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# Children's T-shirts get risqué

**Edgy, rude and scatological clothing is the latest thing for little boys and girls to wear. But has it gone too far?** Jennifer

Howze



Woolworths has pulled a [children's bedroom suite named Lolita](#) from its website after several parents objected to the name. But in the world of baby and children's fashion these days, sometimes it's the parents doing the offending, with knowing slogan T-shirts for the under fives that push the boundaries of good taste.

The children's clothing at the US-based T-shirt Hell, which claims to be the largest online "funny" T-shirt company, are considered humorous and subversive by its customers, according to a company spokesman, but others may not be amused. Its top 10 most popular styles include the relatively tame "Kickin' ass and takin' naps" alongside "I'm this many" (showing a hand with a raised middle finger).

"They're really popular baby shower gifts," says Gary Cohen, the director of operations. "Younger hipper parents are looking for something that's not the same, that has a little more attitude." The UK is the company's second-biggest market, and children's T-shirts represent 20 per cent of the company's business.

For parents, a risqué children's T-shirt is not so different from its expensive organic-cotton cousin with the slogan "100 per cent organic", says Dr Ellie Lee, a senior lecturer in social policy at Kent University. "The reason why they sell so well and there are so many is because we more and more use our children to make statements about ourselves."

By sending a message to society through our children's clothes, we're staking out who we are and, perhaps, who the observer isn't. "Not that I think there's anything wrong at all with buying your little one a top that says '50 per cent mummy, 50 per cent daddy'. Cute (if a bit naff)," Lee says. "At its extreme, what you are saying if you have your kid wear e.g. a 'green' T-shirt is I'm a better person than you, and I also look after my kid better than you because I really care about their future."

"People are putting things on their kids they would be afraid to wear themselves," says Cohen, musing that more conservative parents can express their more outrageous side. While the private company does get "hate mail", it has never discontinued a shirt because of public pressure.

In fact the most vociferous and organised protest has centred on its shirt that reads "They Shake Me", on the grounds it made fun of shaken-baby syndrome. "I think it seems pretty obvious people are joking," Cohen says of customers who buy it.

An unscientific poll of acquaintances reveals that many grown-ups enjoy shirts with funny messages, especially those playing on babies' rascally side of babies, with messages like "I'm a breast man" and "Mischief maker". Darren Hendry chuckled at a shirt he saw at a local market reading "I've just done 9 months inside", but his 16-month-old daughter is too big for it.

Mother-of-three Helen Shepard's husband bought a T-shirt for the youngest son, who's nine, that reads "I am your worst nightmare". "He actually likes wearing it," she says. "The grandparents they agree with it. He's a bit of a pickle."

Rock and roll emblems are also a favourite of hip parents, who deck out their progeny with T-shirts showing the Ramones, the Clash and even shirts that read ABCD styled like the AC/DC band logo.

But what about the people actually wearing the messages? Preschoolers won't be able to read them or get the references, but commentators say some messages - especially ones with sexual overtones like "I enjoy a good spanking" - erode the aura of innocence of childhood. Cohen asserts that a message a child can't read and doesn't understand can't possibly damage him or her. For the parents though who dress their child in a T-shirt reading "I can kick your baby's ass", "You can't put that on your kid and think you're not going to get a reaction," he says.

As for the appropriateness of such messages, Jo Bryant, an etiquette advisor at Debrett's says, "It is unfair to use your child as a billboard for humour and opinion, especially if it is risqué or if there is sexual innuendo...a slogan should only be a phrase that you would be comfortable with your child saying out loud in front of other people."

But if you're confronted with a child in an offensive T-shirt, you should above all remember your own manners. "It would be rude to negatively comment on the clothing of someone else's child," she says.