

Children's Trends

My look at children's trends is influenced by several factors. In running Family Kids and Youth, a market research company that looks at the family and child's market, and as Editor of 'Young Consumers', a journal that looks at new trends around the world, I'm continually monitoring both social and fashion trends. I'm also a trained psychodynamic therapist; I have worked with young offenders, and with children in schools, and currently I work each week as a counsellor with teenagers in Tower Hamlets, London. It is interesting that marketing to children is under the spotlight, and children's needs are being put first. Increasingly children are being protected, and their opinions are being sought about their treatment, and what is happening to them. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child led to an act being passed in the UK in 1989 that for the first time gave significant recognition to the individuality of the child over and above both their parents and the state. In 2004 The Children's Act was passed, opening the door for the appointment of a Children's Commissioner in England. Professor Al Aynsley-Green and his colleagues at the Commission had to be interviewed by a panel of 25 children from the Children's Youth Board before the job was theirs. I'm going to consider three themes: the way in which children are beginning to take a keen interest in their world; the impact of technology on children's lives; and the change to children's diet and activity levels brought about by increasing levels of childhood obesity.

The Pre-'Whatever' Generation

Children will increasingly become involved in measures that help the world: to stem global warming, to support free trade, and to respect others, in their family, and at school. We live in extraordinary times, with today's grandparents, those of the Baby Boom generation, refusing to grow up. We hear stories of people of 60+ going on a 'gap year', or just continually on holiday. Alongside that we have the 'SKI' phenomenon (Spending Kids' Inheritance). We have witnessed the boom in gym membership, ever increasing beauty and spa treatments, and even plastic surgery, all in a quest not to grow old. Age groups are increasingly indistinguishable, visiting the same retail outlets, wearing the same clothes. And we have to ask, if adults refuse to grow up, how can children remain young?

There has been a phrase in marketing banded about for some years now known as 'KGOY' (Kids Growing Older Younger). So increasingly it is difficult to define childhood, and it is difficult for children to remain young. But children are of course just that; they are young, and their needs must be considered. We are all familiar with adolescents, and indeed probably remember that time vividly, a time well depicted by Harry Enfield's 'Kevin', and a couple of years ago Liam Lynch:

dissolute, disaffected, disinterested youth 'United States of Whatever'. But what about children before they reach that age, what is happening in their world? Our research shows that today's children (and I'll define that as under 12), actually mock the 'Whatever' attitude; they do not want to be teenagers, even describing them as 'sad'. Children today talk a lot about 'Respect' and everything that means. They expect respect of adults – of teachers, parents, marketers, the media, and of each other – actually they demand it. Sadly though, life can be fearful for children. Just think what they have learnt about in the last couple of years: terrorism, war, tsunami, hurricanes, global warming, and these events are coming into their homes every day through the media. The effect of all this is that children are beginning to take an interest in current affairs in a way they did not before. They want to help each other, they will discuss bullying in school, and they care about global warming and fair trade.

The iPod Generation

As a counter to the place technology plays in children's lives, there will be a re-emergence of quality family time. Technology can create a distance between children and their parents. We hear much about technology and the impact it has had on children's lives, and parents are aware that their children have a far higher exposure to technology than when they were young. A modern baby is born, and instead of a rattle to play with, is now given a plethora of toys that make noises, light up, demand interactivity. We know from studies in neuroscience that the human brain has mostly developed by 24 months. Infants and toddlers love bright clear images and music, especially repetitive tunes, and research shows that cognitive ability can be stimulated by sight and sound at this age. So in many ways technology can have a positive impact on young children. We have all been impressed by the increased number of children reading, encouraged no doubt by J.K. Rowling and Jacqueline Wilson. But literacy level among children remains a concern. In Japan we have the phenomenon of e-books, that is reading full length novels on mobile phones (Japan has 85 million mobile phone owners). Leading this is Bandai Networks, with 60% of their subscribers teenagers and early 20s, and 70% of these are logging on daily to read their e-books, especially girls.

For many trends in technology we need to look to Japan. Technology though has the effect on children of allowing them to entertain themselves; they may be interacting with the technology, but not other people. The child watching their own TV in their multifunctional bedroom, going online on their own wireless broadband connection, and, even if they are talking to friends on MSN, much of this is done alone. But what are the social implications of this? Increasingly more mums are working (7 out of 10), a necessity brought about by expensive housing and lifestyle. Time short but cash rich parents are increasingly becoming aware that time spent with family, the ubiquitous 'quality time', is important. Parents

seek fun as much as children, and leisure activities that offer entertainment for both will excel.

The Jamie Oliver Effect

Through his TV series (Jamie's School Dinners), Jamie Oliver managed to persuade the Government to release £280 million to tackle the school meal crisis. We continually read the headlines: children's rates of obesity are getting higher, and this has been partly caused by children given junk food and fizzy drinks. Another cause is the lack of exercise that children have, in comparison to their parents when they were children. Figures show that while average weight has increased over the last 20 years, calorific intake has actually decreased. This is in part due to children having far more to entertain them at home – gaming, the internet, iPods etc. But as we know it also links to the fearful world we live in, concern about Stranger Danger and road safety, and parents not wishing their children to play outside, walk to school on their own, or play in parks unsupervised.

This means that there is a trend to encourage children to eat better and healthier, and to take more exercise, and this is happening across much of the world where childhood obesity is a problem. As a result, food manufacturers are responding by introducing ever more healthy food and drink products that not only taste good, but will also appeal to children's sense of fun and adventure. We are also seeing a trend towards organic food, locally produced food, and farmers' markets, all of which appeal to children, and such food is getting cheaper. Another trend linked into this is ways to encourage children to 'get active', and take more exercise. Sport and activity is going to grow amongst all children, not just those that are naturally athletic. This will see new products being introduced that can be used in home, and in small gardens. And activity will become a family activity, allowing busy working parents to spend quality time with their children, while having fun and getting fit.

Conclusion

In looking at trends we need to consider social change as well as marketing trends. The pre-teen market, or 'Pre- Whatever' Generation as I have described it, is increasingly becoming socially responsible; younger children are taking a keen interest in their world and what is happening to it, and they are expecting to be heard. Fair trade and ethical practice will be expected, and 'respect' will be paramount. Technology can have a positive impact on children's lives, and help their development, but it may actually make them more isolated. The 'iPod Generation' is one with busy parents, and family fun will become increasingly important; spending quality time as a family creates many opportunities for marketers. Changes to food and drink consumption brought about by increased concern about childhood obesity and 'The Jamie Oliver effect' will see an increased demand for healthy food and drink, and a growth in locally produced and organic food. Families will begin to embrace healthy eating, and

supermarkets and food manufacturers will be responding to this. Brands that recognise these factors will be the success stories of the next decade.

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