

CHILDSPLAY

For many proud mothers the idea of their offspring appearing on advertising billboards up and down the country, in one of the colour supplements or even in a TV commercial is a worthy aspiration. Surely such an achievement is something for both parent and child to be proud of?

It could even provide a springboard to launch little Johnny or sweet Sarah-Jane into a modelling or film career, and of course, the money will come in handy too. But it takes more than a few snapshots of a bonny, bouncing baby or tearaway kid with a cheeky grin to make a child model, and child's play it isn't.

Childsplay incidentally is the name of one of the country's leading child model agencies. Established in 1977 by Wendy Lee, (who is still director), and her partner Robert Tuthill, the agency is based in the East End of

MJ: How do you find your models?
Michele: We advertise in the local press.
MJ: Anywhere else?
Michele: Yellow Pages and The Stage.
She says the first thing they

the provinces it's very difficult. The modelling scene is predominantly London based, child modelling even more so.

Michele: As far as I know there are no agencies specifically for kids in the provinces. Childsplay does have clients living as far afield as Cornwall, but she stresses this is the exception. For parents who haven't got contacts in the capital she advises it's best to forget it. Another thing she advises mothers to forget is the lure of big money. Most mothers have the best interests of their daughters/sons at heart, but there will always be a few of course who have less than pure motives. Childsplay can spot these a mile off and the 'pushy' mums, (less frequently dads), never get past the interview stage. Realistically though how much can a child model expect to earn? For photo stills, babies will earn £20 per hour or £100 per day.

Some women, are very gullible; they will take their child to an 'agency' in response to an advertisement in the local press, be told, 'Yes, the child is beautiful,' then part with £200 or more on the spot.

particular child might have to attend several auditions before receiving a booking. A ten pound fee is paid to attend a TV audition, but this is only a token. Another thing which makes child modelling less attractive is that, unlike adults, children don't receive repeat fees for TV commercials, although a buyout of up to 100% can be negotiated. Children also have to be licensed, but this is done by the casting company on the day. And what happens to the money at the end of the day? Michele says quite a lot of mothers put it in trust for their young ones, or it is spent on birthday presents and the like. For a lot of the mums it's a day out and something to do.

Another thing she advises mothers to forget is the lure of big money.

The maximum day should be five hours, after that the agency will push for overtime rates. The basic rate for children, (commercials) is £100 to £150 per day. Mothers will also be paid a chaperone fee of from £30 to £35 per day. Children's earnings will be taxed if they exceed the tax limit, but in practice, says Michele, this doesn't happen often.

The rates sound very attractive, but of course the work is not regular. All child modelling is auditions first and a

ask is for the parent, (usually the mother) to send in some ordinary snapshots of the child with a self addressed envelope. If the child looks to have potential, the mother is invited to bring her/him into the agency. She reckons about half the kids they see have potential and about another half are rejected or back out at the interview stage. A one in four pass rate is much higher than for adult models. What do they look for in a child? The child has to be clean, that's very important. It has to speak for itself and has to want to do the work. Babies excepted of course. Do they look for especially good looking kids? Michele says years ago they had to be 'perfect', but nowadays clients want ordinary kids. 'It's all character now.'

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This includes spotty kids, kids with buck teeth, glasses and fat kids. At the moment the tendency is for them to have cheeky faces and look slightly streetwise. About 80% of Childsplay's models get work, but of course there are no guarantees; it's all down to the advertising agency or the casting director in the final analysis. Most of those who don't get work are girls. Michele points out that there are always too many girls and not enough boys in modelling, so it comes down to basic economics; supply and demand. She also says for mothers in



WENDY LEE, Director



MICHELE PLEWS,

London. Its office over the top of a betting shop in Commercial Street is decorated with numerous stills of some of the 500 or so kids they have on their books. I spoke to Michele Plews who is Mrs Lee's personal assistant, and is currently holding the fort. Michele could pass for model herself and was in fact an actress. She has worked for Childsplay for just over a year, and is still active in the theatre; she teaches drama. Despite being a relative newcomer she gives one the impression of being both very confident and knowledgeable about the modelling business. She sits me on the settee next to a Triffid-like rubber plant and in between a constant stream of phone calls mostly from the mothers of prospective child models, I question her about the agency in particular and child modelling in general.

MJ: How old and how young are your models?
Michele: We take on children from babies up to eighteen. Over sixteen they have to be Equity for TV work, so generally we recruit them up to sixteen.

MJ: How many do you have?
Michele: From 300 to 500, from babies to eighteen year olds. We produce two catalogues a year; most other agencies only produce one.

I asked her about the track record of the agency; what publications and advertisements Childsplay models have appeared in, and she produces a list minutely typed, covering a full A4 sheet listing stills from Farleys Rusks to Penguin books, NSPCC posters to Welsh Tourist Board promos, and TV credits for companies as varied as Johnson's Baby Shampoo and Burger King to Harmony Hairspray and the TV series 'Executive Stress', from as far afield as Jamaica and Japan.



STEVEN HILL: featured in 'Rice Krispies' ad. 'The Who 25th Anniversary Concert and stills for Woolworth

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR MOTHERS: RIP OFFS

Childsplay warns all mothers of prospective child models to deal only with registered agencies. 'All reputable agencies are licensed by the Department of Employment.' They are given a registration number, and this number should be prominently displayed by the agency.

gullible, they will take their child to an 'agency' in response to an advertisement in the local press, be told, 'Yes, the child is beautiful,' then part with £200 or more on the spot. This is the last they will see either of their money or of the 'agent,' who by the time they get wised up will have set up shop somewhere else and be sweet talking his next set of mugs.

But no mother should pay out large sums of money.

Do make sure the child is clean and tidy; this is very important. Do be punctual, and if you can't make an interview or audition, give the agency as much notice as possible. Michele says that sometimes a parent will just not turn up for a shoot which is just about the worse thing that can happen from the agency's point of view. It is expensive for the company and bad for the agency.

Childsplay charges a nominal assessment fee for a first consultation and always stresses this in advance. According to Michele a mother should expect to pay £10 to £15; most agencies charge this fee and will tell you. But no mother should pay out large sums of money. Some women, she says, are very

by Alexander Baron



MATTHEW COLE: Plays Matthew in 'That's Love' for TVS



NICKY WOOD: Photographs for M+S and Reed Publishers