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Fashion Aims Young

By [RUTH LA FERLA](#)

POOR Barbie! Her pneumatic contours and sparkly wardrobe have lost their charm for the average 8-year-old, the attractions of her doll-size jeans and shrunken tanks paling alongside the real thing.

Premium jeans, for instance, an item coveted by Maisy Gellert, a third grader living in Westchester County, N.Y. “I’m very particular,” Maisy said. “Sevens are the only jeans I actually wear.”

Like many girls her age, her fashion antennae are finely tuned, her standards exacting, her desires well defined. “I like the stuff that’s in style, like leggings and shorts, tank tops and flip-flops,” she said, promptly adding to that list: “Gap camisoles that are white, because I can wear them with just anything. Puma sneakers, pink and gray — I’m on my third pair — and ballet slippers, but those are hard to find for my size foot.”

Not for long, if fashion has its say. Less than a decade ago the industry began courting middle-school girls, or tweens, offering clothing and accessories that seemed to have been conceived for a much older market. Today designers and retailers are training their sights on even younger consumers, girls roughly 4 to 9, diminutive in stature but with great big eyes for style. Indeed, to judge by the wares — miniaturized drainpipe jeans, footless hose, cashmere tunics and press-on nails — fashion and cosmetics makers are intent on capturing the hearts of pint-size fashionistas, and the purse strings of their parents.

“In general, the awareness of fashion is getting younger and younger,” said Pilar Guzman, the editor of *Cookie*, a magazine aimed at the parents of children under 12. “Just as we’ve seen in the teen market, the interest in clothes is fashion- and celebrity-driven, and that interest has been trickling down.”

It both feeds on and is reflected in *Cookie*’s fashion pages, which highlight scaled-down versions of sophisticated looks from Juicy Couture, Calypso, Scoop, Paul & Joe and Sonia Rykiel, top labels in an expanding roster of luxury brands that have lately discovered the children’s market. Much the same can be said of the advertisers — the likes of Burberry, Guess, DKNY, J. Crew and Baby Phat by Kimora Lee Simmons — each making an aggressive bid for the roller-skates-and-jump-rope set. For a mother willing to spend \$1,000 on her own handbag, these marketers reason, \$154 for a pair of Rock & Republic jeans may not be a stretch.

“Even in the mass market, kids and their parents are more sophisticated,” said Stanley Kaye, the coordinator of Children’s Club, a leading trade fair. “There is a new appreciation that children’s wear is not a stepchild of fashion, that it’s no longer just pink for girls and blue for boys.”

To the delight — or consternation — of their elders, the conventional sugar-and-spice girls' style formula is laced these days with sass, the clothes not so much sexy as candidly provocative in their mimicry of grown-up fare. Pink smock dresses, T-shirts emblazoned with Tinkerbells and easy-fitting overalls are giving way to skinny jeans, flounced miniskirts and fur-trimmed shrugs just like mommy's. And second graders are swapping their knee socks for leggings.

In the cosmetics world, too, "it's all about fashion right now," said Marcy Gonzales, the brand manager of Fing'rs, which sells preglued press-on nails, patterned with stars and kitties, to appeal to girls who, she said, "have the latest 'it' bags and rhinestone-covered Sidekicks." Sales of preglued nails for children are up 13 percent this year, Ms. Gonzales said.

The pre-tween market represents a niche that is still too small to quantify, retail analysts say. But to gauge by the number of merchants and marketers who are entering the ring, it is sizable and growing.

Children's Club has expanded at a rate of 10 to 15 percent a year, Mr. Kaye said, and the trade show had some 700 exhibitors in July at the Javits Convention Center in Manhattan. Established children's wear companies and come-latelies like Juicy, Diesel and True Religion displayed scaled-down versions of adult runway looks.

Even traditional children's houses have identified and begun to cater to an increasingly style-focused market. "They are upping their game to compete," Mr. Kaye said. "They can't ignore the changes."

