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FOR SERENE LIM, a yoga mat isn't just a yoga mat. At least not where her daughter is concerned. Unhappy with what was available in the market, she started to make her own. Before she knew it, she had a business on her hands.

The content and communications professional started Chalk and Chakras in October to sell child-centric yoga mats which are shorter than adult versions, thicker and come in whimsical designs. She says that when she started her six-year-old daughter Claire on yoga lessons, "I couldn't find a suitable yoga mat for her". Ms Lim, who also has a one-year-old toddler, adds, "Adult mats are too long and come in single colours that kids don't like. Plus, most yoga mats are made of PVC, which contain chemicals that can be toxic with prolonged exposure."

Parenthood has thrown up interesting curve balls for couples and one of them is entrepreneurship, going by the growing examples of mothers like Ms Lim.

For example, full-time mum Guan Yuan, who has three kids, aged seven, four and 21 months, now runs a toy business - started from her preference for open-ended toys



such as building blocks, instead of closed-ended toys like puzzles. "An open-ended toy works like an open-ended question. It invites the child to offer their own interpretation of how to play with it," says Ms Guan, who used to ship in such toys from overseas.



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A year ago, she teamed up with her sister-in-law to start Barefoot Toys, retailing open-ended toys online.

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Consumer preference is what spurs parents like Ms Lim and Ms Guan who take matters into their own hands. They do it not only for the benefit of their own kids, but because they believe that there is a market for their products.

SMALLER FAMILIES BUT SPENDING MORE

Dr Lynda Wee, adjunct associate professor at the Nanyang Business School says that, "though there is a slowdown in birth rates, kids make up for higher value spending. For example, dual income families can afford to spend more on each child if they have a smaller family unit. All Asian parents want the best and will splurge on their kids."

Barefoot Toys' co-founder Edeline Tan says, "We earned back our investment within three months. Our revenue has been increasing steadily monthly with more people coming to know about us. We even have purchase requests from overseas."

With a ready market for kids' products and customers from parents to grandparents all ready to snap up the pieces, starting a business in this field and making it profitable sounds easy enough for parent-entrepreneurs. But is it?

GOING IT ON THEIR OWN

Mumpreneurs do not hesitate to point out that they have to do everything themselves.

Maggie Chan, founder of kids fashion label, Baebeeboo, says, "When you are a one-woman show, there are so many things to take care of besides designing. There are logistics, fulfilment, stock inventory, accounting, managing the e-commerce site, attending to customers, marketing, creating content, working with vendors and going to fairs and putting yourself out there." She went into the business because she wanted to design dresses for her daughters, but says truthfully, "designing has become a very tiny part of the entire business."

For Ms Lim, finding the right manufacturer and illustrators took eight months. Along the way, she had her doubts. "Every now and then, I wonder if people will buy these yoga mats for their children? And am I not busy enough with a full-time job plus a baby? Can my website just appear magically on its own so I can stop fiddling with the backend?"

It has been slightly more than a month since Chalk and Chakras launched, but Ms Lim says it is still too early to say if the business has taken off, especially when her product targets a smaller group of customers. "Kids face a lot more stress these days, and a Chalk and Chakras yoga mat represents a space of their own where kids can turn to play, relax and learn to be more mindful and calm," she says. "While kids yoga is a niche market, all parents want their children to be healthy and happy. The benefits of yoga are the same for adults and kids, which is why kids' yoga classes are popping up as well."

The recently-launched Momiji Kids offers kids' furniture, such as toy prams, chairs and bassinets but made only from rattan. Married couple Loo Yingzhi and Darren Hoe started the business when they wanted to move away from buying non-sustainable toys and furniture. They met a group of rattan craftsmen during a trip to Indonesia and decided to work with them to produce pieces for Momiji Kids.

Most of their sales are from customers who have seen their products on Instagram. Their showing at the recently concluded Boutique Fairs Singapore also brought in sales.

Ms Loo says, "Singapore consumers are blessed with an abundance of choice when it comes to kid's furniture and toys. In this highly competitive landscape, our value proposition is centered on delivering well curated designs at compelling price points."

DEALING WITH COMPETITION AND COSTS

But mumpreneurs who sell more mass market items such as clothing also face their share of challenges. There is a ready market, but that also means more competition.

