

## REFRAINING

# Here Comes The Baby, And an Itch To Overbuy

By HILLARY CHURA

**A**S professional couples postpone having children, they find themselves flush with cash and insecurity. Confident in their abilities at work, they nonetheless buy into the notion that the nursery must be full of educational toys and tiny cashmere sweaters before the first contraction.

Yet pediatricians and been-there-done-that parents suggest that expectant couples figure out what they really need before they give friends their Babies "R" Us wish lists. Often, the requirements in baby gear are more modest than the expectations.

"A couple of receiving blankets and shirts with snaps on the front — that's all we had for the first two weeks. Of course diapers, and me nursing," said Julie Baxter-Jordan of Glen Ridge, N.J., about her second son, Lawson, born in September. "Babies only need one toy — they don't need a gazillion. Like one rattle and one stuffed animal."

First-time parents can be especially vulnerable. Concerned about their baby's well-being yet perhaps devoid of a parental network, they lack the confidence to distinguish which items are truly necessary.

Necessity, of course, is not the only consideration for, say, grandparents who cannot resist some cute gadget or other. "I immediately started going into toy stores and buying dolls and stuffed animals," said Morty Fuhr of Manhattan, whose granddaughter, Isabella, turned 1 in August — and who sees his buying as typically indulgent.

Some purchases cannot be avoided: diapers, car seat, stroller, diaper bag, receiving blankets, bottles, bedding and a handful of outfits. But needs vary from child to child and by geography.

Some babies live by the swing; others prefer a bouncy seat. A baby monitor may be useful in a two-story house but less so in a studio apartment. Likewise, a changing table may not be the best use of space in an apartment but can be a boon in a house.

Given their impending deprivation of sleep and the time to shop, expectant parents have an understandable desire to stock the nursery in advance. But the swing that might turn out to be a sleeper's salvation in one household could turn into a clothing rack in another.

As more retailers cater to the pacifier set, parents can expect even more of a marketing deluge. Many upwardly mobile parents have grown to accept that their child needs \$1,000 cribs, \$800 strollers and \$30 booties for infants who cannot walk.

Jeni Napolitano, who recently left her teaching job to stay home with her 18-



## SUNDAY MONEY



Nell Redmond for The New York Times

Anita Blanchard says she and her husband, David Dougherty, try to be selective when buying for their son, Conor. It has been tricky.

## QUICK READ

*Many parents agree that gift cards are perhaps the most beneficial present that generous friends and relatives can bestow. On the other hand, an unscientific survey of moms suggests that items like these may be best left at the store, and why:*

- Bottle sterilizer. Dishwashers can do the job.
- Bassinet. A crib will usually do, unless baby shares a room with an older sibling.
- Four-ounce bottles. Eventually a child's appetite will grow beyond them.
- Food grinders. Blenders can suffice unless a child has a problem swallowing.
- Nursing-specific pillow. Regular pillows generally work fine.

month-old daughter in Gibsonia, Pa., near Pittsburgh, registered for some basics but also for things she knew she would need in a year or so, like baby-proofing latches and covers for electrical outlets. "In some ways, just the interaction and conversation with the child and looking at books together are better than any toy," she said.

Katie Glass of Pittsburgh said that when she was shopping before the birth of her daughter in February 2004, she walked into a Babies "R" Us store and felt overwhelmed

by the array of options in the registry.

"I found we needed sleepers, T-shirts and diapers — certainly not a \$500 crib," said Ms. Glass, whose daughter sleeps with her and her husband. "I look at all the stuff they wanted me to buy, and I'm glad I didn't because I never would have used it."

Kaori Hotta, who lives in Manhattan, said she and her husband bathed their infant son in the kitchen sink rather than a baby bathtub. When he was large enough for the big tub, he played with Chinese take-out containers, not plastic frogs, boats and ducks.

"Before he turned 6 months, Alex was happy with a cuddly animal or two, a fabric book and household objects like a wooden spoon," Ms. Hotta said. "I was in awe of the stuff all my friends had for their children and congratulated myself for being able to live without them." But the minimalist stage did not last. Soon her son was insisting on popular toys featuring Elmo from "Sesame Street" and Thomas the Tank Engine.

Anita Blanchard, a psychologist in Charlotte, N.C., said that she and her husband tried to be selective before their son was born in July 2004, but that they still ended up with items they did not need, like a wipes warmer. She asked relatives to return Baby Einstein videos because she did not want her son to watch television.

Christine Haynes, an assistant history professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, agreed that less was enough. "Babies are very nonmaterialistic," she said. "It is really a waste of money to buy them brand-new clothing or toys when so many hand-me-downs, consignment-shop and garage-sale items are available, and when they outgrow both clothes and interests so fast."

Other veteran moms, however, detect progress in children's playthings. Ms. Blan-

chard's own mother, Dot Blanchard of Greensboro, N.C., says she has seen improvements over the years brought about by technology and better understanding of child development. "They are learning more of the motor skills this time instead of just visual skills," she said, pointing to pop-up books and interactive products that go beyond "toys like Barbie and Ken."

Toy manufacturers understand why the market is booming. Lorrie Browning, general manager of infant and preschool toys for Hasbro, says adults spend \$700 million a year on toys for children 2 and younger.

"Many parents believe that it is important for their children to have access to the types of toys and aids that are tools for early learning," Ms. Browning said. "If a toy is fun, they'll play with it. The more they play, the more they learn and develop."

**B**UT fun is not always a thing to be bought. When parents ask Deborah James, a pediatrician in Cambridge, Mass., what they need to stimulate their babies, she suggests that they read to them, dance with them, sing and make faces. Classical music is good but not obligatory.

"I always recommend that parents play music that they like because they'll be hearing it over and over and over," Dr. James said. "I try to remind them that our mothers and grandmothers certainly didn't spend so much energy on such things, and we all came out pretty well."

She added: "In the effort to do the very best for their children right from the start, they are not only being taken advantage of but being set up for disappointment. If things don't turn out perfectly, they will blame themselves for not providing the right educational toy, book, video or music for their infant." □