

## Oh baby! Business has designs on children's spaces market

BY PAMELA A. ZINKOSKY

[oakland@mbusinessreview.com](mailto:oakland@mbusinessreview.com)

The baby boom is on. Last year, U.S. parents doled out \$1.18 billion for baby furniture, according to a study by Kids Today magazine and New York-based Easy Analytic Software Inc. Projected spending for 2011 is \$1.52 billion.

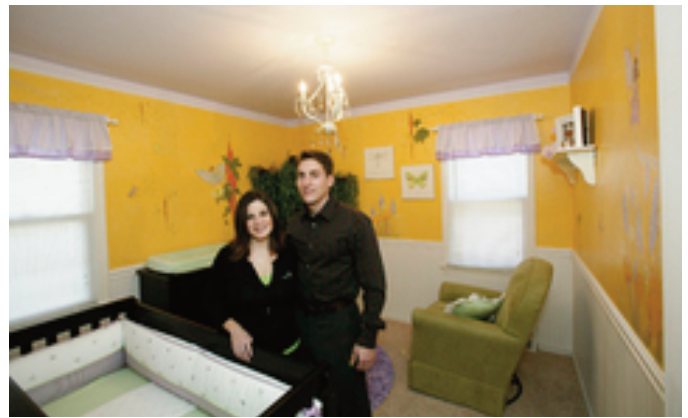
New parents and entrepreneurs Melanie and Brad Weber are capitalizing on that market. After careful planning and preparation, Melanie and Brad in 2006 quit their 9-to-5 jobs to launch Mother Nursery.

The company designs children's rooms and offers child-proofing services, event coordination and an on-line store for furniture and other children's products.

Oak Park-based Mother Nursery is the only company of its kind in Michigan, the Webers said. The business's competitive advantage is its focus on children. "It's such a niche market," said Melanie. "I know all my vendors. If something new comes out in the children's market, I'm going to know about it."

Interior designers create children's rooms, but they're often generic or are appropriate for only the first couple years of a child's life, said Melanie. "We make rooms children can grow into. We definitely try to make things practical and choose things that help with (the child's) development."

Emily Levin wanted a unique room for her baby but didn't have time to design it herself and didn't want to know the sex of the baby. The Webers designed two rooms - one for a boy and one for a girl - got approval for both, and called Levin's doctor to learn the baby's sex.



"About a month before my due date, they taped off the room, changed the locks so we couldn't peek, and the day I came home from the hospital it was like extreme makeover," said Levin.

"To see it all put together was amazing," she said. "The best part is the delicate butterflies hanging from the ceiling. Our daughter loves to look at those when she is on her changing table."

The Webers enjoy surprising clients as they did Levin, but they also create gender-neutral rooms or will design with more input from their clients. They pride themselves on timeliness and convenience for their clients.

"Our customers are our main focus," said Melanie. "We want to make it as easy as possible for them. We have a team of painters, muralists and others, and we schedule everything."

Said Levin: "My husband and I have worked with decorators and had a lot of delays and extra expenses and excuses. I liked that it was just the two of them."

decorators and had a lot of delays and extra expenses and excuses. I liked that it was just the two of them. They did exactly to every detail what we decided on. There were no delays, and they were extremely patient with us and extremely accessible."

Mother Nursery's target market is parents in their 30s or older who want customized environments for their children, said Melanie. "We never design the same room twice," she said. "We can do a pink and brown room so many ways."

The business is a two-person operation, with contract help hired as needed. Melanie, who previously was a graphic designer, handles most of the design work, and Brad, who was in real estate, handles business operations. Brad also has a builder's license.

Brad and Melanie have added child-related products and services as they've seen the demand grow.

The Webers added childproofing to their services this year. They researched the topic and attended seminars conducted by the International Association for Child Safety.

The Webers have also researched toy safety in light of recent recalls. "If something is happening nationally in the industry, we're going to know about it," said Melanie.

The company also offers a Web site that includes child-related articles and approximately 1,000 child products. Customers can order via the site, [www.mothenursery.com](http://www.mothenursery.com).

The Webers ship some items; others are shipped by the vendors. Most site orders have been from out-of-state, said Brad. "(The site) provides another entity of income for our company," he said. "For us, it's diversify or die. If we can provide a quality product, we will."

The site has increased Mother Nursery's national recognition. The Webers invested heavily in Internet search engines and on-line advertising to increase site traffic. Brad has received calls asking whether Mother Nursery has franchises outside Michigan. "It's very promising," he said.

So far, Mother Nursery has designed more than 25 rooms and provided home child-proofing services for eight. Charges are \$95 to \$100 per hour, with discount packages available for multiple hours

This year, Mother Nursery's revenue is up 108 percent from last year, and in February 2007 - just over a year after its launch - the business turned a profit.

"Right now our challenge is just growth," Brad said. "We have a high level of ambition for our company. Statistically it looks great, but it's not enough for us. We're hungry."

Plans include increasing clients, expanding on-line sales, hiring contractors and designers, and possibly opening a retail store.