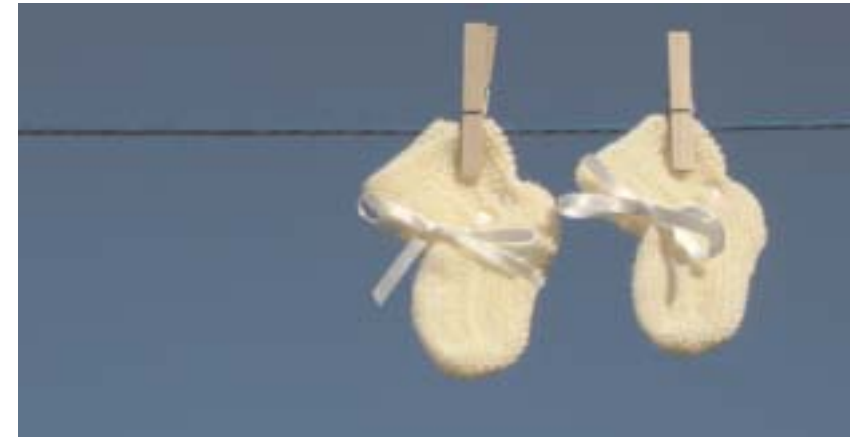


NURSERY RHYMES & REASON



Left: the author and her two sons in their convertible nursery. When you paint, "be willing to expand your interpretation of pink and blue," she says.



Smart Ways to Save When the Stork Comes

By Shelley Franchini

Baby booties, cuddly blankets, diapers, toys. Like all first-time moms, from the moment I knew I was going to have my first baby, I made lists and lists of things that I had to buy, borrow or steal. (Well, maybe not steal.) But more than anything, my thoughts centered around one thing:

Decorating the nursery. That project was complicated by the fact that I'm from that camp of expectant parents who prefer to be surprised—who want the hours of labor to end with the revelation: "It's a"

Still, ideas for adorning our baby's nursery went off like firecrackers of inspiration in my head. I searched the Internet and found a myriad of choices for creating a unisex nursery. (I knew I was going to have a boy,

but I kept that secret to myself.) Designs ranged from traditional baby chicks and bunnies, delicate Beatrix Potter illustrations and nursery-rhyme characters to modern cartoon personalities, like Bob the Builder, with his blue-collar charm, conveying a plucky, positive outlook on the world: Can we fix it? Yes we can!

I conferred with other moms (including my own) and was warned that I might spend countless hours hand-painting or stenciling a backyard scene with cute crawly critters only to find that they scare my toddler. So what did I do to solve my nursery dilemma? First, I went on the perfect imaginary nursery shopping spree.

After a good night's sleep under my goose-down duvet and 403-count Egyptian cotton sheets, I head downstairs to our breakfast nook, my ostrich-feathered, high-

heeled slippers clicking across my spotless marble floors. My husband, a dead ringer for Will Smith, asks me to sit down, then drops a white linen napkin in my lap and serves me an oversized plate of fluffy hot-cakes dripping with real dairy butter and a breakfast burrito stuffed with scrambled eggs, hot peppers, chili sauce and enough melting mozzarella cheese to make a grown woman weep. A freshly brewed cup of decaf and a weekend newspaper follow. As soon as I'm dressed in my Saturday-afternoon best (and, by the way, my hair has never looked better), we set off for a day of shopping. Miraculously, I find a choice parking space, and my Fresh Prince and I interlock our wedded hands and skip down the aisles of our favorite store with a limitless supply of cash and credit . . .

Then I awoke from the land of NOT, got a realistic grip on my expectations, made a list, budgeted for what I needed, and went shopping with my other best pal, my mom. The world may be full of Oprah-watching fathers-to-be who love to shop for nursery doo-dads, but I am not married to one of them. I am married to one who is supportive, though. He has found the key to marital bliss: If I'm happy, he's happy.

Out of the Mouths of Babes' Moms

What will your nursery be to you, and how can you save money creating it? Before you spend a dime, seek the wisdom of the veteran moms you know. They have learned through first-hand experience, and they're always willing to pass on their knowledge, offer their support, and take advantage of the chance to coo about their own little darlings.

Ask yourself: what purposes will your

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nursery serve? It may sound obvious, but consider this: Many parents spend a good chunk of money creating a perfect post-womb space for their newborn bundle, only to find that they can't bear to have their newest team member in a room that seems miles away in the middle of the night. During the first few months, you will be getting up. A lot. With multiple feedings, diaper changes and cuddly sessions, you might want to consider holding off making a big investment in decorating a separate room. A

crib and changing table in the corner of your own bedroom may be a better deal until your baby is six months or so.

At that point, consider the cost advantages of a convertible-style nursery—

a space that will change as your newborn does. The term "convertible nursery" was born out of the capability of some styles of baby furniture to transform themselves into toddler-friendly pieces. By picking furniture and a nursery theme or style that your babe can grow into, you buy yourself time to catch your breath before you have to decorate all over again.

Furnishing Your Convertible Nursery

Here's my advice for creating a comfortable and economical convertible nursery, based on my experience creating one that's stood me in good stead through two children, Rory and Dylan, now aged 2 and 1.

Photo by istockphoto.com/David Freund

The Crib: Your baby's bed is typically the most expensive piece of furniture you will have to purchase. You may choose to purchase a standard crib, or you could borrow one from a friend. But a convertible crib is a great investment. Some toddlers' beds can even morph into teen beds.

