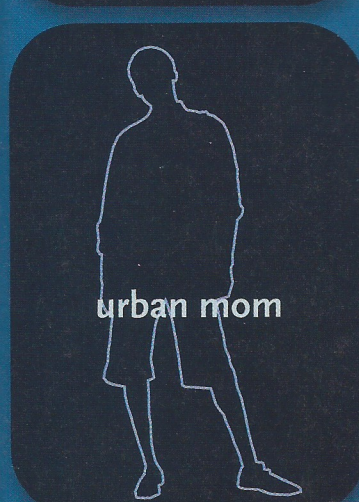


elegant mom



urban mom

MATCH GAME

Which mom style goes with which baby? (For answers, turn the page.)

fashion statement

A mom who had one hand-me-downer of a childhood wardrobe decodes her obsession with kids' clothes.

by Jennifer Baumgardner

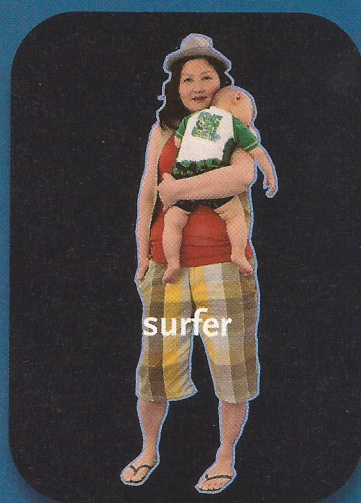
One day as I decided between two pairs of jeans at Sweet William, a local boutique, my son's father looked at one of the price tags and yelled, "Are you kidding me?" This may seem like a natural response, given the price a woman's asked to pay these days for premium denim. But I wasn't shopping for me. I was considering Flora and Henri jeans for my 3-year-old son, Skuli.

As a single mother (the daddy is my ex, with whom I co-parent), I struggle to piece together enough cash to pay the mortgage, babysitter, and grocery bills. So why the heck am I outfitting my son like one of the Beckham boys?

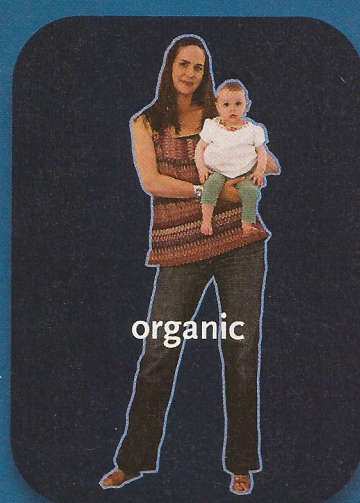
Well, it goes back, as so many things do, to my own childhood. I am the second of three girls, born 19 months after my sister Andrea, and as such was the unwilling wearer of many a hand-me-down. My parents, raised working class in 1950s North Dakota, were unfazed when I claimed my clothes were ill-fitting, hopelessly out of style, or "floods." Anything clean and hole free was deemed "perfectly good." My mother still rolls her eyes at my litany of fashion humiliations. "Everyone said you looked *adorable*," she insists. ►