Ho Su Mei, founder of three-year-old kids clothing label, Sea Apple, says, "Childrenswear is a very fragmented industry, and is ultimately also based on subjective tastes, which means every collection can be evaluated differently. What may have sold well in past collections may not sell as well next time, so I always have to be on my toes." She stays relevant by stepping back and drawing inspiration from other worlds – books, music, art, inspirational people - so that her collections will continue to be set apart.

Baebeeboo's Ms Chan says, "I am just one small brand in a sea of many other brands that are already established, doing well or just starting something new."

As she is the only one designing for the brand, Ms Chan, who still holds her day job as a creative integrated producer adds that she doesn't have the budget to produce four collections a year, unlike other mass produced brands. She admits to being short on variety because it is hard to keep up with production, and every size and

colour requires a minimum quantity production "There's also stack to get vid of

cotour requires a minimum quantity production. There's also stock to get rid or before starting a new collection," she says.

Ms Chan gets around her problem by designing clothes that are "classic in style and high in functionality". She is currently looking for a partner who can handle business development, finances and logistics, so that she can focus on the creative aspect.

Audrey Ng, co-founder of the elly store, which sells kids' clothing and toys, is only too aware of the increasing competition. "The barriers to entry are a lot lower today than nine years ago when the elly store first started. There are more independent online stores catering to kids. Today, you could create a very basic website using a drag and drop feature without any coding knowledge for as little as US\$29 a month. That makes competition fiercer because it comes from anywhere and everywhere," she says.

When Ms Ng and her sister first started the elly store, they wanted to design their own brand of clothing and carry a good selection of quality international brands of shoes, toys and accessories. "Today, many independent boutiques offer similar brands, so we constantly have to upgrade while remaining price competitive. We believe in offering something you can't find anywhere else to give our customers a reason to come back to elly," says Ms Ng. So they began offering personalisation on a popular brand of toys, a service which has since taken off.

Cost is another issue that mumpreneurs have to deal with.

Former art director Elena Ho launched BusyBoardies, a range of activity boards which she designed herself. She had seen similar boards on Pinterest but found the ones available on etsy not aesthetically pleasing, so she decided to make her own for her daughter's first birthday a few years ago. After requests from friends to buy, Ms Ho decided to offer BusyBoardies in 2016 to other parents too.

Each board costs from S\$237. "A lot of people assume that because the items on my board are simple everyday things, they should be cheap. But the cost of manufacturing in Singapore is very high. A lot of time and effort actually goes into the milling and carpentry work of each board and the painting takes time," says Ms Ho.

For the first nine months, she did the carpentry herself at a co-share workshop and brought them home to complete it, so cost was much cheaper and she didn't charge for her time and labour. Later as the business grew, she could no longer work from home and moved to her current workshop. Outsourcing certain work meant that costs also went up.

STAYING ONLINE

Mumpreneurs are keeping costs low by keeping their businesses online, and getting them stocked at certain shops, rather than having a physical store on their own. But they have ambitious plans to sell the brand overseas.

Barefoot Toys' Ms Guan says, "Online sales provide a lot of flexibility for mums like us, and there are less fixed costs. We are on the lookout for a courier company so that we can open up our products to be available globally."

Ms Ho, of Sea Apple says, "we are still a small business, serving a largely domestic market through our online store and select retailers. One of our focus areas would be to find the right distribution channels beyond the market here in Singapore."

Rachel Tan, founder of Urban Li'l which has retailed personalised interior decorative

items since 2015, says "the kids' sector is big as parents are willing to spend - especially on their first born." She adds "That said, there is no sure-win business without the right formula and hard work put into it. "A profitable business depends on several factors including thorough market research, solid business plan, right pricing, and defined target audience. You've also got to think about staying visible and connected, which are crucial in the dynamic and fast-moving kids sector."

AS LIFE CHANGING AS MOTHERHOOD

Despite the challenges, mumpreneurs who have been running their business for some years say it is worth the journey on top of tackling motherhood.

Urban Li'l Ms Tan says, "It's a fun and meaningful space to be in where you make children's lives better through your thoughtfully designed/curated products.

Ms Ho of BusyBoardies says, "Any kind of creative or enterprising pursuit is definitely encouraged. The other entrepreneurs I know have been open in sharing what they know and are so very helpful. We do what we can to help each other out and are very encouraging to each other. If you believe you have a great idea for a kids' business, definitely dip your toes in it. It could change your life."

After her first month as a mumpreneur, Chalk and Chakras' Ms Lim is feeling confident. "I think the key is to be authentic and meaningful as a brand, and offer products and/or services which serve a real market demand," she says.

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