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CHILDRENSWEAR/FRANCE

# Little treasures

We're having children later in life, which (hopefully) means our bank balances are more handsome. The outcome: a lot of money to spend on our kids. And that's why Le Bon Marché is going all out to lure the smartest big spenders.

*By Chloë Ashby*



“It’s important that our customers can come here with their children. Without children, the atmosphere would be very different”

“Le Bon Marché is a family store,” says Laurence Dekowski, head of the children’s department at the famed luxury department store on the fringes of Paris’s Saint-Germain-des-Prés. We’re joined by the store’s in-house architect Perrine Bertin-Lefort and cooling off in her white-walled office – an ice box compared with the stifling 37C heat on the tree-lined boulevards. The topic of conversation? The soon-to-be-unveiled renovation of a retail space for the shop’s youngest clients.

The children’s department has existed since the department store’s bourgeois beginnings and it’s an increasingly important part of the business plan today. Fabric merchant Aristide Boucicaut founded Le Bon Marché – Paris’s original *grand magasin* – in 1852 and the LVMH Group snapped it up in 1984. Since then the three-storey outpost at 24 rue de Sèvres has undergone several refurbishments that have polished its sterling reputation for providing a taste of well-to-do Parisian style on the cusp of the affluent 6th and 7th arrondissements.

Its customer base – a mix of Rive Gauche residents and sartorially aware visitors – has stayed steady but capturing a younger market and getting parents to splash out on their children is increasingly part of the company’s thinking. “Le Bon Marché evokes memories,” says Bertin-Lefort. Memories, she explains, of visiting with a mother, a father, a grandparent. Customers who first came when they were young return in later life with their own toddler in tow – or at least that’s how the team hope it will pan out.

Work began on the new children’s department last spring and will be completed by November (in time for Christmas was always the plan). Like its predecessor, it will occupy the entire top floor. The former kid’s department had been left behind by the modern floors below: it remained small and closed off, a



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Previous page: (1) Gucci’s venture into childrenswear

This spread: (1) TinyCottons clothing (2) The Animal Observatory

series of separate rooms. The overhauled space has grown in size (with five-metre-high ceilings) and has a sleek new design. “It’s important for us to show that we take care of our customers’ children,” says Dekowski. “We have to offer the same kind of environment and atmosphere for children as adults – the same quality of service and design. We want to give them the most welcoming and playful space we can imagine.”

That space will feature mid-century modern furniture such as the bulbous Up armchair by Gaetano Pesce and two wobbling Culbuto chairs by Marc Held. At the centre of the bookshop there will be an events area shaped like a spaceship, while elsewhere you’ll encounter totem-like towers of children’s board games as well as a bus, helicopter, plane and caravan – all from a 1950s carousel.

“It will be a mini Bon Marché on the third floor,” says Dekowski. “The department is unique because it encompasses so many elements: clothes, accessories, toys, books.” Still, visitors will recognise what Bertin-Lefort refers to as the products of Le Bon Marché’s “DNA”: plenty of light, like in the shop’s lofty atrium; concrete, albeit splashed with colour; and wooden floors. Large windows will overlook the leafy Square Boucicaut, a popular playground for children.

“You’ll see and recognise different brands but the overriding concept is Le Bon Marché,” says Bertin-Lefort, who contrasts the experience to visiting department stores such as Harrods, where the individual brands dictate the design of their designated area. That’s not to say Bertin-Lefort hasn’t considered the brands in her floor design: in front of Petit Bateau, for instance, she plans to place a Panton chair in the shape of a wave.

Le Bon Marché’s investment in little ones is timely. The global luxury childrenswear market is gaining considerable

momentum: in 2017 it was worth more than €5bn. The maturation of this market has been a long time coming. Baby Dior launched in 1967, followed by Ralph Lauren Kids in 1978, but it wasn’t until the late 2000s and early 2010s that the majority – Marc Jacobs, Stella McCartney, Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana – began to offer big fashion for small people. Burberry Kids, founded in 2008, is perhaps the most successful player, offering a childrenswear line directly inspired by its men’s and womenswear collections – think mini-me trench coats and shortened tartan scarves. There have been significant recent developments in this sector: Givenchy turned its attention to minors in 2017 and Balenciaga for kids was launched earlier this year. In July, Net-a-Porter teamed up with Gucci to create the luxury e-retailer’s first childrenswear offering.

As with its men’s and womenswear lines, Le Bon Marché offers niche names (*see box*) that you might not find elsewhere. Of course, there’s Bonpoint – the store’s best-selling children’s brand, known for its puff sleeves and soft frills – as well as other luxury labels such as Dior. “People spend a lot on their children, especially the new generation,” says Dekowski. “They love fashion and they buy it for their children just as they would buy it for themselves.”

This increased demand is partly down to biology: parents are having children later in life, when they’re on a higher salary with a bigger disposable income. Buying luxury childrenswear is also a way for less-wealthy individuals to own a small piece of a big brand. And for those brands, moving into childrenswear is a chance to firm up their presence in the general luxury market and – like Le Bon Marché – to cater to all their customers’ needs. “It’s about fuelling growth and building a stronger lifestyle proposition,”

**Niche kids’ brands to buy:**

1. **Anne Kurris**  
Features clothes splashed with abstract patterns.  
[annekurris.com](http://annekurris.com)
2. **TinyCottons**  
Playful designs abound: think a cherry-covered dress.  
[tinycottons.com](http://tinycottons.com)
3. **The Animal Observatory**  
Quirky graphics inspired by 1970s art.  
[theanimalsobservatory.com](http://theanimalsobservatory.com)
4. **My Little Cozmo**  
For kids aged one to 24 months.  
[mylittlecozmo.com](http://mylittlecozmo.com)
5. **French Disorder**  
Casual-chic basics.  
[frenchdisorder.com](http://frenchdisorder.com)



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“We have to offer the same kind of environment for children as adults – the same quality of service and design”

says Samantha Dover, senior retail analyst at research firm Mintel. The speed with which children grow out of their clothes, and require updates, is also handy for brands. “Growth in childrenswear is outpacing both men’s and women’s fashion in terms of retail sales,” says Fflur Roberts, head of luxury goods at Euromonitor. The time is certainly ripe for Le Bon Marché to dial up its offering.

For this Parisian institution, it all boils down to the in-store experience. “Many places have stopped offering childrenswear and toys but that’s not our idea of a department store,” says Dekowski. “We want to combine fashion with toys and books – to create a lifestyle department.” As well as bedroom-like spaces strewn with clothes, toys and stuffed animals, workshops, where little ones aged from four to 10 can be left for up to two hours. “It’s important that our customers can come here with their children,” adds Dekowski. “Without children, the atmosphere would be very different.”

In recent years, Le Bon Marché has refurbished every department – menswear, womenswear, homeware, its food hall and now childrenswear – and each time, the aim has been to add to the richness of the overall shopping experience. At a time when many department stores are struggling, this LVMH-owned institution has managed to thrive

and stay ahead of the game. So the fact it’s now making a considerable investment in tots is significant; other players should take note. “It’s not about turnover; it’s about the feel,” insists Dekowski. This may well be true but Le Bon Marché doesn’t do anything without a smart business plan. This neighbourhood stalwart with an international reputation has left plenty of growing room for children – expect the streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés to be filled with even more well-dressed kids than before. — (M)