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baby & toddler

Baby Gear Must-haves vs. Lust-haves

What Baby Items Do You Really Need?

By Katherine Bontrager

In olden days, when you had a baby there were few choices in gear – a standard stroller, a few crocheted blankets and some glass bottles. But not anymore. Today it's all about limitless choices in colors, materials, designs and more. You can purchase a stroller for \$30 – or \$800. How is a new parent to know what's worth the hype and extra expense and what's not? Where should you splurge and where can you feel OK cutting back? We asked parents and experts alike to discern what's a must-have and what's a lust-have.

The Must-haves

For **Alex McCord**, a mother of two and star of Bravo TV's *The Real Housewives of New York*, a sound investment is a really, really good stroller. "We chose well and have had only one stroller over five years," she says. "In that time we've replaced almost every part on it, so buy one that disassembles completely and for which parts are sold separately. For cold and snowy climates, get one with two small wheels and two big pneumatic tires that has the ability to have either set of wheels in the front. Another great feature is the ability to use an infant car seat with a stroller wheelbase so that you can easily move a sleeping child in and out of a car without disturbing them."

But be careful – a great stroller doesn't necessarily mean an expensive one. Do your homework and find out what wears well and what corresponds with your specific needs.



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"There are so many great options out there right now for strollers and travel systems," says Jennifer Gurley, a mom and marketing manager for PoshTots, Inc., a company that's earned a reputation as the "designer of choice" for Hollywood moms. "All boast amazing bells and whistles designed to make parents' lives easier." Gurley's criteria for strollers are the following:

- Lightweight.
- Easy to fold and store.
- Infant and car seat compatible.
- Easy to steer with one hand.

"How many times did I push my bag in the stroller while I held my child?!" Gurley says. "My point is, more expensive doesn't equal better. My \$25 umbrella-style stroller is my all-time best baby purchase ever."

As a mother, parenting coach and the founder and director of a Montessori preschool in San Francisco, Calif., Lonna Corder has seen her fair share of important – and forgettable – baby gear. "Car seats and strollers should be top-of-the-line products, never secondhand or discounted," she says. Another good purchase for do-it-yourselfers is a quality baby food mill, which can make homemade baby food easy to prepare. "No expense should be spared when it comes to your baby's food," she says.

Appropriately along those lines is Gurley's absolute must-have. "Don't scrimp on a good electric breast pump," she says. "My first child couldn't nurse, but I was determined to provide him with breastfed baby benefits, so I pumped. I had registered for a handheld manual pump (naively never dreaming I'd need it, so why ask for more?), and quickly realized it was simply not going to work. A friend lent me her top-of-the-line pump and now I owe her my life. When my second child was born, I didn't hesitate – I went right out and bought the best pump I could find. It makes life so much easier to get the job done right, and quickly too!"

Another place where McCord won't cut corners is on baby wipes. This experienced mom swears by reading labels carefully and always, always getting the alcohol-free, lotion-infused wipes. "In our experience, every one of the few times we switched to a brand full of 'stuff' (because there was nothing else available), the boys promptly broke out in rashes," she says. "The natural ones do tend to be a little more expensive but it is worth it."



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Gurley found that a good glider was worth its weight in gold. "It's well worth the investment!" she says. "PoshTots.com has a huge selection of gliders that employ the same rocking mechanism as you find on a porch glider, and they're super comfy. The chair-and-a-half gliders are my favorite, because there's plenty of room to snuggle, even during those independent toddler years when they'd rather sit next to you, or when you're pregnant with another baby. There's plenty of room for all." Two other items Gurley found indispensable were a good baby carrier and a Moses basket. "I prefer a good carrier, as it gives an older baby a little more freedom to wiggle and look around," she says. "It's another great way to keep Baby close. I wore mine on outings, but also to vacuum, wash dishes, do laundry, etc. And finally, a Moses basket is so helpful. Baby can nap close by while giving you the freedom to play with your other children, do housework or just put your feet up while you catch up on episodes of the *Real Housewives*."

The Lust-haves

McCord advises parents not to break the bank on sheets and duvet covers. "They'll be washed twice a week at least, and even more during the transition out of diapers," she says. "If you hit a great sale, buy some cute ones, but good old department store cotton sheets are sturdy and less expensive. We bought several sets in bright solid colors so that mixing and matching looks cool when you can't find matching pillow cases five minutes before bedtime!"

And while McCord fully admits to dressing her kids in fun fashions, she says she's learned that expensive pants are not the way to go. "If you want to splurge, go for top-of-the-line sweaters and shirts, but stick with \$10 to \$20 jeans," she says. "Why? Holes in the knees from crawling and climbing, stains from diaper/potty training accidents, finger paint, food, etc. Things that stain always seem to fall in laps when the shirt is covered by a bib or smock."

One piece of gear that you needn't bother with is a wipe warmer, McCord says. Another item you can pass on are Velcro swaddlers, which she found not to be worth the price. "And forget the fancy changing pads," she says. "We received way too many receiving blankets, so we just kept an extra one of those in the diaper bag, which is more comfortable for the baby anyway." "And resist the temptation of diaper pails," McCord says. "Prior to Fran's birth, both Simon and I had a horror of the house smelling like diapers and remembered being at other parents' houses with smelly pails. We decided to wrap every diaper in either a deodorized diaper sack (with our first child) or plastic grocery bag (a great way to recycle). We emptied the trash regularly, and never had a problem." Corder agrees. "All diapering products are a waste of money," she says. "Babies do not need a wipe warmer or a sealed diaper holder."



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Talk to Other Parents

Some of the best advice you'll get on what's a must-have and a lust-have will come from experienced moms in your circle of family and friends. "Talk to parents," Gurley says. "When I was expecting my first child, my cousin, who'd recently had her first baby, sent me a box of her mommy-tested must-haves. She was spot-on about everything in that box, and it had everything – which nail clippers were easiest, the best burp cloths, the best mucous bulb (seriously!), an amazing blanket that was just the right weight, pacifier clips, etc. It gave me a little boost of confidence."

But realize that what works for these moms – and every other mom you meet – is as individual as their child. To that extent, Corder recommends new parents spend the first few months learning the individual needs of their baby. "For example, a very comfortable and expensive rocker will be wasted on a baby who has to be soothed while mom stands and bounces, but a pricey baby swing could keep Mommy from going crazy," she says. "And crib white-noise machines can be an excellent investment if babies respond to low tones, but an overhead fan can work just as well."

It's advice Gurley agrees with wholeheartedly. She recommends parents sit tight and wait, which can be difficult when all you want to do is nest and prepare for your little one's big arrival. "But you don't need everything right now," she says. "As I found out with the breast pump, it's impossible to anticipate all of you and your baby's needs. We had a swing that lived in our attic for four years until my third child was born. He was the only one that liked it, and even then, only for a few short, blessed weeks."