

In the baby land of bunnies, ducks and pink and blue toile, slowly a new breed of contemporary design has emerged in response to a need for forward-thinking products. Some juvenile-product manufacturers have teamed with designers: Maclaren partnered with Kate Spade, Lulu Guinness and Phillippe Starck for ultra-chic strollers; Bugaboo partnered with Dutch artist Bas Kosters; and Fleurville recently joined with industrial designer Yves Behar to create the futuristic Calla high chair, a sculptural flute-shaped chair. Such initiatives resulted from the demand for high design in a market that was a bit behind the times. "I feel like a lot of my customers have their own developed aesthetic and sense of

products that work well within the home, both from a utility and an aesthetic standpoint. "We think design has been sort of static, and that the marketing platforms that people choose are more safety-based and anti-germ than design and sculptural," said Steve Granville, co-owner of San Rafael, Calif.-based Fleurville. The company is expanding beyond diaper bags in its signature bright stripes and whimsical patterns. "What we set out to do is to create more modern, clean, stylized products—and more than that, something with better function," stated Rebecca Finell, design principal of Boon. The Tempe, Ariz.-based company made a splash with the introduction of the Frog Pod, a tub toy scoop and storage sys-

tem, and has since grown to include other much-needed items. "We create products to solve issues, instead of just creating products, that would fit into the modern, contemporary home," she said.

Downey developed Uvumi as an alternative to "electronics that look like they belong in a nursing home, not a nursery," he said. "People really like to see niche products: As much as it's a toy, it's also a tool."

While some designers like Downey are bringing revolutionary new product to the market, others are giving a much-needed update to classic gear. Skip Hop recently



Stokke's Tripp Trapp.



Fleurville's Calla chair.

**“You don't have to revolutionize a product, but you can make it better.”**

—Michael Diamant, Skip Hop.

said. Stokke updated its classic Tripp Trapp with a baby rail, as the lifespan of the chair extends and parents want to use it sooner in a child's life. "It has changed how parents look at what is best for their child," Stokke said. "It's a worldwide phenomenon."

Items with multiple lives perform well at retail. "We get excited when we see things like Ducduc and NettoCollection because they 'get' it," said Chaffee Braithwaite, who along with her mother Nancy Braithwaite runs Atlanta-based B Braithwaite. "They design cribs that turn into toddler beds; you're really investing in the furniture just like you do for the rest of your house." These companies have struck a balance between function and design. Stokke's round crib, that converts into a toddler bed, also receives praises from Braithwaite. "We sell so many; it has a nice balance between wood and contemporary shape," she added.

Oliver P. Kuhr, executive vice president of Koelnmesse, which manages September's Kind + Jugend show in Cologne, Germany, highlighted the multiple uses of children's



A scene from last year's Kind + Jugend show.

introduced a modern-looking circular bottle drying rack. "The bottle dryer hasn't changed much in 20 years, but kitchens then and today are nothing alike," Diamant said. "You don't have to revolutionize a product but you can make it better." Finell of Boon named color and fun, simple forms as emerging details within design. "I see what my kids are bombarded with—cartoons, commercials, characters everywhere—they need a haven where they can relax without being bombarded. That is why everything is cleaning up," she said.

Certain key products, like the high chair, are getting a makeover. Fleurville's Calla chair debuted during the ICFE show in New York in May. At JPMA, Boon launched the Flair pedestal highchair, with a sleek seamless seat and pedestal base with a pneumatic lift. "There are a lot of people doing exciting things with the high chair; it was definitely due for a redesign," Diamant



# GREAT Expectations

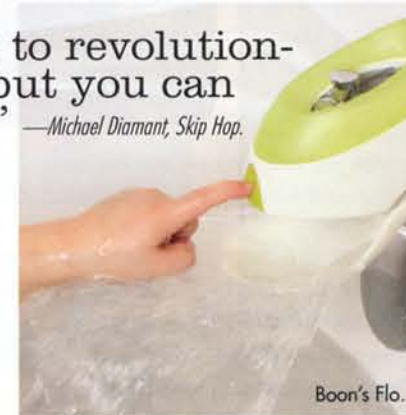
High design, simplicity and function usher in the future of juvenile-product innovations. By Brooke Showell

design, and this is what they are looking for for their kids," said retailer Jenn LaBelle of Romp in Brooklyn, NY. "It is more design minded."

