

Trip to the baby store makes Dad anxious

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For some people, the harsh reality of parenting doesn't set in until Junior reaches high school. For others, it comes much sooner.

As I stepped through the automatic doors with my pregnant wife, I realized I was woefully unprepared for our first trip to the baby store. After an hour under the fluorescent lights, I was feeling lightheaded from the dizzying array of baby gear. I began sweating and searching furtively for the exit. Did we take a left at the strollers or the Jumperoos? What is a Jumperoo, anyway?

I was still getting used to the idea that we would be responsible for a living, breathing baby in a few months. I always had wanted to have a child in an abstract "that would be nice someday" way, but now there was a miniature human being inside my wife who would be joining us soon. If that wasn't enough to blow my mind, we had to figure out how to stock a nursery, actually just a corner of our bedroom in our small rowhouse in Northwest Washington.

Maybe it was a lost cause, trying to prepare for this initiation ritual of parenthood. In a society built on consumerism, we start with the smallest among us and work our way up. The advertising message from stores with names like Buy Buy Baby is relentless. Nervous first-time parents can be scared into buying almost anything with a few words: "Don't you want what's best for your baby?" Who's going to say no?

Must resist . . . hide the credit cards. The baby industrial complex is sucking me down the rabbit hole. We wandered farther into the cavernous store, past the nipple covers and rectal thermometers. Then we turned a corner and stumbled into a brave new world of baby technology. It was time for shock and awe. Mostly shock, less awe.

Baby monitors used to be crackly walkie-talkies, without the walkie feature on one end or the talkie feature on the other. Now they have morphed into full-fledged surveillance systems with remote-controlled video cameras, 900 MHz radio receivers and night vision. Night vision? Yeah, night vision. Big Brother, or Big Mother, can keep a watchful eye and feel the serene sense of calm that comes from knowing that the baby isn't planning a revolution in the nursery.

We wound our way farther into the bowels of the store before reaching the Shangri-La of baby gear. The car seats and strollers were lined up in long rows, offering comfort, safety and peace of mind, all at an unaffordable price. We looked at car seats with articulating armrests, cup holders, side-impact crash panels, and "comfort-sense memory foam." Our baby might not remember what happened five minutes ago, but the memory foam will. That truly is a comfort.

On the next aisle, we found strollers that looked like Humvees. There were gigantic shape-shifting transformers, double-deckers to carry the whole brood and off-road models for the sporty types. Even Jeep has crossed over into baby gear, with the humongous Liberty Limited Urban Terrain Stroller, which offers an iPod-ready sound system and three air-filled tires. So if I pop a tire, do I call AAA?

Parents have somehow managed to raise babies for thousands of years without buying all of this stuff. After a few trips to the baby store and a couple baby showers, we have the basics covered. We have survived without the night vision or the memory foam.

Our son, Soren, is 5 months old now, and he is a joy, our sweet little boy who isn't abstract anymore. He's sitting here smiling at me right now. But if we hit some bumps in the road, I have an emergency backup plan. I'll dust off the credit card and buy that urban terrain stroller. It's big enough to carry my wife and the baby in case our car breaks down.

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