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Project REGISTRY

Finding the best baby gear options for you BY ▶ WENDY HUSTON

Pregnancy is one of the few times in your life when it's acceptable to tell friends and family what gifts you'd like to receive. But with so many choices in everything baby, you may not even know what you want—especially since anticipating a newborn's needs can be a bit mind-boggling.

FIRST STEPS

Melissa Moog, founder of *Isabelly Baby Concierge* in Portland, OR, suggests thinking instead about what products will fit your lifestyle. "The gear you get is really going to depend on how often you'll use it and what your needs are," Moog says. For example, sporty couples who enjoy being outdoors might want to choose a baby backpack and a jogging stroller, while couples who travel frequently would probably prefer a sling and an umbrella stroller.

Taking time to narrow the choices will make registering a fun activity rather than a chore. Elaine Farber, a newborn consultant and the author of *Baby Lists*, says researching products is the first step in creating the perfect registry. "Before you start, you should really know what you're looking for," she says. "The more knowledge you have, the better off you'll be."

Farber recommends beginning with a list divided into categories such as bath

care, baby gear, nursery furniture, and so on. A registry checklist provided by most baby retailers can help with this. Then, prioritize your list according to necessities (diapers), niceties (a bottle warmer), and accessories (nursery décor). This list will help you determine what to read up on before you hit the store, as well as what's worth registering for and what you'd rather find on your own.

THE PRACTICAL APPROACH

If you're the type who plans to register for every necessity, nicety, and accessory on your wish list, superstores such as Target, Wal-Mart, and Babies "R" Us offer the widest variety of items at the lowest prices. Their online registries usually have even more choices, which can be useful if you're on bed rest or have family far away. However, superstores are often limited when it comes to in-store selection, which can be frustrating both for friends shopping for shower gifts, and for you.

Shopping a superstore aisle-by-aisle can also be exhausting and confusing. Going this route requires plenty of up-front research. Large retailers generally feed demand, so they will likely carry the most popular, best-selling items. Compare the top brands and gear before

you go, or research several products to determine your favorite brand and find the retailer that stocks the most products from that label.

Superstores also have online tools like product reviews written by real moms and buying guides with advice for choosing items. Consult these first. "Having a reference before you walk into the store really cuts down on the time you have to spend there," Farber says.

SELECTIVE AND STYLISH

If you have limited time to spend researching and registering, or you'd prefer to receive more distinctive items as gifts and purchase the basics on your own, specialty retailers such as *Babystyle*, *Giggle*, and *Pottery Barn Kids* will better suit your registry needs. These stores stock exclusive products, designer gear, and private-label items for a more tailored baby registry.

"And at specialty stores, the research is already done for you," Moog says. They carry fewer products, so their buyers try out many items and edit the selection



I
want
to...
hear

my baby's heartbeat inside me

record
and have it for all time

send

those precious sounds to my family

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to what they consider the best. Giggle, for example, only sells items that meet at least 3 of its top 10 criteria. On its website, the company explains which criteria each product met, so you know exactly why buyers recommend a particular item. Babystyle carefully researches products and posts best-seller lists in several categories, so you can see what other moms find useful.

With a smaller inventory than department stores, specialty stores also tend to have knowledgeable sales representatives or personal shoppers available online, by phone, or in-store to answer your questions, Moog says.

Large online retailers bridge the gap between superstores and more selective options. At Amazon.com, BabyUniverse.com, and One Step Ahead (onestepahead.com), for example, you'll find items that appeal to designer tastes—but you'll have to look for them. One Step Ahead goes one step further by creating innovative products when existing items don't meet its standards.

BOUTIQUE BABY

Hip moms-to-be should also consider baby boutiques, which offer unique, high-end items that you won't find at large retailers or most specialty stores, but still offer the convenience of a registry. There are lots of local baby shops, but if you want family and friends to be able to order online, check out: babydagny.com, dimplesanddandelions.com, lullabylane.com, and pinktaffydesigns.com.

With a boutique registry, however, you may find that you need to branch out because of their smaller selection. Moog recommends registering at two stores, particularly if you don't fit into just one style. Not only will creating two registries give you more items to choose from, it might also allow you to take advantage of registry perks such as free shipping incentives, discounts for twins, and rewards programs. ▶

Wendy Huston is a freelance writer who lives in Charlotte, NC, with her husband, R.J., and son, Aidan.

WHAT'S YOUR REGISTRY STYLE?

Time to shop but don't know where to begin? Take our quiz.

1. The mother you most admire is:
 - a. Wilma Flintstone
 - b. Martha Stewart
 - c. Katie Holmes
2. Your plan for registering involves:
 - a. Shopping till you drop
 - b. The best of the best
 - c. Perusing *InStyle* magazine
3. The car seat will be in the back of your:
 - a. Minivan
 - b. BMW station wagon
 - c. Prius
4. The clothes in your closet most resemble:
 - a. The sale rack
 - b. 5th Avenue
 - c. A runway

All or mostly A's

You're a practical parent who will do whatever it takes to be prepared for baby—at a reasonable cost. Try superstores.

All or mostly B's

You don't mind spending a little more so her baby stands out in playgroup. Consider a specialty store.

All or mostly C's

You admire Hollywood's mommy elite and like to flaunt your own style. Log onto an online boutique or head to one near you.