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## Gently used - and gentle on the budget

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Two years into parenthood, you look around your house and wonder when it transformed into a shrine to Fisher-Price and Gymboree.

Toys billow out of baskets. Stacks of children's books threaten to slide off shelves. Outgrown clothes sit in old diaper boxes tucked into the back of closets.

If you feel ready now to let go of the memories, you can recoup some of the money you spent on this stash.

As consumers enter a new age of frugality amid a recession, parents are increasingly turning to consignment merchants, resale stores and online marketplaces to realize the revenue potential of their children's castoffs and to save money by buying used merchandise.



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As twins Julia and Grace Hines outgrow their clothes, their mother, Gina, saves the items for a consignment sale through Just Between Friends.

"That old joke about cash in your closets – it's true," said Gina Hines, the mother of 3-year-old twin girls.

She suggests that parents check out the twice-yearly sales organized by Just Between Friends. Don't let the name fool you. These events draw so many buyers and sellers that the company books convention centers and fairgrounds to house them.

"People have inhibitions about secondhand clothes and toys," said Hines, who has been a Just Between Friends devotee for about two years. "But kids don't care where it came from."

This sale is one alternative. Saren Stamp recommends another: eBay.

Stamp, who lives in Antelope with her 2-year-old son, Ethan, sells gently used children's items at her Boys Are Trouble Boutique on eBay. She got the idea from her mother, who ran a similar business so she could stay home while Stamp was in high school.

Many other parents prefer to keep their feet planted solidly in the brick-and-mortar world of consignment stores such as Once Upon a Child. This children's resale franchise pays

sellers cash for items to the tune of about 30 percent to 70 percent of what the store sells them for.

Nicole Collins, a mother of four, visited the Once Upon a Child store in Citrus Heights during a recent lunch break. Although Collins went there in search of a good deal on a playpen for her 6-month-old daughter, she ended up being more impressed by the prices on baby clothes.

"I'm going to get a couple of things," she said, clutching two pairs of tiny jeans to take home to Elk Grove.

Families today are spending money only on necessities, driving down the amount they are spending on children, said Pepperdine University business professor Ed Fredericks.

Children eat up a big share of the family income. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that an average couple earning between \$45,800 and \$77,100 a year would spend \$204,060 on one child before he or she reached age 18.

Hines, Collins, Stamp and other savvy parents are chipping away at these expenditures.

Hines has already begun preparing the clothes her 3-year-old twin girls had outgrown for the upcoming Just Between Friends sale in August. Held in Sacramento and Roseville, the sales offer consignors 65 percent of the profit on sold items, with 5 percent more for parents who volunteer with the sale.

Hines washes and line-dries the clothes, then hangs them in a spare closet in her West Sacramento home. It takes her six to eight hours to get the clothes and toys ready for the four-day sale, which includes the time it takes to enter the information into an online database, price the items and affix tags.

As Hines recently readied a mound of pristine dresses, sweaters and pants for tagging, twins Grace and Julia played with a kids tool bench and toy drills that Hines had scored at a previous JBF sale.

"I buy an overwhelming majority of their stuff at JBF," said Hines, who said she made \$1,500 at the spring-summer JBF sales last month. "Very rarely will I buy stuff new."

That bargain prowess affords Grace and Julia top-of-the-line clothes and toys for a fraction of the retail price. The identical turquoise and pink-flowered Gymboree sundresses her daughters sported last week both were JBF finds. One cost \$5, while the other, which came with a matching headband, was \$7.50. Brand-new summer dresses from the children's retailer sell for around \$35.

Just Between Friends got its start about 10 years ago when some mothers in Tulsa, Okla., had a clothes swap in their home, said Shannon Carter, who owns the company's Sacramento and Roseville franchises.

The event's popularity prompted subsequent sales and franchise success. Now, the original JBF sale is held in the 66,000-square-foot Tulsa Convention Center and last year netted more than \$1 million in sales, she said.

In Sacramento, more than 3,000 mothers shopped the three-day sale last month, resulting in \$150,000 in sales, Carter said. About 500 parents and grandparents provided the sales items, although not everything sells. The average consignor received a check two weeks later for about \$370.

"It's an awesome opportunity to make some money for your family," Carter said. "You paid a lot for this stuff."

Business is on the upswing for Once Upon a Child, which has four locations in Sacramento as well as stores in Vacaville and Modesto, says Susan Baustian, director for the Minneapolis-based Once Upon a Child.

"Parents are just trying to find a value and just trying to provide for their family the best way they possibly can," Carter said.

Stamp, 23, says that in addition to running her eBay boutique, she shops at resale stores. It saves money and "makes me feel green." She buys blankets, toys, shoes and clothes for her son, Ethan.

"If (Ethan) doesn't like something, I don't feel like I've wasted money," she said.

Stamp says her eBay paydays aren't huge. The online auction service takes 12 percent of the selling price and PayPal also gets a share, but she makes enough money to be able to stay home with her son.

"It's easy right now," she said. "I usually try to work between my son's naps, and my house is very cluttered."

Selling children's items online is a growing trend, says Karen Bard, eBay's pop culture expert. In the span between February and May, she said, sellers listed more than 13,000 used items for infants and toddlers, amounting to \$87,000 in total sales.

No matter what the method, reselling children's items is worth the effort, both for the money you can recoup and the deals you can get, parents and resale business owners agreed.

But the adults aren't the only ones who know that secondhand merchandise can be a first-rate find.

When the Hines twins were asked about their favorite toys, Grace grabbed her used veterinarian kit while Julia raced into the living room, her sundress creating a turquoise and pink blur.

"Uni the Unicorn!" Julia proudly proclaimed as she dragged the rocking unicorn into the kitchen.

And with that, the 3-year-old climbed onto her beloved secondhand toy and began to rock.

Call The Bee's Niesha Lofing, (916) 321-1270.