

What Kids Want... and How They Get It

UK TV documentary : 2001 : dir. Matthew Thompson : BBC : 60 min
 prod: Dani Gover : scr: : dir.ph.:

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 Narrator: Robert Lindsay

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Radio Times programme listing:

“When it comes to getting exactly what they want today’s youngsters are experts. Accomplished young whingers are seen in action while behavioural psychologists expose their secret strategies.”

O sweet irony. This pre-Christmas filip was aired on BBC1, 19/12/01. Later that same evening on BBC2, in the series “**Trouble Up North**” – investigating some of the social tensions underlying summer race riots which hit several northern towns – another programme showed the squalor and dereliction of a white estate in Burnley where vandalism by local kids has reduced the neighbourhood to a demilitarised zone of arson, window-smashing and toppling house prices. One mother complains that she’s being prosecuted for antisocial conduct because her son of 11 is getting into trouble and starting fires. All the other women’s kids do it – she reasons – but I’m the only one who gets a letter. Her son is about to be shipped the next day to a boarding school for “kids with emotional problems”, and we watch him cavorting under the uncritical gaze of the TV camera before dashing off to a derelict house in protest. His divorced mother has just bought him a walkman “as a going-away present”, but will not allow him to take a cassette with obscenities on it to his new school...

“**What Kids Want.. and How They Get It**”? Perhaps they *don’t* get it, and that’s the problem. Their parents don’t get it either, or maybe there would not *be* a problem. The programme-makers observe all – feverish consumerism on the one hand, unchecked delinquency and antisocial behaviour on the other – but don’t seem to catch their own drift. They present us with cut and dried proof of parental inadequacies, of spoiled children, bad behaviour, monstrous selfishness, but cannot bring themselves to breathe a word of criticism either of parents or their kids, let alone the philosophy that has shaped this generation, which will not be denied in the very least of its caprices. Whining children in supermarkets are simply a parenting “issue”; peer pressure to buy designer clothes and footwear a consumer “issue”; children running amok in deprived neighbourhoods a social disadvantage “issue”. In our finger-pointing, whistle-blowing, litigating society, the one group who must never be *blamed* are mothers and children. It is an unwritten media law. And as the expert voices to guide us through this display of children’s pressure tactics, we have ms Polly Carmichael, child psychologist, and ms Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer, author of “Positive Parenting”. It’s a safe bet neither of these persons has ever spent much time on estates like that one in Burnley.

It takes two to make a purchase, one of these sages advises us: the child who wants and the parent who buys. Wrong immediately. It also needs a retailer who is selling goods aimed at children, whether those goods are useful, well made, value for money, or not. It requires a marketing industry which invests heavily in advertising on children's television, especially during the Christmas run-up period, subtly and not so subtly applying peer pressure and other devices at their target age group. Children and their parents are the prey species in this retail market; manufacturers, advertisers, commercial children's television and the retail sector are competing predators. But dear me, we can't broadcast conclusions like **that** in a consumer-driven economy, can we? The children must **of course** learn to consume, and hunger to consume, but we must develop new skills to control and steer their consumption!

So we see Jacobi and Bianca, age about 8, as spoilt as their awful names suggest, on a shopping trip with their mothers to buy new shoes. The girls are dressed like Lolitas - figure-hugging trousers, navels bare – and flounce round the fashion store like teenagers preparing for a hot date. One of them wants a pair of impractical gold stacked-heel party boots, even though she can barely walk in them. Her mother fends off all the begging, the imploring on knees, and buys her some cosmetics as a consolation. The end of the programme reports that she got her impractical gold, stacked-heel party boots after all.

That's Kids =1 Mothers = -1

Courtney, 5, is shown accompanying her mother at a supermarket, her eyes lighting on one arbitrary purchase after another – a game she already owns (but this one has a bell hers doesn't have), an early reader for children younger than herself (all about **shopping**, nota bene), some pencil rubbers in the shape of lipsticks – and Courtney rotates through her arsenal of negotiating, pleading, weeping, nagging (all of this in public) while her mother calmly fends off each new request to buy. Finally Courtney sneaks the lipstick rubbers into the trolley while her mother's back is turned. And what happens at the checkout when the subterfuge comes to light? Mother protests angrily – and then buys her the lipstick rubbers, thus rewarding deceit. At home Courtney chuckles over her own guile. The lipstick rubbers do not appear to work very well, but they **do** look just like lipstick.

