

ROYAL BABY!

Taking their cue from new mums Kate Middleton and Kim Kardashian, many local mothers are splurging on expensive toys and baby clothes. SASHA GONZALES finds out why.

When the then-pregnant Kate Middleton went shopping for her first child, she was seen splurging on luxurious baby furniture, designer outfits and trendy strollers. She later checked into a maternity suite at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington that cost a staggering £10,000 (\$\$19,500) a day. Well, she *is* the Duchess of Cambridge.

But these days, even cashed-up commoners are demanding the royal treatment. In June, reality TV star Kim Kardashian and rapper Kanye West welcomed their daughter North at a lavish, US\$3,320(\$\$4,220)-a-night maternity suite at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. Since then, Kim and Kanye have showered North with expensive gifts such as a sumptuous baby spa and a designer crib that cost a four-figure sum.

Only the best for baby

It's not just celeb mums who are splurging on their tots. Regular mothers here in Singapore are doing the same.

In 2009, six months before she gave birth to her son Andrew*, Melissa* hired an interior designer to create her dream nursery. The designer's fee, plus the furniture and accessories, cost Melissa and her husband a cool \$15,000. "I wanted the room to be perfect," says the 37-year-old accountant. "I chose wallpaper and paint in soothing cream and baby blue, bought an Italian-made convertible crib, baby bedding and a vintage rocking chair for me to sit on while I nurse Andrew and read to him."

Melissa disagrees that Andrew, who is now four, would have been too young to tell the difference between a \$3,000 crib and a \$300 one. "Babies have an acute sense of their surroundings," she says. "I wanted to give our son the best room we could afford. It makes me feel I've done well as a parent."

Antonia Tan, 38, an image consultant and business owner, believes in spending top dollar on accessories and food for four-year-old Ian and two-year-old Victoria. She considers it an investment in their health and well-being. "I spent about \$2,300 on a baby stroller after I read that it was one of the most comfortable around. And every month, I spend more than \$400 just on my kids' natural supplements to boost their immune system."

Decked out in designer

Forget hand-me-downs. Some mums don't mind spending hundreds on outfits for their children – never mind that they'll outgrow these pricey togs in a matter of months.

"If I see an outfit I like for my girl, or if she sees something she wants, I'll buy it without thinking twice," declares Cheryl*, a 35-year-old editor and mum to only child, Beth*, 4. Beth's wardrobe is packed with designer kids' clothing, the most expensive being a \$200 satin dress embellished with sequins and crystal beads, which she's worn just once, to Cheryl's brother's wedding last year. "She'll probably never wear it again – she's too big for it now," Cheryl says. "But Beth loves dressing up, and I like to see her happy. Plus, I can afford it." →

Joyann Liau, 31, buys designer clothes and shoes for her only child Lucas, who is almost two. He already owns more than 10 pairs of shoes, each costing over \$50. Even though her friends say that she buys too much for Lucas, Joyann disagrees. "I love being well groomed, and I want Lucas to look good too," explains the personal assistant, who adds that she finds branded clothing better designed than regular department-store threads. Joyann shops for Lucas every other day, at boutiques and online stores.

"A top for Lucas may cost as much as a frock for myself. His day-care teacher always comments that he looks nice, and that makes me feel good." Clothes aside, the most expensive item Joyann has bought him so far is his \$1,500 crib.



Mita Kelder (extreme right) threw her elder daughter Mirabelle (second from left) a \$4,000 birthday bash.

While she admits that Lucas is still too young to appreciate his designer togs, Joyann is sure that "when he's older, he'll be thankful that we gave him the best".

A party fit for a princess (or prince)

Birthday parties are another extravagant expense. Singapore-based writer and model Mita Kelder, 36, has been throwing parties for her two girls since they were three. The most memorable one was elder daughter Mirabelle's third birthday party three years ago, which cost \$4,000.

She invited about 300 guests to the party, held in the family's backyard, in which Mirabelle's wishes for a bouncing

castle, a magician, and actors dressed up as princess characters were all fulfilled. "It was a lot of money and we did feel bad about it," says Mita, whose other daughter, Merel, is four years old. "But we wanted to have a big, fun event for the children. Which kid doesn't love bouncing castles, magicians and cake?"

Bindiya Surtani, 36, threw a similar party for her younger daughter Shania, 5, when she turned four. "My husband and I wanted to celebrate her big day in style," says the stay-at-home mum. Bindiya spent about \$3,500 on party attendants, face painters, food, beverage and the birthday cake. There was even a thosai stall, where guests could have the Indian savoury pancake made to order.

"It was an expensive party, but seeing Shania so excited was priceless," says Bindiya, who had also thrown a lavish party for older girl Ishana when she turned four.

Too much, too soon?

What makes these parents splash out? "They may have grown up without such luxuries and now feel determined to give their children more than they ever had. And some parents resort to extravagance to compensate for some inadequacy, like not spending enough time with their children," says Dr Lim Boon Leng, psychiatrist and medical director at Dr BL Lim Centre for Psychological Wellness.

The downside? "Their children may grow up overly sheltered and unable to handle the realities and responsibilities of life," says Dr Lim. "They may expect things to be handed to them without having to work hard for it."

The trick is to have your child earn her gifts, he adds. Fancy clothes, toys or parties can be rewards for good behaviour. "You need to teach her that toys and indulgences don't fall from the sky," he says.

But the mums we spoke to don't think they're spoiling their kids. Mita says that she tries to keep her daughters grounded. For Mirabelle's big birthday bash, for instance, Mita asked guests to make donations to orphanages in Thailand in lieu of expensive birthday

MORE WAYS TO PAMPER JUNIOR

What do you get the kid who has everything? More of the best, of course! Check out our top three picks.

HAIR MAKEOVER AT CURLY N SPIKE (curlynspikestore.com.sg)

This children-only hair salon and spa offers funky cuts and even relaxing massages. Junior can even get a makeover consisting of a cut and mani-pedi from \$40 onward.

SPA SESSION AT BABY SPA (babyspa.com.sg)

Treat your little one to a relaxing afternoon of swimming in a pool, followed by a massage by a physiotherapist (it costs \$24 for 15 minutes; members pay \$10). You can also book him a stylish haircut.

"BRAIN TRAINING" WITH THE SHICHIDA METHOD (shichidamethod.com)

Besides teaching children numeracy and literacy skills, The Shichida Method, which uses learning tools like flash cards, promises to boost memory and concentration, develop IQ and EQ, and stimulate creativity and critical-thinking skills. Programme fees start from \$1,359.30 for 12 weekday classes.

gifts. "It's important for my kids to understand that there are many children who have nothing," she says. The costs of the party were also partly funded by Mirabelle's earnings as a child model.

Says Bindiya of the \$3,500 party she threw her daughter: "I don't see it as pampering or spoiling her at all. Both my girls have been raised with good values."

"A person can grow up with luxuries and still remain humble," reasons Cheryl. "And spending a lot of money on my child doesn't mean I'm trying to make up for some inadequacy. I give out of love; it makes me happy to see her happy —what's so bad about that?" *HW*

**Names have been changed.*