



£139.6bn
Global market for
childrenswear in 2012

£500m
Spent on labels

38%
US percentage of the
luxury market

£5.9bn
UK market (up from
£2.9bn in 2008)

20%
extension to Selfridges
childrenswear
department, now
totalling 16,000 sq ft

Million dollar baby

Junior apparel is big business, and the haute couture set is getting in on the action. Xenia Taliotis looks at why the fashion houses have designs on the future

The fashion world is shrinking. On gleaming chrome rails in stylish boutiques hang delectable outfits in minuscule sizes. The names on the labels are familiar to those who follow design - Armani, Burberry, Chloé, Dolce & Gabbana. Nothing new about that, you might think: catwalk clothing has been contracting towards sub-zero sizing for years. But the zeros on these outfits indicate age, not girth. Despite the names on the labels, and the three-, sometimes four-figure price tags, these designer clothes are for children, a sector that has grown healthily throughout the downturn, even as those stalwarts of affordable clothing for kids - Mothercare, Adams and Woolworths - withdrew from the high street or struggled.

The most recent forecasts by market research company Marketline indicate that the global market for childrenswear generated £139.6bn in 2012, with about 10% of that coming from designer brands. The biggest spender is the US, which accounts for about 38% of the luxury market, followed by Japan and France, though that may change now that India, China, Russia and Brazil are splurging. The figure for the UK is in excess of £5.9bn in total (up from £2.9bn in 2008), with £500m being spent on labels.

Viewed in that context, designer childrenswear seems fairly niche, but it's an area that generates huge profits, partly due to turnover (children always need new clothes) and partly due to mark-up. A *New York Times* feature put the mark-up on luxury brands at roughly 7.5 times cost, almost double the 3.5 times cost on mid-range items.

It's also an area that's growing extremely fast: as an example, for the year 2012-2013, Burberry's revenue from this category grew by 9% to £73m, outperforming the growth in womenswear and

accessories; only menswear, which grew by 14%, performed better.

Lynne Crook, childrenswear and toys buying manager at Selfridges, has witnessed the burgeoning list of designers entering the junior market with interest. "When I started in this business 15 or so years ago you had Baby Dior and, well, Baby Dior," she says. "Now parents can dress their children in their own favourites, be that Kenzo, Fendi, Gucci, Hugo Boss or Marc Jacobs. The past few years in particular have been exceptional, with many top-end designers launching junior collections and prestige European companies such as Bonpoint gaining ground in the UK. Scandinavian brands, too, are very popular - Mini Rodini is selling very well. There's such an appetite for luxury styling for the under-16s right now, with parents spending many thousands on their children, sometimes in one hit, that demand is constantly fuelling supply."

To meet that demand, last August Selfridges extended its childrenswear department by 20% to 16,000 sq ft, adding 25 new labels to its stock. Sales since then have increased by more than 12%, though that figure excludes any sales that will have been made during June, July and August, when purchases by visitors from overseas typically reach their peak. "The 11 months since we launched have been very exciting and there are now many more

"There's such an appetite for luxury styling for the under-16s, with parents spending thousands on their children, sometimes in one hit"

designers we'd like to showcase," says Crook. "I'm not only talking about global brands; there are niche labels, many of them British, specialising in quirky, high-quality clothes for children. Our customers are very fashion-forward; they come to us expecting to find the star designers of tomorrow, exclusives and new, directional brands - for them and their children - and that's what we provide."

The Selfridges space is big but falls short of the colossal area Harrods (where childrenswear is showing consistent year-on-year double-digit percentage point sales growth) devoted to mini ranges in autumn last year. Covering a staggering 66,000 sq ft, this is one of the largest junior fashion stores in the world, with 11 specialist rooms of clothes for newborns, toddlers and the all-important 10-16 age group.

And not wishing to miss the party, Liberty opened Little Liberty in February 2012, after a seven-year absence from stocking junior lines. Ed Burstell, managing director of Liberty, says that with so many customers asking for childrenswear, Little Liberty became a necessity.

"Kidswear was one of the main things our customers asked us about," he says. "Our customers told us they wanted to shop for their children in store, to buy the same thing for them as they were buying for themselves, so we listened to their requests and gave them Little Liberty."

The collection, says Burstell, is "eclectic, blurring the line between designer and contemporary. We stock Isabel Marant and Acne - both of whom made their childrenswear debut with us - Lanvin, 3.1 Phillip Lim, Stella McCartney and our own range."

But why, in an economically tough time, are parents "demanding" designer fashion for children? Why would anyone spend £240 on a

Left: 10-year-old Romeo Beckham helped boost Burberry sales by 13%

FROM PLUSH TO PLUSHER

This November the UK's first luxury family show, Plusher – a one-stop shop for decking out designer babies, will be held in London. Entrepreneur David Spowart, the man behind the one-day event, says the timing was right for an up-market show. "Industries become polarised during a recession with money being spent at the top and bottom ends of the scale. Having seen the growth in designer clothing and products for children and the success of last year's inaugural children's fashion week, I knew there was a market for Plusher." Exhibitors will include Julia Boggio Studios, renowned for her beautiful, quirky photo shoots of children, and traditional toyshop Honeyjam.

