

CLOTHES FOR BABIES, TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS

Really expensive imported kids' clothes that cost more than yours do, are a waste of time and money as children grow out of them so quickly. Many of them are ludicrously impractical and more for the sort of person who likes to dress a child as a little adult, which is always kind of creepy. They are often made of child-unfriendly fabrics such as leather and require drycleaning, hand washing or an on-call staff of cashmere-laundering valets.

Some catalogues for children's clothes look more like very dubious kiddie-porn, what with their lipstick and bikini tops for people who won't have breasts for another twelve years. I don't know why I'm mentioning this, it's just that it gives me the whim-whams. Let's have a look at some better options. Please.

saving money on kids' clothes

Generally most of the expensive sturdy brands of clothes (not the frou-frou brands) are better made and longer lasting, although price is no guarantee. Some designers now are making clothes with let-downable hems and arms so they last longer.

Sensible gear such as singlets, undies, T-shirts and skivvies are best bought at cheap department stores, especially during sales. Boys' departments are often cheaper for no good reason except that a plain singlet is cheaper than one with a fairy on it. You can buy a girl the cheaper boys' trousers since at this age they don't know the difference. Discount outlets and op-shops are great sources, but do keep an eye out for shoddy clothes – 'cheap' means expensive if they fall apart in the second wash.

You can shop at sales if you plan ahead, buy clothes out of season and squirrel away bargains for use in a year or so, although you need to predict what size your child will be next summer or winter. I bought a size 9 dress on sale for my daughter when she was 6 months old but I think I was technically demented at the time from lack of sleep – in fact I can't think what I was doing out of the house.

It's always useful to hook up with someone whose kids are a little older than yours so you can get their hand-me-downs, and to find someone to hand yours on to, unless you're saving them for another baby. Once kids get to the toddler and preschool stage they're a lot harder on clothes than babies are and don't grow out of them so quickly, so there'll probably be fewer inherited or handed on, or they'll look a little shabbier than the baby hand-me-downs.

Parenting magazines, especially freebies, and websites often have ads for clothes-swapping shops and sales outlets for kids' stuff. These can yield interesting bargains.

Being able to sew really comes in handy for children's clothes. Fabric shops always have details of nearby sewing classes.

baby clothes

Try to grab baby clothes from op-shops, friends or at sales. You need lots of each item because, although babies don't run around getting dirty, they can have quite surprisingly explosive poos and vomits and you can't always be at the washing machine. Don't dress babies in unnatural fabrics: a polyester-cotton blend and polar fleece are as unnatural as you want to go. Nylon is definitely a no-no: partly for comfort and 'breathability' reasons – nylon can be hot and itchy – but also because children's

clothes must be as fire-resistant as possible. Make sure all baby clothes are machine washable and, unless you live in perpetual sunshine, will go in the dryer. Clothes with stretch and a soft feel are best, which is why 'broken in' second-hand clothes are great – it's such a strange new world outside the womb that most babies are extremely disgruntled by being changed.

Babies need six to ten singlets. Some come in wool, but this can irritate a baby's skin and lead to overheating even in cold areas as babies are usually inside in nasty weather. You'll need cotton for the tropics and summer.

Tiny babies could have three or four cotton nighties so it's easier to change their nappies without fuss. After a couple of weeks to a month those little all-in-one suits are good, but make sure they're always a bit bigger than your baby as babies grow quickly.

Expensive flouncy outfits should be left to the relatives and friends to buy: they're such a hassle for babies at this age, who throw up on them anyway.

You'll need three to ten bibs, depending on how dribbly your baby is – once babies start to teethe they seem to dribble a lot. Towelling bibs are good; plastic-backed ones can become a bit humid underneath. Tea towels and cloth nappies make excellent substitutes (and are good for wiping up spills as well).

Winter or southern babies will need warm clothes and a warm polar fleece or woolly hat, extra layers and bootees. But it's safe to say that in Australia, even if your child will never need a good warm coat, they'll definitely need a sunhat (and baby sunscreen lotion) wherever they live. Get a sunhat that really does shade the face and neck. Babies sometimes become fascinated by a hat on their head. If everyone else in the group wears one, and the baby is given something else interesting to distract them, hat-staying-on may be more achievable. Ideally go for hats such as soft cotton ones without nylon-sewn labels so they're not itchy or uncomfortable.

Shoes should be fitted at a children's shoe shop or department store. Kids don't need a proper pair until they're walking steadily outside, and even then they should go barefooted often for their development.

You'll work out the rest as you go along.

BABIES' CLOTHING SIZES

0000 = preemie baby.

000 = newborn.

00 = to 6 months.

0 = 6 months to 1 year, supermodels.

• BLAST FROM THE PAST •

'Mothers should never expose the tender infant's neck and arms. Thousands of children are annually sacrificed by this foolish and cruel habit alone.'

Dr Frederick Wilson Pitcairn (or, as I call him, Dr Bonkers), probably 1905, USA.

toddler & preschooler clothes

Clothes get dirty now that the kid is on the move so you'll need lots of tough outfits. They should be easy to get out of for using the loo and so that the child can start to dress themselves. Long skirts or dresses on a girl will restrict her ability to learn physical skills such as climbing ladders or running.

It's nearly always good to buy the next size up so your kid's clothes will be comfy and not too tight, and they can wear them a bit longer.

Kids' clothing sizes

Children's sizes are related to ages from 1 to 14, although some clothes such as rain-coats, and all clothes from some brands, are just labelled 'S', 'M' and 'L' for small, medium and large – you'll have to ask a salesperson for help. And some European clothes have sizes such as '116'. Ask for help or move to Milan, darling.

Brands vary a lot with their sizes: some are generous and some are not. A kid aged 2 may be into a 'Size 3' regardless of whether the kid is small, average or big for their age.

You can store sales and op-shop bargains in bags or boxes marked 'Size 2', 'Size 3' and so on.

Shoes

Kids shoes should be fitted by a qualified assistant in a shoe shop or department store if possible. Ask which shoes are best. When kids are learning to walk, no shoes or non-slip socks are best, if practical, so bub can feel the ground underneath. Shoe sizes bear no relation to age, but match sock sizes. Many kids have one foot that's up to half or one size bigger than the other: make sure they know this is normal and not a big deal, and just buy the size that fits the larger foot.



more info on buying kids' clothes

When you buy stuff from internet second-hand stores and online baby shops, it's at your own risk. Sizes will vary between brands. Make sure you can return or exchange goods, as sizes are often hard to pick when you can't get a kid to try them on. It's easier in most cases to pick an Australian online store, as it will be simpler to get customer service and return things, but sometimes you can get overseas stuff from the northern hemisphere on sale as our seasons are opposite. Make sure you're on a secure website of a reputable company and it's safe to hand over your credit card details.

australianbabyguide.com.au

Australian Baby Guide edited by Penny Attiwill

This independent directory has heaps of listings for clothing shops, brands and online options. Click on 'Resources', then 'Children's clothing and footwear'.