

Rocking the Baby Products Cradle

By LEAH HENNEN

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WHEN Jessica Iclisoy squinted at the label on the shampoo she was about to slather for the first time on her newborn's tender scalp, she was dismayed to find a long list of indecipherable chemical ingredients staring back at her. "I freaked out a little bit," she said. So she set about creating something of her own.



Penny Gentieu/Babystock.com

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Lars Klove for The New York Times

Ms. Iclisoy, of Beverly Hills, Calif., had no background in chemistry; her previous job was as a manager and buyer for a clothing store. But she researched ingredients at the library, called a local laboratory with questions and started mixing chemical-free concoctions in her kitchen. Fifteen years later she is president of California Baby, a leading brand of so-called natural skin care products for children.

Stocked everywhere from health-food co-ops to drugstore.com, the line is relatively expensive: a four-ounce jar of baby moisturizer retails for \$14. But in the past two years sales have more than doubled. As for the laboratory she once phoned - whose chemists scoffed at the idea of lotions and cleansers formulated without harsh chemicals - she now owns it.

Ms. Iclisoy is just one of dozens of merchants, from kitchen-sink startups to cosmetics giants, who have entered the baby beauty business, many with products described as "natural," "pure," "organic" or "chemical free."

Among them: Estée Lauder, which last month delivered Grassroots Baby, a line of organic cleansers and lotions; Kiehl's (owned by Estée Lauder), which last year unveiled an updated baby line; Bobbi Brown Cosmetics, which just reintroduced Bobbi Brown Baby (featuring \$18 diaper balm and \$95 gift packs); and Earth's Best, a leader in the organic baby food market, which in May rolled out a line of shampoos, lotions, diaper creams and sunblocks. Even supermarket stalwarts Johnson's Baby and Huggies now make washes and lotions with botanical ingredients like lavender and chamomile.

The new children's skin care offerings often cost three to four times what you would pay for the familiar pink bottle of Baby Magic or Johnson's Baby Lotion.

But does the higher price mean they are really better for a baby's skin? Many physicians suspect they are not. "I don't know that these products are any safer or healthier for kids," said Amy Paller, the chairwoman of dermatology at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago. "And with herbals, there just hasn't been a lot of clinical research on safety or efficacy, especially in babies."

That has not kept parents from paying the premium. Not including sales rung up at Wal-Mart and department stores, "children's personal care" products are a \$300-million-a-year business, with sales up 65 percent since 1999, according to the Mintel International Group, a market research firm that tracks the cosmetics category. And people in the industry say the pricier grooming products are the ones with the fastest growing sales.

"There is a shift toward more expensive status brands, with their perceived exclusivity," said Carrie Bonner, a manager at Kline & Company, a market research firm. "Parents also like the idea of using more 'natural' products, even if that word might not mean a whole lot."

No stranger to the "natural baby" aisle is Ki Rubin, a 30-year-old video maker in Oakland, Calif. "I'm a total sucker for these products," Ms. Rubin said, adding that she has dropped upward of \$300 on baby beauty goods for her daughter, Zoey, 2. "When your kids are little, you want to do everything right. So of course I'm going to go for skin care products that are positioned as being totally natural and organic."

On the surface that strategy makes sense. In the first month of life alone, the average newborn is bathed four times a week and exposed to 48 different ingredients in baby washes, shampoos and lotions, according to a survey done by researchers in the department of internal medicine at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Ill. And doctors say that caution is called for when parents choose which products to use, because a young child's skin is much thinner than an adult's.

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(Page 2 of 2)

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"Plus the barrier function isn't as good, and children's skin-to-body mass ratio is much higher, so you have more product absorption," said Nanette Silverberg, director of pediatric dermatology at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in Manhattan. A child's immature liver and kidneys may also have trouble processing any chemicals that are absorbed through the skin.

Scrutinize the labels on many brands of mass-marketed baby shampoos, cleansers and lotions, and you are likely to find ingredients like sodium laurel sulfate, diethanolamine, triethanolamine, PEG-150 distearate, dimethylphthalate and methylparaben. The chemical names may startle parents, but manufacturers and pediatricians say clinical research and years of everyday use have demonstrated that these ingredients are generally safe.

