

nineteenth centuries as an invaluable asset to the health of adults and children alike. In 1794 William Butchman wrote, “the most decided superiority of the Fleecy Hosiery, consists in the powers which wool is found to possess, over all other articles of clothing, in absorbing and conducting moisture.” He continued to profess that wool gave a “degree of elasticity not possessed by cloth of any kind.” Because cold drafts combined with wet diapers threatened the health of infants, wool seemed a perfect safeguard providing both warmth and the breathable quality needed to keep them dry. Wool shirts, spencers, slippers, and socks were considered necessities in the middle and upper class infant’s trousseau, along with flannel gowns and blankets.

While most women agreed that a child’s bodily warmth was best maintained through wool shirts beneath flannel gowns, they debated the use of caps. A conflict arose between health and fashion as women laboriously stitched beautiful infants’ caps while medical doctors protested their use as instruments of sickness trapping feverish heat in a child’s scalp. The 1848 *Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy* by T. Webster and Mrs. William Parkes supported the health concerns related to caps: “[W]hile the mother is admiring the face and curly hair beneath the heavy hat or bonnet, she is not conscious that the heat and the weight are acting forcibly and prejudiciously on the delicate vessels of the head, often causing headache, if not tendencies to severe diseases.” Advisors also associated the use of caps with such ailments as dropsy, eczema, and loss of hair. Crocheted and knitted lace cap patterns, emerging in the 1840s, developed in response to and reconciled practical and aesthetic concerns. Such caps were made of cotton thread with lacy loops, picots, and ruffles that allowed the free flow of air upon the child’s head.

As the weather began to warm and the dangers of stoves and cold breezes receded, children were commonly dressed in light closely-woven cotton or linen. Considered good conductors of heat, they were notably more comfortable than the winter wardrobe. In the summer months mothers chose thin linen caps for protection from the sun. Yet a steadfast few believed that even in summer children were susceptible to cold and warned mothers to continue clothing their children in warm flannels and wools, but not to the degree that would cause perspiration.

Throughout the nineteenth century people continued to critique children’s clothing. Instructional texts and pattern books tried to answer these concerns by promoting useful and suitable styles which also incorporated colorful wools, silks, and cottons with knitting and crochet. This section presents some of these patterns in the common styles of the period: warm wool booties, a ribbed crochet spencer, and a beautiful lace cap.