



Boston's high-priced baby boom in its infancy

BUNDLES OF JOY



By JILL RADSKEN

The economy's groaning, the stock market's a mess — but at least some folks are toddling toward a happy future.

High-end baby gear is hot, with parents paying top dollar for upscale designer products — mohair mattresses, tricked-out play mats and \$1,000 stroller systems — and personal service in selecting them.

So hot that amid ongoing recession fears, Karina Meleger opened Baby Koo in Newton at the end of May. Soon-to-open in Brookline is the Tiny Hanger, and Vanessa Bono is scheduled to open

Little V Designs at Natick Mall this weekend.

"Upper-income younger professionals continue to spend big money on their baby," said Michael Silverstein, senior partner at Boston Consulting Group and author of the best-seller "Trading Up: The New American Luxury."

Leah LaRiccia of Waltham agrees.

"We decided to splurge on the stroller and crib," said LaRiccia, a self-employed wedding photographer who is eight months pregnant. She said she and her husband "were willing to spend extra to get the attention and save time." Recent purchases at Baby Koo included a Quinny stroller system (\$800) and area rug (\$100) for the nursery.

"The stroller is a huge investment," LaRiccia, 35, admitted. "But (Meleger) spent a ton of time with us and we're certain this is the right one for us."

Meleger said hers is "a happy business." Her customer demographic, comprised largely of expectant parents, doting grandparents and relatives, is unconcerned with costs.

"I haven't heard anyone talk about the price," she said. "With high-end, it's not the price point. It's the quality."

To that end, she has filled her shop with eco-minded products customers can't get easily get elsewhere. Among them are Natural Mat crib mattresses filled with coconut (\$399) or mohair (\$599), Kushies play mats (\$122) and Spot On Square cribs that retail for up to \$2,000.

Marie Aronsson Padilla, who is expecting a girl next month, was one of the first to snap up an \$805 Spot On crib. "I grew up in Sweden, and really like clean, simple lines," said the 31-year-old.

"There are not too many all-white cribs."

New retailers say first-time parents don't blink at spending extra for what is one of the most momentous times in their lives.

"I did really well," said Bono, who started selling her own line of embroidered accessories on a mall cart in Woburn before upgrading to her new Natick Mall shop.

Along with her embellished hats (\$15 to \$22), Bono will sell clothes for children up to age 5. She offers Beatrix backpacks for \$45 (popular with Suri Cruise) and baby dresses by Mustard Pie that range from \$60 to \$70.

"I don't want to sell generic-looking things that look like you can buy them at Target for a quarter of the price," she said. "I'm asking, 'How does it look?' so they won't feel guilty spending the money."

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LITTLE FOLKS, BIG PRICES: Beatrix backpacks (\$45), Peg-Perego Pliko Switch System stroller/carriers (\$1,000) and Mustard Pie clothes (\$60-\$75), from top, are part of Boston's burgeoning baby-goods industry.



GREAT EXPECTATIONS: Mom-to-be Marie Aronsson Padilla with her Spot On Square Echo Crib from Baby Koo in Newton.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SWAN