches pick VBS shirt colors to match the theme or to tell groups apart. When the week puts kids outside, on a field, in a parking lot game zone or at a water day, the shirt color is also a heat and sun decision. The two health sources a director is most likely to check give opposite advice on color, and your daily schedule is what settles it.

Do light or dark shirts keep kids safer outdoors?

It depends on whether heat or sun is the bigger concern, because the guidance splits. The CDC's page on infants, children and heat says to dress children in "loose, lightweight, light-colored clothing." The Skin Cancer Foundation says the opposite about ultraviolet light: dark or bright colors, including red, black and navy blue, absorb more UV rays than whites and pastels, and "the more intense the hue, the better protection the clothing will provide." A white shirt is the cooler choice and the weaker sun shield. A black shirt is the reverse.

How much sun does a plain T-shirt block?

Less than most directors expect. The Skin Cancer Foundation puts a white T-shirt at a UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) of about 7, and the same shirt wet at a UPF of about 3. By comparison, it cites a dark, long-sleeved denim shirt at a UPF of about 1,700. A VBS shirt in any color helps, and sunscreen, hats and shade still carry most of the load. Color choice moves the shirt's share up or down.

Which risk should decide your colors?

Your schedule should decide it, not the theme palette. The CDC's sun safety guidance says UV rays in the continental United States are strongest from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daylight saving time, which covers every summer VBS week. A morning program running 9 to noon puts its late morning outdoor rotations inside that window. An evening program runs mostly after it, when heat lingers and UV is lower.

- **Mostly indoors, one short outdoor rotation:** choose colors for the theme and for telling groups apart. Health barely tips the decision.
- **Outdoor games or recreation between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.:** lean toward bright, saturated colors such as red, royal blue or kelly green over white and pastels. The Skin Cancer Foundation counts bright colors with dark ones for UV, and they are lighter than black or navy.
- **Evening VBS, or long outdoor stretches late in a hot day:** heat is the bigger concern, so lighter colors fit the CDC's advice, and black is the color to pass on.

Where the heat and sun advice agree

Both sources agree on fit. The CDC says loose clothing for heat. The Skin Cancer Foundation says loose-fitting apparel is preferable for sun, because tight clothing stretches and lets more UV through the fabric. The main VBS t-shirt planning guide already recommends choosing the larger size when a child falls between two, so kids can keep wearing the shirt. On an outdoor week, that same choice helps with heat and sun too.

How should a church plan the water day?

Treat water day as its own case. The Skin Cancer Foundation notes that wet or stretched clothing loses protective ability, and the CDC's sun safety page says a wet T-shirt does not protect as well as a dry one. If the program includes water games or a slip and slide, plan sunscreen for shoulders and backs under the shirt, or move water games outside the 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. window. The CDC's advice for schools fits a VBS schedule well: avoid outdoor activities at mid-day when possible, and build in breaks so kids can reapply sunscreen and drink water.

Does the shirt fabric matter as much as the color?

Fabric is a second lever. In its guide to how clothes block UV, the Skin Cancer Foundation names synthetic and semisynthetic fibers such as polyester among the best choices for sun protection, and lists bleached or refined cotton among the lighter options. It also says densely woven cloth protects more. For a week that is mostly outdoors, ask about blank shirt options when you request your design.

How does this fit a color-coded VBS?

If each group wears its own color, assign colors by where each group spends the week. Give the stronger UV colors to the people outside at mid-day: the recreation crew, game leaders and older kids who run outdoor rotations. Save white and pastels for groups that stay mostly inside. One design printed on several shirt colors still goes in as one order, which the guide to combining shirt colors explains, and leader shirt designs can carry their own color as well.

Some designs read better on some shirt colors than others, so tell the designer your colors and your outdoor plan when you request a custom design. A designer adjusts the artwork to suit each color and sends it back for you to approve. Call 888-980-4827, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm Pacific.

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