

New kids on the block

by A. J. Dalton

Have you heard of the term ‘tweenager’? It’s the new slang word being used in the UK to describe children at either eight–12 or ten–13 years old. They are between being a junior and a teenager, you see. Why are the press and media suddenly referring to kids in this way?

Well, more and more companies are beginning to create products and services for tweenagers. The Disney company sells the *Hannah Montana* television show, music, film and merchandise to tweenagers and their parents. You can get everything from branded lunchboxes and mobile phone covers, to monthly fan magazines and clothing. The *High School Musical* series of films is also intended for a tweenage audience. So, it’s all about sales, which tells us tweenagers must have more money, freedom and influence upon their parents than they’ve ever had before.

Most children in the UK today get more pocket money than kids did a decade ago. Despite the credit crunch, parents have more money to give than previously, since parents are having fewer children on average than in the past. In addition, the divorce rate in the UK is continually rising and parents spend less time with their children than they used to, so many parents try to compensate by buying presents for their children. It’s a bad habit for both parents and children to get into, but parents are under constant pressure from commercial marketing and the pleas of their children.

You may wonder how tweenagers have more freedom than previous generations. Well, UK children today are very media- and computer-literate. A lot of them have a television, if not a computer, in their bedrooms. They have access to much more information about life and the world. They may have experienced a lot in life as well, since 24 per cent of UK children live in single-parent families, so people now say that ‘kids are getting older younger’. With such sophistication at such a young age, it’s no wonder tweenagers are able to influence their parents.

UK tweenagers never used to be worried about spending money on clothes and fashion accessories. That’s changed. Now, they are much more fashion conscious and concerned about their image. In a world of television programmes that promise overnight success and fame at a young age (for example, the shows *Britain’s Got Talent* and *American Idol*), some people think it’s extremely important to look fashionable. Such ideas are also promoted by both the *Hannah Montana* story, in which a tweenage girl suddenly becomes a world-famous pop star, and the *High School Musical* story, in which tweenagers go through various auditions for musicals and talent shows.



So what does tweenage fashion look like? Well, it’s quite horrible really, but then I’m a bit too old to appreciate it, I suppose. It’s lots of brightly coloured materials, particularly pink, and usually plain, not patterned. There are plenty of bows, necklaces and bracelets, too. It’s all very cute, if that’s your taste.

Surely none of the above is a good thing, is it? Can it really be healthy for us to encourage kids to be like adults at such a young age? Are we stealing childhoods in return for a bit of profit? Well, the UK government is certainly concerned, and for that reason has strict laws preventing companies from explicitly marketing their products and services at children.

Even the rest of UK society is concerned. Now that people are aware of the problem, there is a popular backlash against the exploitation of children by commercial marketing. In addition, many tweenagers outgrow the bright colours and fashions of their teenage years and go for something darker, such as gothic clothing. So, is there a happy ending to this story? Well, companies have just worked out that the older tweenage audience is now looking for something darker and more rebellious. As a result, we are seeing dark films such as *Twilight* being produced for the older tweenage audience.

Activity 1: Connotations

Look at the following words from the article and try to decide which ones have a positive (Pos), negative (Neg) and neutral (Neu) meaning.

- constant pressure
- influence
- happy ending
- commercial exploitation
- tweenager
- compensate by buying presents
- popular backlash

Activity 2: Vocabulary

Match the categories to the examples. One of the answers is given.

Categories

- slang (c)
- merchandise
- tweenage fashion
- commercial exploitation
- television programme
- getting older younger
- being fashion conscious
- overnight success

Examples:

- Britain’s Got Talent*
- sophistication at a young age
- tweenager (1)
- suddenly become a pop star
- branded mobile phone cover
- bright colours and bows
- spending money on clothes and image
- marketing aimed at children

Activity 3: Comprehension

Are the following statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article?

- Tweenagers often get their parents to buy merchandise for them.
- When parents get divorced in the UK, the children get presents.
- Tweenagers today know more about the world than tweenagers in the past.
- In the UK, companies market their products and services directly at children.
- When tweenagers get older, they still wear the same style of clothes.
- The author of the article suggests there won’t be a happy ending.

Fun corner

See if you can find these words from the article in the grid. They can be horizontal, vertical or diagonal.

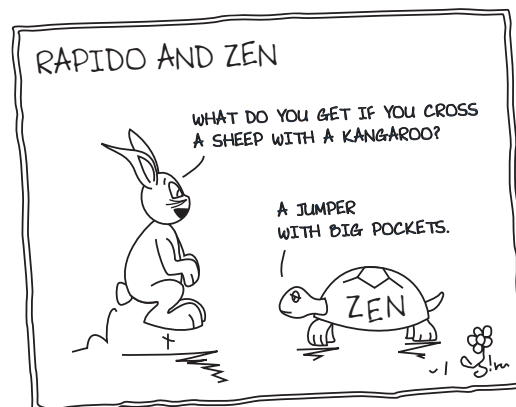
Example: IMAGE

- C_TE
- STR_CT
- _UDIENGE
- G_TH_C
- PR_F_T
- _RODUCTS
- _UTGR_W
- SALE_

O	C	H	B	R	G	O	S	I
N	Y	G	E	M	D	U	S	A
F	I	T	C	I	R	T	S	U
T	U	C	J	X	C	G	A	D
C	U	T	M	U	I	R	L	I
U	W	O	D	B	H	O	E	E
P	R	O	F	I	T	W	S	N
B	R	I	W	J	O	U	H	C
P	O	I	M	A	G	E	P	E

Word of the day

A ‘fanzine’ is a magazine created for fans of a particular celebrity, band or movie.



1	Neu	2	e
2	Neg	3	f
3	Pos	4	h
4	Neg	5	a
5	Neg	6	b
6	Neg	7	g
7	Neg	8	d
8	Neu		

Answers