

FLAIR family

Departing middle school
for new cast of characters • D3

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Tyke clothes only look like separates

One-piece outfits for infants make dressing less of a chore

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What's a mother to do when cute separates make changing a chore and dressing her child a challenge?

Snaps down the back for someone who spends months on her back. Buttons that rarely fit through button holes. Pants without snaps.

Impractical.

And don't even get her started on the twisting that separates do on a squirmy infant discovering himself and his surroundings.

Such frustrations turned Jennifer Hughes into a mom on a mis-

sion to create reasonably priced clothes that made being practical, fashionable.

The result is Stylease, an infantwear line of one-piece outfits that look like separates. The outfits sell for about \$20, which, along with their practical fashion, have made them a staple at the 25 U.S. boutiques and several e-stores where they're sold. Parents magazine even gave the line its stamp by featuring the "Picnic" style in its May issue.



Hughes

"It was nothing I ever planned on doing," said Hughes, a former private investigator and animated film industry manager with a background in art and theater. "This is something that happened to me."

Hughes, described by her husband as a capable woman known for her initiative, said the idea for the line came to her more than four years ago with the birth of her first daughter, Phoebe. But, it wasn't until Lilli, now 22 months, was 4-months-old — and Hughes' husband, Robert, told her to put up or shut up — that Hughes took action.

After more than a year of research, a skill Hughes perfected as a PI, Stylease was launched in August. Hughes' goals were simple and lofty then: Skip the trade

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Stylease's outfits include (from left) "Chips and Cheese" (a "three-piece" look), "Picnic" and "Poo-Poo Platter." Lilli Hughes (far right), daughter of the company's founder, modeled Mackinac Island.



STYLEASE

"Day at the Beach" features cap sleeves, lace trim and snaps along the right sleeve and shoulder that make changing simple.



STYLEASE

Stylease

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shows and specialty stores. Focus on the big discount chains, which will snatch up the product and her \$50,000 minimum order.

Wrong.

"It never occurred to me [that approach] wouldn't work. Maybe that's naive, but I think I've got such a great product," she said from her home office in Traverse City, Mich.

Hughes, who found a manufacturer in China on the Internet, quickly discovered that major companies weren't ready to take a risk on an unknown company no matter how great its product.

"They didn't want to be the first person to find out you can't deliver," Hughes said.

Plus, with prices that started at \$17.99, she was told she had priced herself out of the discount chain market. Lowering her prices or quality was not an option. Hughes said she was unhappy but ultimately undeterred.

"Everything on this project had been going without a hitch. If I look at it, this is not a hitch," she said of her thinking at the

time. "This is a blessing in disguise."

So Hughes stepped back, let the interested boutiques know she dropped the \$50,000 minimum order to zero and started doing business. Hughes also took the line to a trade show and learned that even there, she had to sell her product because her great idea wouldn't sell itself.

In fact, she said, she executed her patent-pending concept so well, potential buyers passed by without a second glance.

"When they're hanging on a hanger, you don't realize what you're looking at," she said. "I'd say, 'What you're looking at is really a one-piece outfit.'"

Stylease offers eight styles, in sizes infant to 24-months, for boys and girls under names including "Poo-Poo Platter" (Get it?), "Day at the Beach" and "Chips and Cheese." Each outfit features closures that open to the waist down the front or the entire shoulder and sleeve open up, making it easy to "dress your baby from the bottom up." Changing is a snap, too, because every style has a snap crotch.

Florals, seersucker, pastels and gingham dominate the girls'

Lilli Hughes, daughter of Stylease's owner, wears "Tea Party." The one-piece outfit has snaps down the front and in the crotch.

line of long-sleeve, short-sleeve and sleeveless outfits made with shorts, capri-length pants and bloomers. Boys can choose from plaid, striped, Hawaiian print or bold Polo shirts that are paired with cargo pants or cargo, Bermuda and plain shorts.

"Chips and Cheese" is the only style with a "three-piece" look of a plaid outer shirt, a white T-shirt and cargo shorts.

Heather Armour, a sales associate at Mommy & Me in Paris, Tenn., said Stylease's boys line is "the cutest thing we've got in here." Armour is equally enthusiastic about the selections for girls.

"We just love them... and they're easy to put on and [take

off the way they're supposed to be," she said.

While the line is not carried by any Richmond area stores, the outfits are available through Hughes' Web site, www.stylease.com.

Hughes said she can ship orders immediately because the 16,000 outfits made by her Chinese manufacturer are stored in a warehouse near her home. She said she lost money last year and hopes to break even this year. And once the Stylease brand is branded into the minds of the fashion public, Hughes expects to do even better.

"This is 10 times more work than I thought it would be, but so what. Anything that is going to be extremely rewarding or successful is not something that happens overnight."

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