So that's Kids =2 Mothers = -2

A 15-year old would-be model believes she has a chance at fame, because on a recent trip to London an agent showed some interest in her. The programme charts her campaign of pressuring her parents to let her take a trip to London to see this agent before finishing her GCSEs. Her strategies are more sophisticated, playing on parental guilt, but it finally still boils down to persistent nagging. She believes she has the upper hand when mother agrees to buy her a new outfit for the trip (which father hasn't agreed to yet). In the car to the shops, escorted by her schoolfriends, daughter works her advantage by demanding extra money. Mother gives in and lets her take £20 from her handbag. But on returning from the shopping expedition mother has decided finally against allowing the trip to London. Daughter must finish her GCSEs first. Daughter is thunderstruck. Then the end of the programme announces she got her trip to London some weeks later. Her agent failed to show up. A great letdown for the girl of course, and we can't help but sympathise with her disappointment. But nevertheless that's Kids = 3 Mothers = -3

Are there **any** children left in the UK who aren't female? – you may be wondering at this point, or is this phenomenon of parental bullying confined to girls? Ah well, we'd better squeeze **one** story in about boys then. The camera follows the parents of two teenage sons shopping for Christmas presents, but unaccompanied by the sons. Sons want mobile phones, so mum takes dad to the mobile phone store, where he balks at the prices. He refuses point blank to pay for any of them, and it is mother who does the wheedling on the sons' behalf. Unlike all the other cases above, we never hear the sons interviewed about their own take on the situation, and they're not in any case children, but why quibble? – they're purely here for token balance. And the end of the programme reports that they got their mobile phones too.

So that's Kids = 4 Mothers = - 4

All of this is egregiously trivial stuff, an index of weak parenting in a culture of runaway consumerism. The programme, and its self-styled child psychology experts, offers no fresh insight or analysis. Boys must wear name-brand trainers, it explains, so they can conform with their peer group and not expose themselves as outsiders. Brilliant! It does not explain why 8-year old daughters should expose their erogenous zones and be dressed in buttock-emphasising trousers, in a country psychotic about the menace of "child sex abuse". It does not explain why a middle-class parent, patiently on guard against her five-year old's "give me give me" frenzy, should feel it alright to buy erasers for her shaped like women's cosmetics. And it does not, even in passing, question why it is suddenly essential that all schoolchildren have their own mobile phones, or why all parents have surrendered to the fad, or whether more gossip (to the profit of the phone companies) equals better communication.

What kids want, and how they get it? It seems a fair conclusion they want to be treated as though they're adults already (only without any of that boring responsibility stuff), and to a measurable extent they are (except for all that dangerous sex stuff). But children are **not** adults, as parents and child psychologists are the very first to insist, and nor does the law deal with them as it does with adults, whether they behave well or badly, so what are the social consequences of indulging this mirage of premature no-risk adulthood? On that point, of course, the experts have nothing to tell us. But we can always watch the later programme on teen race riots and vandalism. Not that the two phenomena are connected in any way, you understand. None of the boys in Burnley wear name-brand trainers, or carry mobile phones. None of the girls in Burnley are busy modelling themselves on The Spice Girls.

To throw these little episodes of family power play into sharper relief, the programme includes a few "reconstructions" of reported incidents involving older teenagers. A policeman encounters a youth about to throw himself off a bridge because he can't get a particular pair of flashy trainers he's set his heart on. The policeman rushes away and returns shortly, having bought the trainers out of his own pocket. The youth is content. Kids = 5 Adults = 5

In America, a black youth was shot dead in a playground when a couple of local thugs tried to rob his friend at gunpoint of a fancy jacket he was wearing. The gun was fired, the bullet missed his friend, passing through the material of the precious jacket and hitting the youth (who did not wear any name brand clothes) square in the chest. What was that about peer group conformity again?

An English youth takes his girlfriend off on a luxury holiday in a five-star Belgian hotel, blows £5,000 in a week, and where did the money come from? He sold his mother's car while she was in hospital. The son is taken to court and fined the equivalent of what his mother had spent on bus fares since her release from hospital. "Kids" = 6 Adults = 6

Most outrageously of all, a teenage daughter tells her father she has cancer and needs money for an operation. Father sells his second home, cashes in his pension, and raises daughter £150,000, which she then blows on a new sports car and improvements to her home. She is prosecuted and jailed for three years on multiple counts of fraud. How's that for "family values"!

In some future time, when sanity returns to the UK, perhaps people will pore over documentaries like this and ask themselves how it was that parents and teachers of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries could so blithely record the evidence of their own deficiencies, and still not be able to see the wood for the trees? The children, secure on their pedestal of liberal middle class reverence, gaze down with a smile that has more of Caligula than Peter Pan. They get what they want alright, but it only feeds their hunger for more. Denial, like discipline, is a medicine withdrawn from the pharmacy shelves.

See subject index under **BRATS / SPOILT CHILDREN, DOCUMENTARIES** and **POLICE / SOCIAL WORKERS / CHILD PSYCHOLOGISTS**.