10 Great Inventions Dreamt Up By Children

BY WARREN DAHL

Kids can be incredibly creative and inventive – and some even see their big ideas develop into astounding business opportunities as well. The following ten children turned their frustrations, mistakes and strokes of luck and brilliance into commercial successes, businesses and even life-long careers. Their stories are sure to inspire anyone going into the business world, where ingenuity and imagination are often a bonus, if not a must. Kids came up with these ten great inventions, conceiving everything from earmuffs to Popsicles. Read on to discover how.

10. Abbey Fleck (Age 8) – Makin’ Bacon

Young entrepreneur Abbey Fleck was only eight years old when inspiration struck. She and her dad had just finished cooking bacon, only to discover that there weren’t any paper towels to soak up the fat. Much to Fleck’s mother’s dismay, the pair improvised and used the classified section of a newspaper instead. Suddenly, Fleck had an idea: “Why not hang the bacon up while it cooks?” Not only would this render paper towels unnecessary, but it would also make the bacon healthier.
In 1993, after Fleck and her dad had spent some time experimenting, the duo brought forth a microwave-safe dish with three upright bars on which to hang bacon on while it cooked. They patented their idea a year later and eventually struck a distribution deal with Walmart. Fleck’s grandfather took out a loan on his farm to pay for the first 100,000 dishes – but it seems to have been worth it. In 2002, Entrepreneur.com reported that the new company was earning more than $1 million in royalties annually, and Makin’ Bacon dishes are still sold at Walmart, as well as Kmart and Target.

9. Richie Stachowski (Age 10) – Water Talkie

In 1996, 11-year-old Richie Stachowski went on a trip to Hawaii with his family. “I was surfing with my dad. When we dove under, there were so many beautiful things to see. I wished we could talk underwater,” said Stachowski. After finding out that there were no inventions for this kind of sub-aquatic communication, Stachowski started researching underwater acoustics and trying out prototypes in the family pool. Eventually, he came up with the Water Talkie – a conical device with a blow valve and plastic membrane that enables swimmers to talk with one another underwater from as far as 15 feet away.

Next, Stachowski went to New Jersey and pitched his idea to Toys"R"Us. At the end of the interview, he had an order for 50,000 units. With the help of his mom, Stachowski started a company called Short Stack LLC (named in honor of his love for pancakes) and went on to invent other successful pool toys. Then in 1999, at age 13, he sold his company to Wild Planet Toys. While it has been reported that Stachowski made millions through the deal, Wild Planet said that the sale was worth less than that but would not disclose the exact amount, only divulging that it was “a substantial amount of money.”

8. George Nissen (Age 16) – Trampoline

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In 1930, at age 16, George Nissen came up with an idea that would revolutionize acrobatics: the trampoline. After seeing trapeze artists finish their routines by dropping into a safety net below, Nissen thought it would be even more exciting if they could somehow keep bouncing around – so he turned his parents’ garage into a workshop and got cracking. His invention consisted of a metal frame with canvas stretched over it, which he christened the “bouncing rig.”

While studying a business degree at the University of Iowa, Nissen continued to perfect his contraption, replacing the canvas with nylon to increase the bounce. He changed the name to “trampoline”, adding an “e” to the Spanish word for “diving board”, and registered it as a trademark. “There was no market for it because nobody has ever seen one,” said Nissen. “I had to demonstrate its worth. And that was always my forte. I like to make new things and then market them.” The late inventor spent his life traveling the world doing trampoline demonstrations and promoting both his invention and the sport. At the age of 92, he could still do a headstand.

7. K-K Gregory (Age 10) – Wristies

In 1994, 10-year-old Massachusetts native Kathryn “KK” Gregory was playing in the snow when her wrists began to hurt from the cold. Determined to find a way to keep her hands and forearms warm and dry during the winter, she invented Wristies – fuzzy “sleeves” that can be worn beneath coats and mittens. After testing them out on her Girl Scout troop, Gregory and her mother worked hard to get the invention off the ground. Gregory says that she enjoyed learning so much about business, even at that tender age. “As the inventor of Wristies, my childhood was not like most kids. My mom and I went to meetings with the patent attorney, shopped for fabrics and met with companies like Turtle Fur to write license and sale agreements,” she recalled.

In 1997, Gregory appeared on the QVC Network to promote Wristies. She was the youngest person to sell a product on the network, and the spot earned her $22,000 in sales within six minutes. Gregory went on to discover rock climbing, major in humanities at Southern New Hampshire University and travel the world. She also spent several years working as a videographer. In 2010, 16 years after inventing Wristies, she returned to business and is now the CEO of Wristies, Inc.

