

*Is Pokémon
another harmless
toy trend or a sign
of trouble in our
media-saturated
world?*

The Fad Phenomenon

BY MARIE SHERLOCK

To say that 9-year-old Olin Stickler likes Pokémon is an understatement. Olin's mother, Becky, says he's "intensely interested" in Pokémon. Olin says, "I'm not obsessed; I just really like Pokémon a lot." When his friends come over, they sprawl out on the living-room floor with their Pokémon card collections.

For the hermits among us, Pokémon—short for "pocket monsters"—is the latest mega-fad for kids.

There are 151 of these animated cartoon creatures, each possessing complex powers used to battle each other. Originating in Japan in 1996 as a GameBoy product, Pokémon became a smash Japanese cartoon show before traveling across the Pacific to millions of willing young American consumers.

Pokémon is, of course, just the most recent in a long line of kids' fads. In recent years, Power Rangers, Tickle Me Elmo, Furby, Beanie Babies and many other products reached "mania" magnitude. Fads are nothing new, of course. Parents may remember a time when they couldn't live without a Davy Crockett Coonskin Cap, and grandparents may remember when a certain dance—the Charleston—was all the rage.

Not all fun and games

So is Pokémon just another harmless toy trend?

Perhaps not. The difference between today's fads and those of the past, experts say, is the presence of cross-over marketing, a term that covers the use of a variety of media delivery systems to reach consumers, from television and movies to fast-food restaurants and cereal boxes—even classrooms. In addition, marketers are using increasingly sophisticated methods to persuade kids to cajole their parents into purchasing goods.

As a result, say some, today's fads may not be as innocuous as those of yesterday. "My major concern is that each successive fad is more materialistic, more acquisitive," says Peter Christensen, author of *It's Not Only Rock & Roll: Pop Music in the Lives of Adolescents* (Hampton Press, 1998). "Marketers have no restraint when it comes to marketing to kids," he says. "They use manipulative techniques and even purposely create shortages that fuel fads."

These same things trouble Gloria DeGaetano, author of *Screen Smarts: A Family Guide to Media Literacy* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996) and a consultant to parents and educators on the subject of media literacy.

A child's obsessive interest in a specific toy line negatively affects him in a number of ways, she says. For example, the child's social play becomes constructed around an artificial reality instead of being constructed by children simply interacting as children. DeGaetano believes that within this artificial reality, there's no room for the child's own imaginative experience to blossom.

A child's self-esteem and self-respect may become connected to the fad, too. Having all 151 Pokémon cards or an extensive array of Beanie Babies are examples. Becky Stickler has seen glimpses of these effects. "Olin and his friends would normally be playing together, relating to each other. Now they're so focused on these cards," she observes.

On the other hand, Stickler sees some positives to the Pokémon phenomenon. "It's sort of a social bonding thing. It gives [the kids] something to talk about, something they have in common." The card game is also very involved, says Stickler. Players must memorize a lot of facts about the different Pokémon characters, making it, in essence, an intellectual challenge for kids.

Gotta buy 'em all!

Stickler has a problem, however, with another facet of this particular fad. When kids buy a pack of Pokémon "booster" cards—priced at \$3.29 and up—"it's all up to chance," says Stickler. "You can end up buying a bunch of cards you already have. It's really almost like teaching them to gamble."

Parents in New Jersey felt the same way and brought suit against the cards' manufacturer, claiming this approach amounts to racketeering. Stickler says that Olin, who uses his own money to buy the cards, has been disappointed. "He has only a small amount of money and all he wants to spend it on is these cards."

To compel kids to want to spend their money, DeGaetano says that children's product marketers employ techniques that actually change a child's relationship to his parents. Marketers use psychological methods, with a goal of circumventing the parents through nagging or parental guilt.

Diane Morrison of Seattle knows this well—as a mother and a psychology professor at the University of Washington. Morrison and a number of other psychologists recently jointly sent a letter to the American Psychological Association, protesting some members' compliance in performing psychological research that allows corporations to "bypass parents and influence the behavior and desires of children," resulting in the "commercial exploitation and manipulation of children." Morrison adds that several countries and Canadian provinces have laws to protect children from being manipulated by psychological expertise. The U.S. has none.

The result of these marketing strategies? "Parents are no longer authorities, but pals who'll give [kids] everything they want—if they whine long enough," explains DeGaetano. Christensen concurs, recalling that when he was a child, there was no possibility he'd get all that he asked for.

"It's so much harder to be a parent today than it used to be," says Christensen.

"It's necessary to say 'No' much more often. It's painful for parents."

Advice for parents

Short of moving to a Pokémon-less, Beanie Baby-free desert island, what's a parent to do?

"The most powerful thing you can do is make kids aware of the extent to which they're being manipulated," says Christensen. DeGaetano concurs. "Sit down and talk with them," she counsels. "Point out that the goal of advertisements is to sell something."

In addition to educating your kids to be media-savvy, DeGaetano says parents need to control the amount of exposure their kids have to the media. She agrees with the American Association of Pediatricians' recommendation of limiting to one hour a day exposure to all screen media combined—television, computer, Nintendo, GameBoy, etc.

Christensen also advises talking to your kids about the economic implications of spending all of their—or your!—money on fads.

And parents should draw the line for kids, and help them find other things to do, DeGaetano says. If parents continually give in to a child's whining, they need to stop.

Parents can be advocates by starting or joining a group that works to protect kids from the adverse impacts of marketing.

Probably the most important thing any parent can do is to spend time with their kids. That might mean going for a hike, flying a kite, or throwing a Frisbee around. If you have a child who is "into" Pokémon, "by all means, play the game with him," says DeGaetano.

And keep in mind that this fad, too, shall pass. Even Olin Stickler, avowed Pokémon collector, claims, "I'll probably keep buying them—until something new comes out." 🐾

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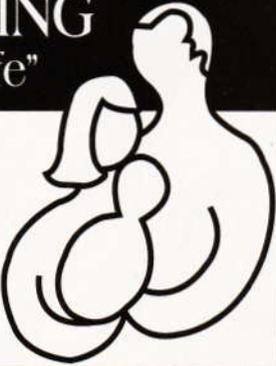
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