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FOR KIDS LIKE MY
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Looking good: Young model
Parker Abianac, 2, wears Aventyr
Kids clothes and (opposite)

JODIE MUNRO-O'BRIEN AND AMY MOLLOY

CHIC & UNIQUE

With their charm and style, these young models are turning the fashion world on its head, advocating a new kind of beauty, where everyone is accepted for who they are

Strutting up to me, Parker Abianac puts his hands on his hips and waits.

"He's waiting for you to compliment him on his outfit," his mum Kat Abianac laughs.

Flashing a cheeky grin, the spunky 2-year-old is sporting a long-sleeved white top, Aventyr Kids squirrel pocketed harem pants, a monster bandanna, grey sneakers and a plaid fedora.

Satisfied with the forthcoming compliment, Parker, who has Down syndrome, rushes off with the swag of a catwalk model.

Potentially, that could be his long-term future, thanks to a combination of his love of bright clothes and Kat's campaign to have mainstream clothing companies include children and adults with a diagnosis in their advertising. Kat has ramped up the campaign after an alleged incident of online bullying of Parker by adults over an outfit he was wearing.

In late-June, the Brisbane mum popped Parker into his pyjamas – a Hawaiian print Bonds zipper onesie that included large pink flowers among other colours – then realised she had to run to the supermarket.

Tucked in the trolley seat, the toddler was just the right height to grab a purple ladies' hat from a hat stand in the store.

Thinking it was funny, Kat took a photo and later shared it with a baby clothing group on Facebook where women often buy and sell limited-edition onesies.

"I only shared it in the group because he was wearing the onesie ... as far as I knew, onesies are unisex," Kat says.

"After I posted the photo, some people wrote 'Not that I'm judging, but I'd never dress my son in that', and 'Poor little boy, I can't believe his mum dressed him like that'.

"There were a ton more horrible comments before they were deleted.

"I wanted them to know, you don't make fun of a toddler or his choices," she says.

Kat wrote about the incident on her blog – parkermyle.com – which she started to help other parents of children with Down syndrome.

"As a parent, you don't want your child to be picked on for any reason, but especially by adults over something so basic and ignorant like gender stereotyping."

Before long, word got out about the Hawaiian onesie incident and soon Parker had two gender-neutral clothing companies knocking on the door – US-based children's clothing company Aventyr and Brisbane's Wynnum West start-up Freestyle Threads.

Parker, of Macgregor on Brisbane's southside, is no stranger to modelling. As a baby, he posed for Redcliffe-based Bibska Bibs, the makers of his beloved monster bib accessory and later for modern cloth nappy makers, Bubblebubs, also from Brisbane.

When he turned two, Parker was one of four Australian children chosen to model for Wonsie Australia as part of American Katie Driscoll's Changing the Face of Beauty campaign. The non-profit organisation campaigns for equal representation of people with disabilities in advertising and media worldwide.

Brisbane-based children's clothing company Eeni Meeni Miini Moh has featured Perth boy Julius Panetta, now 6, since 2013 when his mother Catia Malaquias approached the company with the idea of including her son, who also has Down syndrome, in their marketing.

Elizabeth O'Connor-Cowley, owner of the now international brand, says she didn't hesitate to say yes.

"We tend to use the same models over a few years as we like them to become part of the Eeni family and be recognised as that, so Julius is up to his sixth shoot with us now.

"We've never been involved to draw attention to ourselves.

"He's a gorgeous little boy, his personality is infectious and he integrates well with the other kids."



Catia now runs an Australian not-for-profit project Starting with Julius that also raises awareness and promotes the inclusion of people with a disability in media and advertising.

Kat says, so far, the chance for any child to appear as a model has been largely parent-driven.

She says Brisbane model, 18-year-old Madeline Stuart, who also has Down syndrome, was so far the only Australian adult to seek and gain a successful modelling career, but it didn't happen overnight.

"Madeline is supported by a parent who would do anything in her power to give her child the best she can in life," Kat says.

"When Maddie told her mother she wanted to model, it started with a weight-loss journey of over a year and wasn't all dresses and pretty make up. It was exercise, sweat and hard work and Maddie giving it her all.