The Food and Drug Administration requires that cosmetics companies ensure their products are safe. And although the agency does not review lotions and cleansers before they go on the market, it "does not have compelling evidence that any of these ingredients pose a safety risk," said Kimberly Rawlings, a spokeswoman for the agency.

Still, dermatologists point out that some common additives can irritate skin, causing redness or stinging or allergic reactions like rashes or hives, especially in children with eczema or other skin conditions. Among the most likely to trouble tender skin: parabens, used as preservatives in many lotions and cleansers; boric acid (listed as sodium borate on labels), used as an emulsifier in some diaper rash ointments and baby skin creams; sodium laurel sulfate and its chemical cousin, sodium laureth sulfate, foaming agents in soaps and shampoos, including many formulated for children.

Diethanolamine, an emulsifier found in some baby oils and lotions, has been linked in studies to cancer in laboratory animals. But whether it can cause any harm in the small concentrations found in baby products is a different question. The F.D.A., according to a policy statement, is "in the process of carefully evaluating" what it calls "the real risk, if any, to consumers."

Anxious parents may be attracted to "natural" skin care products because of the chemicals they lack. But what about the ingredients they contain? Some children's shampoos and lotions smell like a field of flowers or sound good enough to eat because they are made with herbals, mango butter, sweet almond oil, honey, buttermilk, apricot

kernel oil or pink grapefruit, among many other delicious things. And new products containing everything from green tea to algae extract claim to offer healing, soothing and protective qualities that are hard for parents to resist. Yet scientific evidence to back up these claims is often scant.

"These ingredients sound sexy," Dr. Paller said. "But the fact is that, applied topically, they don't necessarily do anything."

One thing they may do, however, is cause allergic reactions. In 2003 researchers at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago examined 293 pediatric skin preparations and found that one in four contained common allergenic foods like milk, soy, wheat, eggs and tree nuts. They warned that children's lotions, cleansers and other skin care formulations could be to blame for adverse reactions in children with food allergies.

Plant extracts and essential oils, found in products whose labels include words like "botanical" or "aromatherapy," can also trigger allergies, said Albert Yan, the chief of pediatric dermatology at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. So parents who spring for these potions may simply be substituting one set of suspected irritants for another. If a child is prone to rashes or eczema, Dr. Yan said, it is a good idea to test new lotions or shampoos on a patch of skin before slathering him head to toe.

That is not to suggest that all parents should avoid using baby lotions and cleansers made with natural ingredients. "If you want to spend \$13 on a bottle of organic baby wash, that's your prerogative," said Dr. Paller of Northwestern. "The fact is, most products are reasonably well-tolerated by most kids."

Even so, pediatric dermatologists say it is wise to look for toiletries without a lot of fragrance or coloring, especially if a child has eczema, as nearly one in five children do, or other skin problems. Some of the mildest formulations can actually be found in the adult skin care aisle. Doctors commonly recommend Dove, Aquaphor, Cetaphil or Eucerin lotions and cleansers, all of which cost around \$6, or plain old Vaseline, which costs less than \$4.

"Petroleum jelly is a great moisturizer," Dr. Paller said. "It's not elegant, it doesn't have a nice baby smell or any special ingredients, but it works."

What did she use to keep her own babies, now teenagers, clean? "Warm water and a washcloth, mostly," she said. "My motto is, keep it simple."

1. ALMOND OIL Bobbi Brown's entry into the baby business includes body balm, \$25 for 8.5 ounces.

2. LAVENDER From Grassroots, Together Time moisturizer and massage oil, \$8.50 for

5 ounces.

3. VANILLA Kiehl's hair (if any) and body wash, \$18.50 for 6.8 ounces.

4. FRUIT SALAD From California Baby, aromatherapy bubble bath with ingredients straight from the produce aisle, \$3.49 for 2 ounces.

5. PROPYLENE GLYCOL The granddaddy of them all, from Johnson & Johnson, about \$2.99 for 9 ounces.

6. ECHINACEA Organic diaper cream by Erbaviva is also made of lavender and chamomile oils. About \$19 for 4.2 ounces.