While that news may be welcome to some in the clothing industry, the notion of children dressing and preening like sawed-off adults can be dispiriting. "You get this idea that there is a kind of lost innocence," Ms. Guzman of Cookie said. "It's not so much that there is now a little-girl's version of adult clothes as that the gap is diminishing between what's meant for children and what's intended for their elders. I find that a little sad."

Others may find it alarming, especially at a time when decade-old images of a 6-year-old [JonBenet Ramsey](#), dressed in miniature sheaths and wearing lipstick and high heels, are fresh again with the arrest of a suspect in her murder — images that, depending on the beholder, may verge on the grotesque. That point is reinforced by the film "Little Miss Sunshine," in which a gaggle of garishly coiffed and made-up child beauty pageant contestants strut their stuff to mixed reactions from their audience.

Juliet B. Schor, the author of "Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture" (Scribner), ascribes children's heightened acquisitiveness partly to increasingly aggressive marketing. "The very insidious thing about this," she said, "is that kids get the message that they need this product — whether it's a sugared cereal or the latest fashion trend — to be O.K., to be cool. That is potentially interfering with their intrinsic sense of self. Kids from the very beginning are learning that your self-worth depends on what you have and how the market evaluates you."

While some parents abet their children's rabid consumerism, others struggle to curb it, even as they question whether its origins are in the home or a pop culture that reveres labels and brands. "To say my

daughter's interest in shopping is intense is an understatement," said Wendy Gellert, the mother of Maisy. "All this girl wants to do is shop. I find myself saying 'No' a lot."

Whether inspired by mom or the stars of the Disney Channel, children themselves are making sales decisions, merchants say. "These kids are very opinionated, and they know what they like," said Zoe Shapiro, the chief buyer for 98 Percent Angel, a children's boutique in Malibu, Calif. "I have children coming in and asking for Diesel."

Lisa Strubel, the trend director for the Children's Place, a retail chain with more than 800 stores across the country, said that the stores cater increasingly to style-fixated little girls, offering of-the-moment items like skinny premium jeans, faux-layered sweaters and graphic T-shirts selling for \$10 to \$50. "These girls are expressing their views earlier than ever," Ms. Strubel said.

At Cozy Cuts, a children's hair salon in Manhattan, it is not uncommon for aspiring glamazons to bring in magazine tear sheets displaying photos of their favorite stars, said Cozy Friedman, the owner.

Adult clients at the Paul Labrecque salon on Madison Avenue frequently bring in their children. "You have to know all about their little celebrity world," Mr. Labrecque said. Hilary Duff used to come up a lot, but that keeps changing. What remains constant is that "a 6- or 7-year-old is looking up to someone who is 20." Even Barbie has required a style upgrade to keep pace with the times. Specialty versions of the doll now come boxed with handbags and high heels and wearing full makeup, or tricked out in metallic bras and matching hot pants, flounced denim minis and form-fitting rompers. For the young sophisticate, there is also Project Runway Barbie, poured into a shrill green halter and multitiered skirt.

"We're living in a child-obsessed culture," said Vanessa Boz of Kidding Consultants, a firm with children's-wear clients. Parents, she added, don't always put their foot down. "Some just want to make their children happy."

There are limits, to be sure. Rita Drexler's 8-year-old, Victoria, has a yen for grown-up styles. "But the rule is: no belly shirts, no tank tops or tight-fitting bicycle shorts," said Ms. Drexler, an office manager in Brooklyn.

Hillary Offenbergl, on the other hand, imposes few rules and is more amused than concerned about her daughter's precociousness. Four-year-old Carly Gulotta "has a mind of her own," said Ms. Offenbergl, a wholesale florist in New York.

Not without a touch of pride, she added: "My daughter loves everything that is in fashion right now, like wearing dresses as little smock tops over pants, or mixing polka dots and plaids.

"She got dressed by herself this morning in fuchsia tights. She said, 'Mommy, even if you say no, I'm still wearing it.'"

"You pick your battles," Ms. Offenbergl said, heaving an indulgent sigh. "Carly is a pushy broad."

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