"Adults with Down syndrome like Madeline are breaking down stereotypes for kids like my son, and showing the world

what they are really capable of when inclusion is promoted within the community."

On Parker's blog, Kat noted there are now at least 14 companies in Australia featuring someone with a diagnosis in their advertising, including the company Living Dead Clothing, who were the first to feature Madeline.

"We track it via the hashtag #15in2015AUS and promote it via a campaign called Changing the Face of Beauty. And the best part is, Living Dead Clothing didn't even know about the campaign. They hired her because she is well liked, popular, has a nice Facebook following, and because she's gorgeous."

But Kat emphasises it's not all about modelling, especially after the Hawaiian onesie incident.

"My focus isn't about using kids in modelling. It's about letting kids be kids and letting them wear what they want to wear and how (kids and adults with disabilities) are severely under-represented in the media in general."

It's 11.45pm and model Madeline Stuart is taking off her make-up. Just a few hours prior, she achieved a career ambition that is the holy grail of many models – stepping on to the catwalk at New York Fashion Week.

"I walked down the runway with the boys," Madeline says, referring to South African designers Hendrik Vermeulen and Jean-Daniel Meyer-Vermeulen, who created her final-lap outfit as part of a presentation of international designers. It was a T-shirt dress with the logo "I am NYFW" printed across the back.

Her first outfit was a gold gown also by the design duo, which was swapped in at the last minute because the dress she was meant to wear wasn't "high-fashion" enough.

She also had to wear her own boots because her feet were too small to fit the heels provided. But Madeline handled the changes like a pro.

"I wasn't scared," she says, "just happy. I want to do it again next week – I want to do it again tomorrow!"

It's all in a day's work for an average model, but Madeline's only the second model in history with Down syndrome to walk at New York Fashion Week, following in the footsteps of *American Horror Story* actor Jamie Brewer in February. Madeline was also signed up for fashion week without having an agent. In fact, the Aussie teen discovered modelling only recently after her mother Rosanne took her to a local carnival, where she saw girls walking on a catwalk and decided she wanted to join them.

After getting professional headshots and posting them on a public Facebook page, both mother and daughter were amazed when it went viral.

Within weeks of the page going live, it had more than 400,000 followers, including fashion producers FTL Moda, who asked if Madeline would walk in their fashion-week showcase.

She was joined on the runway by "bionic model" Rebekah Marine, who wore a state-of-the-art prosthetic arm called the i-limb. Her other catwalk companion was American model Leslie Irby-Peoples, who's been in a wheelchair since she was involved in a car crash two years ago, which left her paralysed and killed two of her friends.

So is this a sign the fashion industry is ready to take off its rose-tinted glasses and represent different forms of beauty? Because here's the thing – we don't all have a size-zero waist and long, waifish limbs, or even four limbs at all.

With almost one in five Aussies reporting some kind of disability, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, ignoring diversity isn't just ignorant, but also poor business sense. And people are finally cottoning on.

There is mounting evidence that designers are starting to

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THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT MODELLING; IT'S ABOUT CREATING INCLUSION, STOPPING DISCRIMINATION, BREAKING DOWN WALLS OF CONFINEMENT – AND LETTING MY DAUGHTER FEEL BEAUTIFUL



Natural beauty: (Clockwise from main) Madeline Stuart; Rebekah Marine at a fitting New York Fashion Week; Kelly Cartwright and Damian Whitewood on *Dancing with the Stars*; and Madeline on the runway during New York Fashion Week.



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celebrate "otherness", working with models and ambassadors of varying age, size, gender or ability.

This year alone, couture house Celine chose 80-year-old Joan Didion as the face of its new campaign and Karl Lagerfeld shot the "bearded Beyonce", Conchita Wurst, for an editorial titled *The New Normal* for *CR Fashion Book*, the magazine founded by former *Vogue Paris* editor Carine Roitfeld.

Closer to home, cosmetics retailer Lush recently unveiled its Naked campaign (to promote that many of their products don't come in any packaging). It features four naked women, shot from behind – and there's no airbrushing.

