



Child's Play

I am an impatient gift buyer usually, but last week I spent about two solid hours in one particular shop, looking for a present for my four-year-old niece. She's actually quite easily pleased so the reason I took my time was simply that I was enjoying myself so much.

The shop, you see, was Hamleys, the world's largest toy shop, situated in Regent's street and home to the greatest collection of toys, games, tricks and playthings to be found anywhere on the planet. Hamley's joy is spread over six themed floors and the shop is particularly famous for its vast menagerie of soft toy animals, which contains many unusual species as well as, of course, an enormous collection of bears, including the rare, and possibly endangered, Steiff bears from Germany.

Almost as impressive as the range of toys are the tireless demonstrators whose batteries never seem to run down. When I arrived they were teaching their tiny but demanding customers - card tricks, boomerang throwing and how to fly radio controlled helicopters- and when I left they were still at it. I used to (attempt to) teach little children and still have the scars to prove it so these heroes have my undying respect.

One thing I didn't see in Hamleys though (apart from Kitty Chan lurking in her very own corner on level 3) were many Japanese, which makes me think they may be missing a trick here as a trip to this cathedral of fun would make a nice alternative to the more obvious Harrods or Selfridges (just a short walk away incidentally).

The feel good atmosphere in Hamleys is a good example of how Britain has become a more child-friendly place in recent years. The British are moving closer to the indulgent Japanese view of childhood as a 'golden age' to be celebrated and enjoyed to the full, and we are now *Buzz Lightyears* away from the traditional 'seen and not heard' attitude of yesteryear. Much time and careful thought is now put into how to amuse the little ones, and sophisticated new characters appear regularly and have become big business. Even dear old Thomas the Tank Engine now has a rival in the anthropomorphosised form of the locomotives of 'Chuggington'.

I must confess that the golden gates of childhood closed firmly behind me many years ago but it is still fun to take a peek through the railings from time to time and Hamleys is one place to do that. Another is the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green in east London. Part of V and A, the MOC has an assortment of exhibits that range from antique dolls to the most modern toys and games. Plenty here to amuse children, of all ages.

Incidentally, the words: *child/children* are actually quite formal in English: in spoken English it's much more common to use the word *kid*, although if they are still finding their feet, then *toddler* is more accurate. The adjective *childlike* is a positive word to describe someone who is unusually youthful in outlook, but in a good way, while *childish* is similar but decidedly negative. And if you've ever wondered what *wagamama* is in English, then wonder no more - *spoiled brat* is an exact translation.

I finally settled on a mechanical pink poodle for my niece. It yaps and walks, wags its tail and has a diamante collar. She seemed delighted, christened it 'Lucy' and dressed it in a skirt for some reason. I hope she has as much fun playing with it as I did choosing it.

<http://www.hamleys.com/>
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/index.html>