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Crystal France watches her 5-year-old daughter, Cagnie, try on a dress and sing into a mirror at Ever After in Fresno. There's an element of playing dress up at Ever After, where children can model the clothes they want on a wooden stage swathed in fabric in front of a large mirror. "They think they're in fantasyland," France says.

Darrell Wong / The Fresno Bee

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## Haute babies

## It's easy for parents to shell out lots of money for high-end stuff in this todd

By Bethany Clough / The Fresno Bee

(Updated Monday, April 3, 2006, 8:42 AM)

An \$88 pair of designer Daisy Duke shorts for a 12-month-old, a Swarovski crystal-studded pacifier and \$1,150 washable silk bedding custom-made by a Los Angeles designer.

You can spend a lot on a baby these days. Retail spending on infants, toddlers and preschool home fur accessories hit \$8 billion last year, a 5.2% increase over 2004, according to the New York-based resea Facts.

Parents across the nation are spending more, and though it's easy to shell out lots of money for high-€

income folks are playing a big role in this toddler trend, too.

Several new stores catering to children and parents have opened in the Fresno area in the last few mo end items, like kid versions of designer jeans such as True Religion. And others carry a range of items which sells bedroom sets and sippy cups.

According to Packaged Facts, much of the increase in spending is driven by what some call "yoga mor urbanites and suburbanites with upscale tastes and willing to pay premium prices.

Yoga mommies can be seen toting their "hipster babies" or "elegant babies" wearing \$150 pint-sized d leather-lined strollers.

Although some of those extreme examples might not be for sale in Fresno, shoppers can buy high-end stores here.

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Furniture and clothing store Little Dreamer opened in November in the back of the Villaggio shopping c Nees avenues.

The store sells cribs, strollers and accessories, like designer diaper bags for dads that look like messen printed on them.

The store is drawing customers from Merced to Visalia, "people who typically would have to buy on the town or be frustrated at Babies R Us," said co-owner Danny Armenta.

Crystal France and Carrie Hernandez opened Ever After in October in the Riverview Shopping Center on Fort Washington Road near Friant Road. Next to Haute Mama Maternity, the store sells special-occasion formalwear like Easter and first Communion dresses and high-end infant gifts.

Demand for onesies that say "Bald is beautiful" and "Diva in Training" and can be embroidered with baby names is out there, France said. More and more people are moving to the central San Joaquin Valley from places like the Bay Area and Carmel and bringing their tastes with them, she said.

"We're doing well," France said. "Obviously, Fresno can afford and does want this type of retail."

Spending more on little Emily or Anthony is also happening across the nation.

near Friant Roac Maternity, the st formalwear. Darrell Wong / T

Crystal France a

Ever After in Oct Shopping Center

Parents have more disposable income, said Arun Jain, a professor and chairman of the marketing department at University at Buffalo. They're having fewer children, and that means it's easier to splurge on that personalized towel set from Nordstrom than buying towels for

Parents are having children later in life -- the average age of a first-time mom is at an all-time high of careers are often more advanced and paychecks are bigger, Jain said.

And more families have two parents working, which means two paychecks, but it has other effects too

"Parents sometimes feel guilty," he said. "They are compensating, psychologically, for not spending as children."

Retailers have figured out that parents will pay more, and are raising prices, he said.

Even Wal-Mart is selling baby clothes in organic cotton.

And like any shopping experience, there is always the allure of the cute and the funky, such as the "Pe for girls at Little Dreamer that features a green pea with a smiley face sitting on a pink throne.

But it's not all about the \$515 Dolce & Gabbana motorcycle jacket available online from Neiman Marcu

"I think a lot of people are hung up on having to have those things," said Christy Delashmutt of Kingsk with her daughter, Marci Cranford of Selma, and grandkids at USA Baby, which opened in November a and Willow avenues in Clovis.

The women hunted for bargains and found designer products at discount store Marshall's. But Cranforc \$6,000 child's oak bedroom set that included a bed frame, desk and chair.

Spending is going up, Jain said, who noted that it's not just affluent folks spending more.

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The yoga mommy spirit lives on in parents who mix value hunting with the occasional high-end purchar Packaged Facts.

These consumers are also big on nostalgia, high-quality durable items that can be used as several chilifeatures that will make their lives easier and high-fashion at bargain prices, said Packaged Facts Publis

That sentiment is part of what motivated the Little Dreamer's owners to open.

Co-owner Sandy Tacchino said she remembers thinking she could never spend \$200 on a highchair. The a \$100 Evenflo highchair and found it barely lasted through her first child.

The owners say the store focuses on quality.

"There are actually car seats that are three times [as expensive] as what we have, but it's a piece of ju

Many of the products are what Tacchino calls good investment pieces. Cribs have sides that look like h footboards and turn into full-sized beds when baby grows up.

The store sells an \$1,800 Bratt Decor dresser/changing table. The sides of the changing area can be reused as a seven-drawer dresser with a carved filigree design on the front.

"I just had a customer say, 'Wow, I could put that in my living room,' " Tacchino said.

Little Dreamer is considered a specialty shop, which means some manufacturers will offer more option don't offer at Target or Babies R Us, Tacchino said. Britax car seats can be bought at many stores in but Little Dreamer carries them with fabrics in leopard print or pink flowers, she said.

Ever After's high-end baby gift business is doing better than expected, but half the store sells special c including flower girl dresses for weddings and Christmas.

"I don't think this is the type of place where you would put your child in our clothes every day, but to I pieces," France said.

At many of the stores featuring high-end products, it's grandparents and friends, not parents, who are

And there's an element of playing dress up at Ever After, where children can model the clothes they we swathed in fabric in front of a large mirror.

"They think they're in fantasyland," France said. "Little girls come in here and they say, 'It's a princess

The reporter can be reached at bclough@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6431.



Furniture and clothing store Little Dreamer opened in November in the back of the Villaggio shopping center at Blackstone ar

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say the store focuses on high-quality merchandise. Darrell Wong / The Fresno Bee



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