FROM CATWALK TO HIGH STREET

Where designers tread, the high street is sure to follow. To bring designer threads to the masses (and boost their sales), Debenhams, Gap and even Thomson travel are among the companies that have teamed up with a famous name to create a children's range. Leading the way is Gap, which struck gold first with its sell-out Stella McCartney collections and, more recently, with Diane Von Furstenberg. Debenhams meanwhile has added a range designed jointly by Donna Air and Markus Lupfer to its childrenswear, which already features items by Julien Macdonald and Matthew Williamson. Most enterprising of all, however, is the recent partnership between milliner Philip Treacy and Thomson. The range of sunhats mark the launch of a new resort in Turkey, are given free to the resort's first guests, and will doubtless be appearing on eBay soon.



White ruffled dress from £300 by Junior Gaultier (ages 2-16)

Burberry trench coat for a three-month old, or £500 on a nylon Mulberry nappy bag, or £95 on a pack of three Gucci bibs? There are several factors at play, among which, says Crook, is the increasing popularity of the baby shower. "The gifting market is huge, and baby showers can be quite plush affairs so people are opting for lavish products for mother and child." According to research by VoucherCodes.co.uk, British women now spend £220m on

baby showers per year, equating to an average of £50 per gift. More surprising still is the fact that some soon-to-be mothers are now drawing up gift lists - bringing an altogether different meaning to the term "expectant".

Another factor, says Emma Clifford, fashion and clothing analyst for Mintel, is the older parent. "The childrenswear market is profiting from the shift towards smaller and wealthier families," she

PHOTOGRAPHY: IAN DERRY

says. "More women are delaying motherhood, so when they do eventually have a child they're more financially secure and in a better position to spend on their new arrival. We know from our research that affluent parents want high-quality items."

Nick Bassi, CEO of Childsplay Clothing, the UK's largest independent retailer of children's designer clothing, footwear and accessories, according to its website, agrees with Clifford but cites an additional factor. "People are confronted with images of celebrities and their children dressed in head-to-toe designer labels every day. You can't get away from them - the Beckhams' boy Romeo headlined a recent Burberry advertising campaign, JLo's twins modelled for Gucci and Cindy Crawford's daughter for Versace.

"Kids today have a presence and a voice - they're seen and heard from a very early age, jetting about with their glamorous parents, and what they're wearing is as much a talking point as what their mums and dads have on. It's like the Kate Middleton/Reiss dress effect. Once a celebrity endorses a brand, sales rocket because loads of people aspire to that lifestyle." This theory is reflected in the statistics: Selfridges reported a 70% rise in luxury babywear following the birth of Harper Beckham.

Bassi, whose turnover has now passed the £10m mark, opened his Essex-based shop in 1990, stocking boutique labels from France. "There were no designer collections for children when we opened, but even then, there was a hunger for brands. We saw that when we first stocked Timberland. We sold out of everything within six or seven weeks and that gave us a hint of what was to come. When Burberry launched and we got permission to stock their products, it pushed our turnover to £1m plus, it propelled us into a different league. And then when Armani, Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, John Galiano and Gaultier came in, our sales exploded.

"Since going online in 2009, our growth has been extraordinary. In one year alone, we grew by 300%. Each time a new collection launches, we see a spike in sales because people who love that brand

£311

Young Versace junior boys black velvet two-piece suit



£686

Burberry baby changing bag



£281

Fendi baby velvet dress with ruffles



£520

Dolce & Gabbana junior girls grey cashmere and wool coat



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brands have given companies such as mine a new and extended lease of life."

Online sales now account for 70% of Bassi's business, with orders coming from all over the world - his website gives customers the choice of ordering in 71 languages including Haitian Creole, Filipino and Swahili, an indication of how he expects his company to grow.

Aided by the internet, the passion for fashion is turning into a global and universal pursuit, with designer names forming the basis of a lingua franca that's spoken from Milan to Manila and from Saint Malo to São Paulo. Though the brands themselves are opening standalone children's stores in major cities throughout the world (Burberry, for example, currently has 12), it's the internet that is transforming desire into fulfilment. It is also the means by which word spreads, trends gather momentum and companies such as Caramel Baby and No Added Sugar (now both well-established with stores of their own) make the leap from the kitchen table to the showroom.

What's also interesting is the way brands are using technology to market direct to children. Harrods last year opened a virtual store on Stardoll, "the website for everyone who enjoys fame and fashion". Little girls could visit the store, which has subsequently closed, to buy designer clothes for their paper-doll avatar. Meanwhile Ralph Lauren launched the RL Gang, an online storybook featuring eight very well-dressed children enjoying normal life. Their most recent adventure takes them to Europe and gives parents many opportunities to shop the look.

This comes as no surprise to Bassi. Ultimately, he says, the brands are after loyal, life-long customers, who'll start off wearing their clothes as children, carry on wearing them as adults and then progress to dressing their own children and grandchildren in the same label. And what does he expect to happen next in childrenswear? "We'll see more business coming from the emerging economies, which are extremely dynamic right now. And, I hope, the launch of Hermès, Prada and Chanel junior lines. I have many, many customers waiting for those." ■

go on a spending spree. I have customers who'll order everything we've got by Missoni or Rykiel for their toddler. Or who'll order the same Moschino T-shirt in all colours for their seven-year-old. Our customers include royalty, celebrities and sports stars; we have one customer who spends £37,000 in one visit, and another client who spends £50,000 per child each season. Designer clothing for children is big business - the