Convertible cribs come in all price ranges. If you have a bundle to spend on your bundle of love, check out the Bi-Plane Aviator Sleigh Crib (priced at \$2,454, plus shipping) at www.poshtots.com. This aviator-themed sleigh bed is perfect for any future Howard Hughes or Amelia Earhart, and, like most Poshtots furniture, it is handcrafted.

Coming down to earth, price-wise, visit www.Sears.com, where you'll find a range of convertible cribs. The Luxemburg by Delta is a solid wood crib that adjusts to five different rail-height positions and converts to a toddler's bed. It's priced at a very reasonable \$179.99. Always

remember to read the fine print, when shopping online. Most cribs don't come with the mattress or bedding that is shown in photos, and shipping and handling is nearly always extra.

The Dresser: Whether you buy new or used, always buy adult-sized drawers. If you're a DIY kind of gal, scour your local newspapers for yard sales, estate sales, thrift shops and the like. A dark and dingy 1970's piece can be transformed, lickety-split, with a coat of glossy white paint and some cool hardware. Check out the endless possibilities at www.restorationhardware.com. My favorites are their '30s-style glass knobs, which come in clear, white and two shades of blue and green. At \$5.95, they couldn't be more stylish.

Or take a look at the cute ceramic knobs—giraffes and hippos, oh, my!—available at www.onefinebaby.com. At \$22 a piece, however, you could end up spending upwards of \$200 in hardware upgrading your

thrift-store find. Solution? Buy two cute knobs for the top two drawers and less decorative—and less expensive—knobs for the lower pulls. Necessity? The mother of invention!

The Layette: Layette is a French word meaning equipment and clothes for your newborn. Before I had my children, I had never changed a diaper. Not one. If you're in the same boat, relax. By the end of your baby's first week, you will have changed close to one hundred diapers and will probably have what I call "diaper carpal tunnel" syndrome. A well-stocked layette includes diapers, diaper creams, potions, salves and balms, baby wipes, breast-feeding equipment, bottles, blankets, burp clothes, and tiny little socks that will go missing just like your big ones do once they enter your dryer. All of these things take up space. And they all need to be instantly available when you need them.

My solution is a three-drawer plastic toy box (typically priced at around \$30). Costco often stocks them in primary colors. You can count on Ikea

(www.ikea.com), too, for your baby-décor needs. The TROFAST storage unit comes with six deep plastic storage bins and costs only \$87.

The Décor: Now for the truly fun part, decorating. If you've ever seen an episode of TLC's *Trading Spaces*, you already know that the most exciting moment is when the paint color is revealed. Do yourself a favor—and avoid expensive mistakes—by trying one of the many useful online virtual painters, to see how a color will look on the walls of a room of your choosing. The grand dame is the "Personal Color Viewer" at www.benjaminmoore.com, which even allows you to import a digital image of your own room, then experiment by changing the color of the paint on its walls.

If you can't fight the urge to paint gen-

A nursery is a special place. A special time. A state of mind. Hang on to every moment. The good, the bad, and the everything in between.

BABY (SHOP) TALK: Grown-Up Savings on Kid Stuff



CLOTHING: Buy big—never the size your children currently are. A general rule of thumb is that you should purchase clothes three months ahead of your child's age. Clothing of better quality, though more expensive, will be more likely to survive multiple washings.

For outerwear, choose one-piece outfits in comfortable, durable materials like fleece. Visit a local consignment shop, where you can often buy outerwear for a fraction of the cost. Look for clothing that opens at the bottom with easy snaps or Velcro. But test those snaps before you shell out the cash; constantly refastening over and over again is frustrating. Cotton T-shirts and turtlenecks are great underclothing, provided they have side snaps on the neck. The Sears brand Baby Boots is designed that way and easily slips on and off baby's head.

TOYS: Create a handmade toy by sewing a fabric bag with crackled cellophane inside. It's easy, inexpensive and charmingly personal. Baby will love to grasp the soft fabric and listen to the curious sounds. Check your local newspapers for "Kid Swap Meets," which are often held in the spring and offer a way for parents to recycle—no, not their kids—gently used toys.

WIPES & DIPES: To stretch diaper usage, include in your layette both expensive, name-brand disposables and less expensive store-brand disposables. Use the less expensive brands during the day, when baby will have your constant attention and care, and the pricier brands at night, so baby will keep drier longer, giving you both a better night's sleep. To save even more money, make your own baby wipes: Buy Bounty paper towels, cut each sheet in half, and store in an old wipes container. Add two capfuls of baby wash and a cup and a half of water. Refill as needed. This formula makes inexpensive wipes that won't irritate your baby's skin. To deal with those messier diaper changes, buy an inexpensive plastic spray bottle, fill with water and a few tablespoons of baby wash, such as Johnson's or Baby Dove. A few squirts to baby's bottom before wiping will clean the mess better and faster than wipes alone and reduce diaper rash.

der-specific colors like traditional pinks and blues, at least be willing to expand your interpretation of pink and blue. If pink is your hue, try Paris Romance, Toasted Mauve, Secret Garden or Confetti. If you are searching for that perfect shade of everyone's favorite color, blue, then try Waterfall, Pool Blue, Little Boy Blue or Blue Jean.

Accessorize your nursery with personal items. I was lucky enough to have knitted booties, handmade stuffed toys and quilted blankets made for my sons by family members, and they provide homey touches in our nursery, which is now doing double duty for a baby and a toddler. Each boy has his

own area, with high shelving (away from curious hands).

These cherished heirloom pieces won't be on display forever. Your children will outgrow them, just as they outgrow their furniture, so agree to let the nursery convert when everyone's ready. But don't rush! A nursery is a special place. A special time. A state of mind. Hang on to every moment. The good, the bad, and the everything in between. □

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