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GIZMOS TO GROW ON

By CHRIS ERIKSON



Park Slope mom Gayle Forman's 17-month-old daughter, Willa, found a new leash on life, courtesy of the O'Pair system.

Photo: Elizabeth Lippman

January 14, 2006 -- IF you're the parent of a young child, the manufacturers of America want something from you - and it's not baby pictures.

Roughly \$6 billion is spent every year on baby equipment in this country, and a steady supply of new products is angling for a piece of it. But which ones work, and which are all wet?

We asked the pros - city parents - to check out some recent entries, from newfangled pacifiers to a toddler-leashing system and an emergency potty.

As it happens, parents aren't just the market for many of these products - they're also the entrepreneurs. Take the WubbaNub (\$9.95), the brainchild of Connecticut mother Carla Schneider. Schneider was trying to put her baby to sleep with a pacifier, but every time the baby nodded off the pacifier fell out, waking him up.

Sleep deprivation being the mother of invention, she sewed a stuffed animal to it. He held onto the animal, and the pacifier stayed in place. She now manufactures them, with dog, duck, frog and horse designs.

We offered a WubbaNub to Brooklyn mom Liz Pitofsky. But since she couldn't boil or otherwise sterilize it the way she did other pacifiers, Pitofsky kept it out of her son Henry's mouth.

Jenny Peters, also of Brooklyn, didn't find it useful, either. It wasn't the kind of pacifier

her 3-month-old daughter, Lailah, likes, and the nipple can't be switched. But, she allows, "It's a cute idea."

Better, she says, is the Floor Nanny (\$56.99), a pillow with a recessed center in which you can set down an infant when you need your hands free.

"It works really well with her," she says. "I can position her in all kinds of ways that make her comfortable, and I can put a play mat above it, and she'll recline in comfort and look at all the toys."

One big drawback: You can't wash the Floor Nanny, and a removable cover costs \$29 more.

Less favored was the Bibfeeder (\$21.99), a bib with an angled pillow designed to prop up a bottle in the baby's mouth so he can feed unassisted. Neither Peters nor Pitofsky said they would use one.

"I'm wary of anything that takes the parent out of the equation," Peters says.

Peters also tested the Keep-it-Kleen pacifier (\$5.95), another mom-designed product. This one has two plastic wings designed to snap shut when it drops out of the baby's mouth, thus keeping the nipple from touching the floor. Watching carefully, though, Peters determined the nipple sometimes hit the floor before the wings snapped shut. Her verdict: "False confidence."

Potty Mitts (\$5.95 for six pairs) are another product designed for maximum sanitation. They're disposable gloves designed to protect your child's hand from the pathogens lurking in public bathrooms. Which begs the question of what is easier: packing a pair of these and putting them on your kid's hands, of simply washing his hands on the way out?

Where bathroom innovation is concerned, we're more partial to the Travel John Jr. (\$5.95).

Designed for kids who have to go when there's no urinal in sight, it's a small plastic pouch containing absorbent material, with a plastic collar at its mouth that either a girl or boy could urinate into.

As someone who once had his son pee into a bucket on a subway platform, I can testify that there's an occasional need for such a product. (Though, despite what the box says, I don't think camping is one of them.)

Just as kids need to pee at inopportune times, so might they need to be punished. Which brings us to Toddler Timeout (\$29.95), a 4-foot-square quilted mat that folds up into a pouch, with a removable digital timer, for "timeouts" outside the home.

Manhattan mother Marjorie Ingalls, whose 4-year-old daughter got many a timeout in her wilder years, figured it could be a marginally worthy item.

"I could see how it could be useful, if you're totally stuck," she concedes.

Not only that, she says, but for a toddler on a tear, watching the timer "could be like kiddie biofeedback ... It could help get them out of their crazed head space."

Being a parent in New York City means occasionally taking cab rides with your kids. As you may have noticed, cabs don't come with safety seats.

Consider the Ride Safer Travel Vest (\$99.95), designed as an alternative to the booster seat. It's a vest with a handful of buckles and straps that correctly position a seatbelt over a child's small frame.

For an opinion on this one, we went to Alisa Baer, an NYU medical student and child car-safety expert who runs the Web site thecarseatlady.com. Baer gave it the thumbs up.

"I think it's a great idea," she says. "It's been shown to perform very well, and it's more compact and portable than even the smallest backless booster seat."

The disadvantage, she says, is that the child has to be wearing it before getting in the car, which some might not like - even though the vest's makers assert, somewhat optimistically, that kids will find it "cool."

Another car-related item is the Cold Seat (\$49.95), further evidence that, for some people, modern parenting involves going all out to spare their offspring any possibility of discomfort.

It's a car-seat cover with gel packs that you keep in the freezer until it's time to travel. While you're in the supermarket, say, you cover the seat with it, thus ameliorating your "fear of entering an uncovered vehicle in the soaring temperatures," and protecting your child "from burns or other heat-related injuries."

The maker promises this will have a "dramatic and immediate impact on the way you conduct your daily routine."

Another product of dubious value is the Walk-o-Long (\$24.95), a harness with handles designed, its dad-inventor says, to "create a sense of safety so kids can learn to walk," sparing them the torment of toddlers past who suffered the occasional spill. (Or who never learned to walk at all.)

Park Slope mom Gayle Forman, who tried it on her 17-month-old, Willa, was unimpressed.

"I can't see it except for a very paranoid parent, or for a child who's really unsteady on his or her feet," she says. Not only that, but Willa "threw a fit" when strapped into it.

But Forman was won over by the **O'Pair** (\$23.95), a leashing system that tethers together a pair of fanny packs: a plain black one for the adult and one with a furry animal for the child.

The idea is to give kids freedom to walk on their own yet keep them from straying too far, while avoiding something that looks like it ought to be attached to a dog collar.

It worked great with her daughter, who's extra-active and resists hand-holding, Forman says.

"When we're going out for little walk, it's perfect. I don't have to chase after her or be anxious if I let her go for a second." She's gotten only positive comments about it - "people think it's adorable," she said - and her daughter loves it.

In fact, she loves it a little too much. "She insists on sleeping with the fanny pack," she says.

chris.erikson@nypost.com