



Record-Eagle/Jim Boyer

Jennifer Hughes of Traverse City is creating her own line of one-piece children's outfits.

Woman designs one-piece outfits for small children

■ A lawyer has filed an application for a patent on the concept

By **BILL ECHLIN**
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TRAVERSE CITY — While wrestling her daughter Phoebe into a cute little baby outfit one day, Jennifer Hughes had a thought: "Why can't someone make nice-looking clothes for infants that are as easy to manage as one-piece sleepers?"

She'll soon learn if anyone else thinks that's as good an idea as she does. She's bringing a whole new line of infant-ware to market in the next several months.

Hughes had forgotten about the whole thing until she had daughter Lilli 14 months ago. The idea flashed back into her mind and this time she decided to do something about it.

Hughes said that with separates, shirts often become untucked and ride up or pieces can become twisted as a baby is moved around, messing up the look of the outfit and causing the baby to get cranky.

An Internet search found nobody selling what she had in mind: one-piece suits that looked like little shirt-pants combos or top-skirt outfits with a bit of style.

She sat down and sketched out eight designs, sewed up samples, tested them for wear and tear and laundry durability, and locked down design-



and-fabric combinations that worked best.

The clothes either open down the front, or the entire shoulder and sleeve open up, making it easy to dress a baby from the bottom up.

That's for babies who don't like clothes pulled over their heads.

Snaps in the crotch make for easy diaper changes. She named the various styles Chips and Cheese, Poo-Poo Platter, Club House and Go-Cart for

boys 0-24 months, and Day at the Beach, Picnic, Tea Party and Mackinac Island for girls 0-24 months.

Attorney Kathleen Shannon set up a limited liability company for Hughes, Liloobe LLC — combining the names of Hughes' girls. A patent lawyer has filed an application for a patent on the concept of styled one-piece clothes for infants.

Hughes, again using the

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Woman develops one-piece items for babies to wear

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Internet, found an infantware manufacturer in Hong Kong that looked promising. She sent off her prototypes and got back manufactured versions that met her needs for fabric and sewing quality. And they hit her price target.

"I had it set in my mind even before I designed the samples and sent them out that \$20 would be the suggested retail price," Hughes said. "I don't want this to be something you only find in chi-chi boutiques where sets go for \$60. I wanted it to be geared to stores like Target and regional department stores."

The prices she got back from Hong Kong would allow that \$20 price target with a decent margin for her, she said. The only daunting part of the deal was orders had to be a minimum of 50,000 units each.

"Big retailers don't even blink at that, so that's another reason why we're working on that market," Hughes said. "Eventually we'll get things set up so we can work with smaller stores, but we can't handle small orders at this point." Next was the job of selling

the product to retailers, so she took out ads in trade publications, put an ad on a fashion-oriented industry Web site, and put up her own Web site: www.stylease.com.

She designed the now-trade-marked logo using script lettering for the "Styl" part and lettered baby blocks for the "ease" ending.

In September, after the trades ads ran, her Web site recorded 40,000 visits and the pace continues at 1,000 visits a day.

"The unsolicited feedback from those who visit the site has been very encouraging," she said. "All kinds of people are wanting to buy stuff and we keep having to tell them we're not ready to sell yet."

Once the orders start to come in from retailers, with a 500,000-unit manufacturing run scheduled, Hughes will run ads in parent-oriented magazines. A friend in advertising is trying to line up appearances on "Today" and "The Early Show" among others.

So far the entire project has been supported by investments from friends and family and a home-equity loan, which paid for the first run of production and the trades ads.



Record-Eagle/Jim Bovin
Jennifer Hughes, of Traverse City, holds up some of the one-piece children's outfits she is designing and marketing.

Hughes, 36, is doing all this while her husband, animation director Rob Hughes, has been working on a big project in Germany for the last six months.

That means work in her in-home studio has been limited mostly to after 8 p.m., when the girls are in bed. She also has a small office above the DeYoung's store in downtown Tra-

verse City, next to her husband's.

Hughes, a native of Lake Tahoe, Calif., attended the California Institute for the Arts aiming to be an actor. She was diverted into private investigator work for four years before getting a job in animation production with Steven Spielberg's Amblin studio.

She went on to work on com-

mercials, which is when she met her husband, a director, and then on to Disney, where she did production work on the Pocahontas and Tarzan films. She stayed there until Phoebe arrived, which is when the couple decided to move to Traverse City to raise their kids.

"All the apparel buyers are moaning about how there's nothing new to excite buyers,

so I think my timing is perfect," Hughes said. "This is a whole new product. A friend from high school, a designer in San Francisco who previously worked for Gymboree, got excited about this and is working on our fall designs.

"That's been how this whole thing has gone, people turning up just when I needed them," she said.