



## Borrowed help

Baby equipment rental business aims to make vacationing less stressful for parents

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It's no mystery why people with young children find it difficult to take vacations. Imagine making your way through a busy airport with a baby or toddler and all their gear — stroller, toys, changing mat — in tow.

And those are just the bare essentials. Forget bringing the high chair, the playpen, the walker or the baby gate. You won't get it all in the car, much less through airport security.

What's a parent to do once they arrive at their destination without all the equipment meant to keep their little one both occupied and safe?

Well in Key West, they have Holiday Baby Inc. This locally based baby equipment rental business was launched by Nancy Zappola earlier this year.

"I just want to make it easy for people when they arrive that they don't have to lug all their gear," Zappola said.

She got the idea for the business after watching her sister struggle with the situation each time she'd come to visit her in Key West.

"My sister lives in New York and they come down to Key West quite a bit with my niece," Zappola said. "When I knew she was coming, they'd bring a little travel stroller, But they didn't want to pack a lot. So I'd borrow a lot of equipment from my friends who had babies."

One day it occurred to Zappola that there probably were dozens of other mothers who were going through the same thing. So in October, she began acquiring baby equipment and putting together the idea for her business.

"I knew that there was a market for this," she said.

Her second bedroom now houses a growing inventory of cribs, high chairs, bed rails, car seats, strollers, exersaucers, toddler tubs, and pack 'n' plays (modern-day playpens that also come equipped with bassinets, changing tables, or toys and mobiles.)

Kris Green of Santa Barbara, Calif., said she was grateful for Holiday Baby when she and her family, including 14-month-old Ada, were in town for the sailing races two weeks ago. She had put an ad on Craig's List, an Internet classified site, hoping to find a family in Key West that was willing to rent some furniture to her. But it was Zappola who saw her ad and called.

"Santa Barbara is a small airport and Key West is a small airport, so lugging equipment was really difficult for us," Green said. "So it was great to have a service there where we could rent everything we needed and we didn't have to drag along everything."

With Ada starting the walk, the baby gates made for a worry-free trip. The adults could enjoy the tropical breeze through an open door without worry about the baby wondering toward the pool. And the giant bag of toys meant more relaxation time for the adults.

"In terms of the toys or the gates, we would have had to purchase things there and give them away or something," Green said. "Or we would have had to do without it, which would be difficult. It wouldn't be much of a vacation if she wasn't entertained."

Green said she has used similar companies elsewhere, including on a recent trip to Palm Springs, Calif. But she said Holiday Baby was by far the easiest to work with and had the most reasonable prices.

Zappola admits this is a business she never would have thought of 10 years ago in her early 20s, but now that most of her friends and family have started families of their own, she's capitalizing on their experiences — and their advice.

"My friends are great resources for information," said Zappola, explaining how they told her what brands to get and what products other moms would appreciate.

Zappola also spent hours reading online reviews to make sure she was getting quality products.

"People would be like, 'I would never recommend this stroller. The wheel fell off a day after I bought it,' so I would keep looking," Zappola said laughing.

Some of the brands she purchased include Graco, Evenflo, Chicco, Britax and Safest 1st.

Holiday Baby offers free delivery and pickup and has daily and weekly rental rates. Prices start at \$5 a day for a toddler tub, and range to \$100 a week for a crib.

Zappola said all the equipment is sanitized with environmentally friendly cleaning products in between each use. She's happy to fulfill most requests for anything she might not have in her inventory with an advance request.