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## Business

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AMERICAN BABY FAIRE

### The spoils of love

#### AT THE AMERICAN BABY FAIRE IN FORT LAUDERDALE, GRANDPARENTS WILL GET SPECIAL TREATMENT

BY MONICA HATCHER  
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Healthier, wealthier and spending more money on teddy bears and teething rings than any generation before, baby boomers are going gaga for their grandkids -- to the tune of an estimated \$50 billion a year.

In a nod to their growing spending clout, organizers of this weekend's American Baby Faire in Fort Lauderdale, the largest infant and parenting expo in the country, are waiving the \$8 admission fee for grandma and grandpa.

"We know they wield some cash," said Jessica Hartshorn, an editor at American Baby Magazine, which organizes the annual event at the Broward County Convention Center.

Grand boomers, as they've been christened by marketers to the 50-plus crowd, represent the next big boon to the industry that makes and sells toys, clothing, furniture and other merchandise for kids.

Born between 1946 and 1964, the 78-million-strong boomer generation controls almost 75 percent of the country's personal wealth and last year was responsible for more than \$1 trillion in consumer spending, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

More and more of them are also becoming grandparents.

Retailers are fast discovering that nothing tugs at boomer heart -- and purse -- strings like the toothless smile of a grandbaby. Let the drooling begin.

The AARP says 32 million grand boomers are already spending twice as much annually on their grandkids than previous generations.

"This is the group that put those Baby-On-Board stickers all over their minivans in the 1980s," said Matt Thornhill, president and founder of The Boomer Project, a marketing consultancy in Richmond, Va. "They were so proud of having babies. What do you think they're going to do with their grandbabies? They're boomers -- they're consumers."

#### GRAND POWER

Indeed, grandparents buy one of every four toys, four of every 10 baby books and one of five video games, according to data gathered by the GrandParent Marketing Group.

"A huge majority of grandparents consider spoiling their grandchildren to be their most important role," said Robert DiLallo, director of the firm's New York office. "There's this flood of emotions that leads to spending."

Typically, grandparents purchase the largest and most expensive items on the mother's baby shower registry. Giant baby retailer Babies 'R' Us, which is sponsoring the American Baby Faire, lists both sets of grandparents on its registry printouts.

"Obviously, grandparents love to brag about their grandkids and love to shop for them because it's fun -- it's more fun than actually baby-sitting them," said Hartshorn, of American Baby Magazine. "They are often not in the same city as their grandkids anyway, so they want to help anyway they can, which often comes down to making purchases to help Mom and Dad."

Deeper issues may play into the urge to splurge, too, market researchers said.

Some grand boomers feel they need to make up for their own perceived failings as young parents -- moms might have drank alcohol or smoked, dads may have driven

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around with baby on his lap. Also, boomer parents were the first in a generation of mothers and father who both went to work.

The guilt-induced shopping that sometimes results is called restitution spending. 'They felt guilty about leaving kids to go to work, so they feel ` I don't want little grandbaby staying home alone, ' and 'because I wasn't able to take care of you, I'm going to take care of your baby,' " Thornhill said.

#### RARELY NOTICED

Even though grand boomers sit on a trillion-dollar treasure chest, DiLallo said only 10 percent of advertising targets them.

Retailers are starting to make an effort, if a small one.

Last year, KB Toys acknowledged grand boomers when it launched its Grandparents' Rewards Club. The store knocks 10 percent off the purchases of shoppers over 50, but only on Tuesdays.

Babies 'R' Us hosts free seminars for grandparents that address developments in baby safety and baby care, but only in select stores.

Amy Chernoff, the firm's director of promotional marketing, said the firm recently partnered with Fisher-Price to sell a 60-page guide for grandparents called ``Loving Your Grandbaby."

"We love grandparents, of course," Chernoff said.



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