



No adverts, no free gifts and definitely no Bob the Builder. Welcome to 'Okido', the magazine designed to make children brainier

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New kids on the block

You can get quite sick – if you're a parent – of buying children's magazines. They consist of endless Disney princesses and Barbies, queens of bland, with nothing much in them except adverts, ghastly computer-generated images and word searches. Boys have Spectacular Spiderman but really all they want is the FREE!!! Battle Blaster plastic gun. You can buy the ones that claim 'Learning is Fun', but it's still clear they're cashing in on television characters such as Bob the Builder. And even if children are invited to get creative ('Let's make party bags with Noddy!'), the paper is so glossy, so hostile to crayons and improvisation, that it all feels pointless.

But now we have *Okido*. Launched last year, this is a science and arts magazine for two to seven-year-olds. Published four times a year, it's educational, stylishly designed and a welcome escape from the ravaging worlds of television, consumerism and Disney.

'Why should young children have to conform to being either fairies or builders?' asks Sophie

Dauvois, 46, co-founder of *Okido* with Rachel Ortas, 48. 'And we didn't want to treat them like little consumers.' Most importantly, they've also targeted the parents. 'We want them to have a good time together, looking at the magazine, so it was very much about trying to find a style that would please both generations.'

The magic of *Okido* is the detail: its size (20 x 20cm) makes it easy for children to hold; recycled paper means that it can be marked with whatever chalk, coloured pencil or felt tip comes to hand (*Okido* encourages a lot of drawing); it's a book to keep, rather than a magazine to throw away; and it's made by artists, not tied to television. There's origami, games, stories and recipes (eg, pumpkin pancakes and, more startling, fake poo – 'hide it somewhere fun!'). Each issue has a theme, such as 'growing' or 'brain and dreaming'. And *Okido* must be the only magazine you can eat. 'We use vegetable-oil ink, so it's really eco-friendly,' says Ortas.

Children will be thrilled, too, by the characters. Messy Monster, for example. He's the reason your shoes go missing, or your room suddenly becomes a very big mess. It's not your fault! You have Messy Monster living with you! Squirrel Boy, on the other hand, charts the adventures of Albert, a boy who is

small for his age, but is transformed into a bushy-tailed superhero, when he puts on his home-made squirrel suit, fashioned from his grandmother's fur coat. Ta-da!

Children are clearly gripped by Albert, Dauvois says, because they send in photos of themselves dressed as Squirrel Boy in suits made out of coats by their mum or dad. She says they also loved the recipe for the Alien Muffins (courgette and cheese muffins decorated with cocktail stick antennae and carrot legs). But one parent wasn't so happy with Spot Foxy in the 'Seek and Locate' double page spread, in the fourth issue. It took her child one hour to find him (he's on the jam label): 'One hour less in front of the TV!' laughs Dauvois.

Okido began life in 2004, in the sitting room of Dauvois' flat in Brixton, south London. Born near Paris, to a vet father and teacher mother, she studied genetics and biology at university in Paris, went on to complete two PhDs and work for Cancer UK in London. In 1996, she switched from

research to education at the Hackney City Learning Centre, where she enthused children with such subjects as 'the beautiful world' of cell biology. But it was her son, Emil, aged seven, who was the inspiration for *Okido*. 'He made me realise the lack of magazines,' says

Dauvois, 'so we did loads of activities ourselves, cutting out and drawing. If Dauvois is the science and education, Ortas is



It's a kitchen. Can you find where the 'Squirrel Boy' is 'squirring'? Can you find these animals? Are they real or make-up?

Seek.



What colour should Suki choose to paint her first picture?

What colour would you choose? Read next issue and see Suki's adventures with the M.P.P.T.



What happens when we grow?

Put this page against the window to see all the bones of your skeleton.

Look inside your body.



'We checked that the title didn't mean something inappropriate in Japanese. It's the name of a form of yoga that makes people laugh'

the art (and cooking). Born in Spain, where her father was an artist and her mother a psychiatrist, Ortas moved to Paris at the age of three. A former lead singer for Tokow Boys, a new wave band, and Luna Parker, she moved to London in the mid-1990s, met Dauvois, and went on to study at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, where she is now artist in residence and associate lecturer – and well placed to recruit young talent, including Edmund Fung, *Okido*'s designer. 'All these young illustrators come to London to study,' she says, 'so we have this enormous pool of people who are happy to work for us because it is a chance to be published.' Picture books are a big influence on Ortas and she draws on Tove Jansson, Richard Scarry and Maurice Sendak for the retro-naivety of *Okido*'s style.

Dauvois launched the magazine with £5,000 of her own money. The name is a hybrid of 'kid' and 'okey-dokey'. 'We checked it didn't mean anything inappropriate in Japanese,' says Dauvois. 'We found out it's the name of a form of yoga that makes you laugh – so that was OK.'

The first issue took eight months to produce. Now it takes six weeks and is stocked in Borders, Foyles, Tate Modern and museum and toy shops and has 300 subscribers. Since the company is non-profit making, *Okido* is a labour of love: Ortas supports herself by selling cards and

prints, Dauvois by freelance designing and teaching. Last December, the Wellcome Trust, the medical research charity, awarded a grant to fund production costs, a website and workshops in primary schools: there is money for two more issues. 'We really want to keep a way from having ads,' says Dauvois, 'so we are looking at getting more funding through workshops.'

For *Okido* to be sold in newsagents, distributors have recommended that it expand to a conventional A4 format. This, of course, is out of the question. 'But we are thinking of stapling the magazine inside an A4 cardboard folder which can be used as a game or a cut-out,' says Dauvois.

But what of the dreaded 'free' pit? 'An origami balloon or a feather,' she laughs, 'significantly.'

Further information on okido.co.uk



Kidding around Facing page, clockwise from top left: 'Okido'; Zoe (in red); Ortas running a workshop; and with Dauvois (right). This page: Felix (top left); finding Foxy; Squirrel Boy meets some aliens; activity time – looking at a skeleton and painting