6. Hart Main (Age 13) – ManCan
Hart Main’s business started out with a joke. In 2010, the 13-year-old made fun of the girlie-scented candles his sister was vending at a school fundraiser and kidded that she ought to try more manly scents. However, his parents overheard him and encouraged Main to pursue the idea himself. So it was that Main used $100 he had earned from his newspaper route and gave it a go. He purchased scents and wax online and decided to make his ManCan candles in recycled soup cans, choosing aromas like Coffee, New Mitt, Bacon and Fresh Cut Grass.

Main’s imaginative product also serves a dual purpose. To empty the soup cans, Main donates their contents to soup kitchens across Ohio, before cleaning the recycled cans and using them for his candles. Two years after ManCans’ inception, business was still booming – so much so that Main rented warehouse space and employed five people part-time to cover his orders. In 2011, he shifted 25,000 ManCans.

5. Frank Epperson (Age 11) – Popsicle

On a winter’s night in 1905, the temperature in San Francisco had fallen to a record low, by chance freezing a concoction that 11-year-old Frank Epperson had left out on the porch. As the story goes, Epperson mixed soda water powder and water in a glass and then left the stirring stick in the mixture. After a night out in the cold, the mixture had frozen solid – and the accidental inventor had created the world’s first Popsicle.

Epperson didn’t do anything more with his invention until 1922, when he gave out the treat at a fireman’s ball. Everyone loved it so much that he patented his idea under the name “Eppsicle.” However, he changed the name after his children started calling the treat a “Popsicle.” Epperson sold on the rights to the Popsicle brand name to New York’s Joe Lowe Company in 1925. Three years later, Popsicle sales had topped 60 million, bringing Epperson royalties on each sale.
4. Sarah Buckel (Age 14) – Magnetic Locker Wallpaper

In 2006, Sarah Buckel had just finished the eighth grade when she dreamt up the idea for magnetic locker wallpaper. Like her peers, Buckel loved to decorate her school locker – but dreaded scraping it clean at the end of the year.

When her father became chief operating officer at MagnaCard, Buckel asked him to make magnetic wallpaper for her. He thought it was a great idea – and just what the company needed. “We were a neat little company with boring products,” he said. When he heard his daughter’s idea, he knew he’d struck gold. Buckel helped choose patterns and age-appropriate accessories that contributed to the product’s success. The magnetic locker decorations were sold at Target, Rite Aid and Staples, and within one year, Sarah Buckel’s invention had made $1 million in sales.

3. Kelly Reinhart (Age 6) – T-Pak

Whilst stuck indoors one rainy afternoon, six-year-old Kelly Reinhart’s parents challenged their daughter and her siblings to draw a picture of an invention. The prize for coming up with the best idea was getting a prototype made. Inspired by cowboy gun holsters, Reinhart drew a thigh pack that would allow kids to carry their video games around.

After getting feedback from other children, Reinhart and her parents made improvements to the design and obtained a patent in 1998. They started out selling the packs at flea markets and trade shows, but interest grew, and pretty soon they had an investor for their company T-Pak International. Reinhart’s father even became his
daughter’s full-time employee. The company’s earnings were invested in other companies, he explained, adding that if they had kept the profits, “we would have made millions.” In 2001, his industrious daughter sold the firm, at the age of nine. Then in 2002, Reinhart started her own non-profit organization to teach other kids how to become inventors.

2. Chester Greenwood (Age 15) – Earmuffs

While he was 15 years old, Chester Greenwood’s ears got painfully cold one day when he was ice skating in his hometown of Farmington, Maine. Although he tried wrapping a scarf around his head, it simply didn’t do the trick – so he set out to find a better solution to the problem. Greenwood made a wire frame and asked his grandmother to sew beaver skin pads to it, creating the world’s first earmuffs.

In 1877, at age 19, Greenwood patented his invention. He went on to perfect and manufacture the ear protectors in a local Farmington factory, eventually selling his earmuffs to soldiers during the First World War. By the time he died in 1937, he had made a veritable fortune, selling as many as 400,000 pairs in a single year. What’s more, earmuffs weren’t Greenwood’s only invention; in fact, he took out more than 100 patents in his life.

1. Cassidy Goldstein (Age 12) – Crayon Holders

At age 11, Cassidy Goldstein encountered a problem that has vexed creative kids for generations: her crayons were broken and the pieces were too small to hold onto. Still, undeterred, she searched through her arts and crafts supplies until she found a plastic tube designed to keep roses fresh during shipping. Goldstein inserted a crayon piece
into the tube and unwittingly created her first prototype. In 2002, she filed a patent for her Crayon Holders and soon struck a licensing deal with Rand International that ensured her five percent of royalties per sale. Her Crayon Holders not only make it easy to use broken crayons, but they also help kids with fine motor difficulties to hold onto the wax pastels.

In 2006, the Intellectual Property Owners Education Foundation named Goldstein Youth Inventor of the Year. According to CNBC, the invention earned Goldstein enough money to cover most of her college costs and helped to get her set up in New York City after she had graduated.