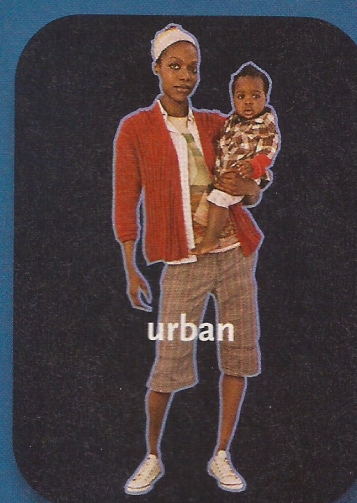
chic



surfer



organic



urban

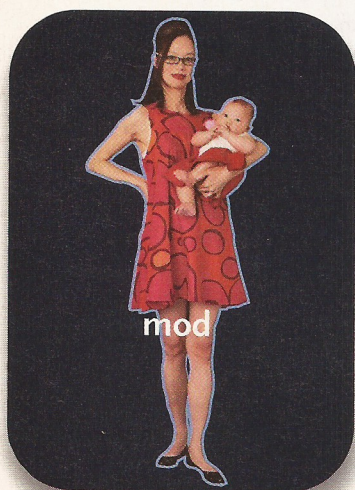
My mother was a repurposer of Scarlett O'Hara proportions: When I was about 8, she decided to make me a dress out of her green velvet palazzo pants. The resulting garment was long, narrow, glitzy—like something Olive Oyl might have worn to the prom. I secretly made a cut in it, hoping she'd have to just buy me a new dress from a real store. Alas, she pronounced the cut a slit, as if the dress were an evening gown, and sent me out in it anyway. On another memorable occasion, I was forced to go to a restaurant wearing a masculine-tailored seersucker suit we got from somewhere, shamefaced and feeling like a boy—the kind of dorky boy who wears suits to Chi-Chi's. And the list goes on.

"Honestly, Jennifer," my mother says, "you didn't get the jeans you wanted, but your father and I spent our money on things that really *mattered*." True, my parents worked hard to put my father through medical school, and then they worked hard to put three daughters through college. That investment served me far better than acid-washed Guess overalls would have. But it really didn't feel that way back then. In fact, the way my parents pragmatically (and necessarily) downplayed fashion left me a bit obsessed with it.

I'm a proud feminist. I've written four books on feminism and lecture about issues that affect women. I want equal pay for equal work, and the freedom to spend that paycheck however I want—

even on shoes I don't need. Of course I don't want to be reduced to my appearance, but I can't shake the neurotic conviction that what I wear matters, even if it just boosts my mood or my confidence. And while I'm certainly not impeccably turned out at all times, I love clothes the way I once loved outfitting my Barbies. So the second I found out I was pregnant, I began plotting Skuli's outfits—and my revenge against a childhood spent in pillared sweaters.

At first I gawped at the insane amounts of money one can pay for this stuff, but I have to admit that all too quickly, I got used to it. Now my child's togs are not only much nicer than my childhood wardrobe, they're nicer than my adult wardrobe. He has spiffy ▶▶



mod

clothes circuit

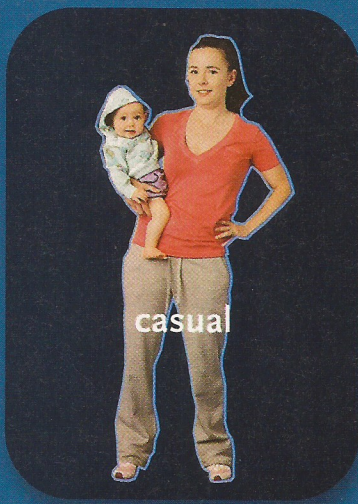
My favorite sites for shopping virtually (if not virtuously): I love Sons + Daughters (sonsanddaughtersinc.com) for their unexpected gifts (sorted by age, from newborn to 8) and beautifully made European clothes. Daily Candy Kids (dailycandy.com/kids) is a well-curated roundup of the latest and greatest. Mini Boden (bodenusa.com) is more reasonably priced and has charming skater/surfer-style stuff.

other fun places:

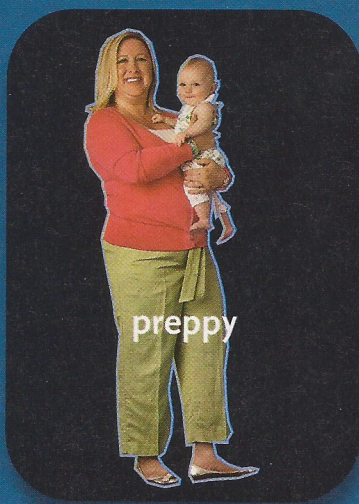
unebebe.com (witty T-shirts)
spunkysprout.com (modern)

modandmini.com (retro mod)
tinymcsmall.com (classic/preppy)
supermarketqh.com (cool hippie)

giggle.com (eclectic)
www.nordickids.co.uk (Eurostyle)
crazy8.com (sporty)



