

HELLO KITTY

BY DR KENNETH LYEN

Children's fads are nothing new. Over the years we have seen them come and go. There was He-man, Cabbage Patch Dolls, Teenage Ninja Turtles, Care Bears, Teletubbies, and Tamagotchi, to name but a few. More recently there have been Pokemon and Hello Kitty.

For people like myself who do not find any of these creatures particularly appealing, the obsession displayed by their fans seems completely bewildering. What would entice large numbers of people to queue up overnight just to buy a Hello Kitty doll? What generates the incredible demand for these dolls such that the black market price for them is inflated several fold? Why did some of those who queued up for these dolls lose their tempers and come to blows over such a trivial matter? And as for those who got hurt when they pushed so hard that the glass door shattered, we ask why?

As a parent and as a paediatrician, I look at behavioural problems from a developmental point of view. Namely, what did we do wrong as parents? Why did we fail to vaccinate our children (some of them already grown up) with values and judgements so that they would not succumb to peer pressure, or to advertising's ugly influences? How did we as parents, fail to inculcate independent thinking in our children?

Alexander Pope once wrote: "Tis Education forms the common mind; just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined." I fully agree with him. It is through education, in its widest sense of the word, that we can shape our children, so that they will develop into upright citizens. But recent events suggest that we have not been as effective parents-cum-educators as we thought we were. Let me stick my neck out, and make a sweeping generalisation. Let me preface this by saying that I don't have any research data to back up my impressions.

I believe that parents these days seem more intent on getting their children to do well at school, to pass exams, with a view to securing better paid jobs and a more comfortable lifestyle. Children nowadays seem to be taught more and more facts, and less and less about values; they are taught more about the techniques of passing exams, and less about moral judgements; they are taught more about winning, and less about coping with failure; more about following instructions, and less about independent thinking. Now, before I get a flood of criticisms, let me immediately apologise if the above generalisation provokes a negative reaction from parents, educators, and others who feel that I have got it all wrong.

But have I really got it wrong? I think that the events rising from the Hello Kitty madness has already vindicated my beliefs. Let me give you some further observations. I have seen people queuing up behind a sign placed by the fast food chain that the Hello Kitty dolls are sold out at this point. My colleagues have noticed that their several of their office staff have arrived late to work because they had queued up for a doll. Many rubbish bins outside the fast food chain were full of discarded food uneaten, because once the person queuing obtained the doll, the food became redundant.

Some parents feel that they are displaying love to their children when they shower them with presents. They indulge their children's every craving. This is exacerbated by the highly successful advertising on television. The child becomes obsessed with the desire to own the object advertised. Their peers exert further pressure. Parents think that they are doing their child a great favour by giving in to their demands. Sometimes the child becomes insufferable and goes into a temper tantrum. To stop these tantrums, the parent might give in, even though the parent may initially object to buying the toy.

As a paediatrician, often asked to advise parents on how to deal with childhood tantrums, I always tell the parents never to give in to their child's tantrums. Children are often smarter than we realise. They know how to manipulate their parents. They are fast learners. If they go into a temper tantrum, and the parents give into their demands, they will learn that this technique works. In future they will always go into a temper tantrum to get what they want. If, on the other hand, the parents consistently deny the tantrum child's demands, that child soon learns the futility of launching into a tantrum. Over the course of time, the tantrums will extinguish.

Thus, if we as parents are obsessed with acquiring material wealth, or we ourselves queue up for our condominiums, or cars, our country clubs, then unwittingly we transmit these values to our children. If we would rather spend our money on expensive holidays rather than helping destitute families, we are also making a value statement. Hence to some extent, the misbehaviour of those obsessed with buying the latest fads can be traced to our own misplaced sense of values, our own obsessions, our own misbehaviour.

What can we do? As doctors, I believe we have a responsibility to society. Like it or not, society scrutinises our every act, our every word, our every deed. We are already seen to be a role model for society, and we should therefore be seen to fulfil this role responsibly. Furthermore, we are also educators. We are constantly educating our patients and the parents of our patients. We have that opportunity to allow others to "catch" our own views and values.

Education needs balance. Currently it is imbalanced towards competition rather than cooperation, towards winning at all costs rather than coping with failure, towards acquiring facts rather than values. The least we can do is to discuss the problems, to air our views, to listen to the views of the public. Maybe by engaging in dialogue we can find new solutions to achieving a balanced education. That is the direction we should be heading towards.