Michael Diamant and his wife Ellen are co-owners of New York-based Skip Hop. These Gen X parents started out with a functional, unisex diaper bag and have expanded into a line of home accessories. "There are a fair number of companies founded by parents who grew up with a different understanding of design and a greater expectation of how things should work," Michael Diamant said. Adding expectation and design equals a greater level of aesthetic, quality and function within juvenile products. "When we think of good design, it is something that serves a purpose to include the quality of life," said Geir Stokke, president and CEO of Kennesaw, Ga.-based Stokke USA, who suggested a formula of clear, credible and simple, with an element of fashion. "It is not only the visual aspect or the material aspect; it is a combination."

This change toward better, purposeful design is due to a need for contemporary

furniture. "Many of the new products that are being unveiled this year have a modular structure that makes them suitable for various uses. As a result, they can be set up not only in children's bedrooms but in other rooms as well, as practical or decorative



Boon's Flo.

items," he said. The transition from a child's room to other parts of the home is a big selling point for contemporary families. "We want people to buy a product and use it in the whole house, not just in a kid's space," said Melissa Pfeiffer, owner of Oakland, Calif. showroom and e-tail site Modernseed. For consumers who want their child's gear to fit into the décor of their house, design will always be first and foremost. "I like extremely high build quality and finishes and extremely simple design," stated designer David Netto of NettoCollection. "I like to be the guy who is not afraid to do too little, and have the beauty come through in the quality of construction."

Social responsibility also plays a part in modern design. "We require all of our suppliers to sign a code of ethics," Stokke said. "Many companies are doing what we are doing in terms of making sure you are a good corporate citizen. More parents are concerned about buying products that they know are good and responsible." It's an effort that is appreciated at the retail level. "It's a selling point for the products I have if they are made of recycled product and wood that is responsibly harvested," LaBelle of Romp said. "I would like to see more toys and kids' products that are designed with good label practice."

Such innovations require the expertise of a forward-thinking retailer. "We are not afraid to have a discussion with the parent," Stokke said of his company's Scandinavian-minded products. "The retailer is clearly an important element. It's a slow process in a

way; word of mouth is built by people being happy with what they have." For example, Stokke's revolutionary stroller, Xplory, requires education on the part of the retailer and the consumer. "It's a different approach of how to buy a stroller," Stokke said of the pram's multi-stage benefits. "It is not by any means an overnight success; long-lasting, good successes are not overnight, they are done the old-fashioned way—you earn it."

Consumers are becoming more educated through research and comparison-shopping, both in the store and on the Internet. "Modernseed is not mass market and we know that, but it's a lifestyle that anyone can achieve," Pfeiffer said. "We're not just about peddling our wares but educating [customers] about why we like this lifestyle." Some successful shops, Granville mentioned, feature "stores within stores, where retail becomes a set of small, distinct environments that help filter information," he said.

On the juvenile-product wish list, affordable high design is key. "Right now a significant number of products are very expensive," Diamant said. A big step in the market, he noted, will be to "find equivalent design level and quality, but make it more available to the masses—not necessarily mass market, but still have it accessible to a great number of people." Chaffee Braithwaite pointed out the need for good design beyond the contemporary. "There are very few people who are doing classic or country in a new way," she said. "I would love for someone to look at how we can make classic new again. Not everyone wants contemporary."

Clearly there is still demand for manufacturers to reinvent the wheel; to develop new products based on old formulas. "I wish there were more companies that are doing what Boon is doing—taking a new look at old categories," Braithwaite said. "It relates to their everyday life, which is what moms need." But for now, the future of juvenile-product design looks bright. "We see that some lines are creating things that are of great quality but at a better price," Braithwaite said. Diamant added: "I think you'll see a lot more emphasis on functionality, design and adult-looking products—more options for the parent."

"Even for mass manufacturers, everybody is getting a bit of the contemporary bug," Finell said. "Design is no longer an afterthought; color and simplicity are starting to show up more. It's very refreshing." ●