The largest of the models (who are all Lush staff) has bright blue hair and multiple tattoos. You may roll your eyes and say "publicity stunt", but don't be too sceptical. The same accusations were made 50 years ago when Donyale Luna was the first black model to appear on a magazine cover.

Anyone who's a "first" risks being seen as a token. So how can brands embrace diversity without being seen as exploitative?

When *Dancing With The Stars* producers asked Paralympian Kelly Cartwright to join the show, the athlete (who lost her right leg above the knee due to cancer) knew she'd be joining as "the disabled contestant". But that was exactly why she accepted.

"We made my (prosthetic) leg part of the costume," Kelly says. "The wardrobe department didn't hide it, but instead they emphasised it. They loved me having my leg 'out' and probably wouldn't have asked me to join the show if they didn't know I was comfortable in my own skin."

When competing, the gold medal-winning long jumper and sprinter usually wears a covering over her prosthetic limb, but on the reality-TV show she left the mechanics uncovered.

"When I lost my leg at 15, I wore my brother's pants for the rest of Year 10 and Year 11," she says. "At the time, there was no one in

the public eye like me. If there had been, it would've helped not only me, but other kids to accept me. I used to have a bulky prosthetic – now it's sleeker, sexy. It can look cool, which does help the situation."

These days, role models are more visible. Last February, Lady Gaga's favourite designer Antonio Urzi picked British personal trainer Jack Eyers, who had his right leg amputated at the age of 16, to model his menswear collection at New York Fashion Week.

Meanwhile, the Sydney theatre company Can You See Me? produces plays in which actors with a physical disability are paired with an able-bodied actor. They're currently making a short film about "desire, passion, frustration and authenticity".

There are even entire modelling agencies devoted to "otherness". Thailand's Apple Model Management made headlines in 2014 after opening a dedicated transgender division. The agency has just announced plans to open an office in Los Angeles, and is considering allowing reality-TV cameras behind the scenes.

But should models with unique characteristics be placed in their own category, or does this contradict the message of inclusion?

"I don't think it's necessary," says talent manager Joseph Tenni from Chadwick Models, who manages transgender model Andreja Pejic. "From the beginning, Andreja was placed on both our male and female boards, but her career naturally took the direction of womenswear. We're in the business of selling beauty, (not) gender."

It's a view shared by Lauren Foster, who, in 1980, became the first transgender model to appear in an issue of *Vogue*, specifically the Mexican edition.

"It's kind of a backhanded compliment, really," says Foster, who recently launched the website Just Another Girl to empower teenagers dealing with gender identity.

"I think we should just be hired on our looks and talent. I should be competing with female models, not in a class of my own." And who can forget transgender celebrity Caitlyn (formerly

Bruce) Jenner, who unveiled her transformation on the cover of *Vanity Fair* earlier this year – the first time a transgender woman has fronted the prestigious title?

Supporters of Jenner came out in their masses, with one blogger even sharing an online template so that other people could create their own version of the iconic image (spawning the popular hashtag #MyVanityFairCover).

Arguably the safest way for ambassadors or models to control their message is by starting their own brand or launching their own platforms.

More than 1.3 million people have viewed the YouTube channel of Lucy Edwards, a beauty vlogger who's also legally blind (but puts on cat-flick eyeliner better than most experts). And although more than 21,700 people subscribe to her vlog *Yesterdays Wishes*, not all of them are visually impaired.

Her make-up tips are designed so you don't need to use a mirror to apply them. They're inspiring and practical, whether or not you share Edwards' point of difference.

This is the message that the role models of diversity wish to project. They may be, by definition, a minority, but they do have a place in the mass market.

As for Madeline, her catwalk appearance wasn't just a one-off.

She's been signed as the face of LA-based brand GlossyGirl cosmetics, making her the first model with Down syndrome to front a beauty label. She also has a bunch of jobs booked before the end of the year in the US, Milan and Sweden, and will walk at New York Fashion Week in 2016. But she still faces some hurdles.

"She can't get an agent," Rosanne says.

"People still don't seem to think she'll be around long enough to sign her, even though the bookings keep coming. But she's OK with that.

"This isn't just about modelling; it's about creating inclusion, stopping discrimination, breaking down walls of confinement – and letting my daughter feel beautiful."