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## Dora gets a makeover in bid to keep maturing audience



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Photograph: Financial Times

JOSHUA CHAFFIN in New York

DORA THE Explorer, the wide-eyed cartoon character adored by young children around the world, is facing a makeover amid competition from older, racier rivals.

Nickelodeon, the children's television network owned by Viacom, has been discussing a redesign of some Dora-themed toys and other merchandise that would make the character appear more feminine, say people familiar with the talks.

It is also considering a group of Explorer Girls that would appeal to older children, and could take an older Dora to the big screen as early as 2010.

No decision has been made yet on either project.

Nickelodeon declined to comment on specific changes, but acknowledged that it was eager to find ways to retain Dora's pre-school fans as they mature.

"Dora is as popular as she's ever been, and now has a second generation of viewers that we would love to serve," the company said.

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Dora has helped lead Nickelodeon's march into video games, clothing and other products.

The potential changes for Dora are being considered as Nickelodeon's grip on young audiences is challenged by the Disney Channel, which has had a string of hits aimed at young and early teen audiences, including the High School Musical films and the Hannah Montana TV show.

Nancy Zwiers, chief executive of Funosophy, a children-focused marketing firm, said the challenge for Nickelodeon and similar networks was that children were migrating to more mature programming earlier.

"The younger kids enter into a franchise, the younger they leave it," she said. Hannah Montana, originally aimed at children aged eight to 12, was increasingly popular among viewers half that age, Ms Zwiers said.

In internal presentations, Nickelodeon executives have cited the Disney threat, employees say, and emphasised the need to reinvigorate franchises before signs of waning appear.

But changes to Dora could prove a delicate task. Parents have complained that products such as Bratz dolls have encouraged the sexualisation of children at earlier ages. Disney faced a firestorm of criticism this year when Miley Cyrus, the 15-year-old star of Hannah Montana, appeared in provocative photos in Vanity Fair magazine.

The backpack-clad and bilingual Dora (she speaks English and Spanish) has been hailed as a symbol of curiosity and empowerment for pre-school children - particularly girls.

"When something has been that successful for that long, there is a nerve that has been struck," Ms Zwiers said.