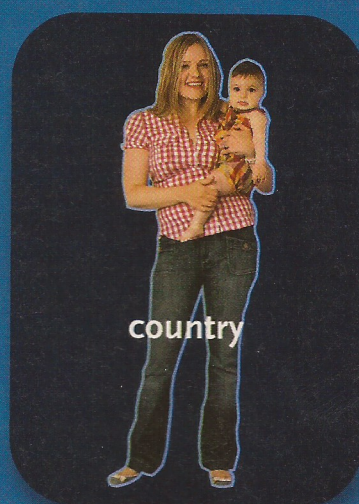
casual



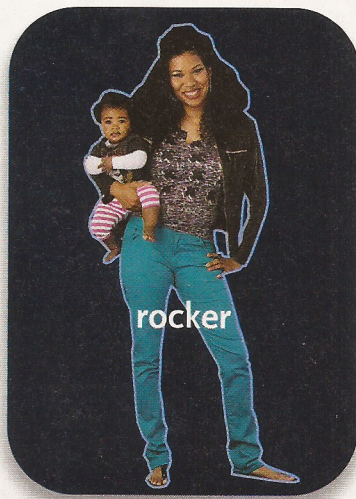
preppy



elegant

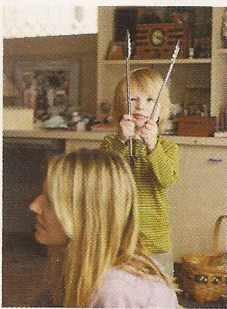


country



rocker

Jennifer Baumgardner with Skuli, who thinks no outfit is complete without barbecue tongs.



Italian sneakers, a silk tie embroidered with bulldogs that you could imagine on Barack Obama, a newsboy cap that makes him look like Brad Pitt, boxer briefs. My grandmother said in shock when she saw Skuli at 1 month old in Levi's cords and a striped crewneck: "He's dressed like a little man!" But back to the question I know you're asking: Why do I waste money dolling him up when A) as a toddler he doesn't care and B) he'll grow out of it in half an hour or so?

All parents are exercising their values when they dress their kids—the values they were raised with or the values they've adopted. My parents believed in hard work,

making the most of every opportunity, and making opportunities where they didn't exist. As the beneficiary of those beliefs, I hope to pass them on to Skuli. But for my parents and for me, the choices we've made with our kids have been as much a product of when we grew up as how.

My mother and father were the youngest kids in their Depression-mentality families, and hand-me-downs meant they had something to wear. My father got shoes that were floppily big and wore them until he couldn't cram his feet in them anymore. To this day he has hammertoes as a result. By the time my parents raised their kids in the 1970s, consumerism was far-reaching, but so was the women's movement, which meant my mother was aware there might be a better use for her time than starching pinafores. More than that, she suspected that playing into my appearance-related neuroses wasn't so *Free to Be . . . You and Me*.

Dressing our children is about more than our values, though (or at least I like to think so, lest my values resemble Dina Lohan's).

We're also dressing our children to cover them—not just to cover their little bodies, but maybe to cover our fears about their vulnerabilities. I wonder if I, as a single mother, want to dress Skuli beautifully to demonstrate that *we are doing just fine, thank you very much*. His clothing is my armor.

Regardless of what I do, I'm no doubt sowing the seeds of some future rebellion. After all, my parents set out to raise a socially conscious person, and I think (I hope) they did—but one who felt Gloria Vanderbilt jeans would have transformed fifth grade. (And they totally *would* have.) Just the other day, I asked Skuli what he wanted to wear to school. "Nothing," he said. "I want to be naked." If I turned things over to him, I'm sure he'd be wearing his *Pirates of the Caribbean* weapons belt and nothing else. I worried to my mother about where these sartorial tendencies might lead—a nudist colony? Will he grow up to be like Matthew McConaughey, always stripped down to his bike shorts? "Oh, Jenny," my mother said, "kids just don't appreciate what their parents do for them, do they?"