

# Mothers of invention

By MARY TERESA BITTI

**I**ncreasingly, mothers are starting their own businesses. It's such a phenomenon there is even a trademarked name to describe it: Mompreneurs. Today, there are 820,000-plus female entrepreneurs in Canada, and more than half of them have children.

Many have developed products they realized would be useful to them but couldn't find in the market and, thanks to the power of professional Web sites, building their own businesses in the process.

"Everyone is trying to get through the day without smelling like vomit," said Julie Cole, mother of five children aged six and under, and co-founder of Hamilton-based Mabel's Labels Inc. ([www.mabel.ca](http://www.mabel.ca)).

A lawyer by training, Ms. Cole, together with her sister Cynthia Esp, a teacher, and university pals Tricia Mumby, manager of a printing/graphic department, and Julie Ellis, a financial planner, came up with the idea for Mabel's Labels, which designs, makes and sells personalized labels. At the time, they were all dealing with the same problem: keeping track of their children's belongings.

"A lot of women leave the workforce when they have children, for various reasons," Ms. Cole said. "We were all working full-time and having children and looking for something that was a little more family friendly. We also had this idea for a product that was missing from the market and that nagged away at us."

With 11 children among them, they had gone through their share of lost mitts, toys and sippy cups, and five years ago, they decided to do something about it.

The women spent two years planning, researching and testing different materials and technology to create personalized labels able to withstand the dishwasher, the microwave and rough-and-tumble children — all the while continuing to do their day jobs.

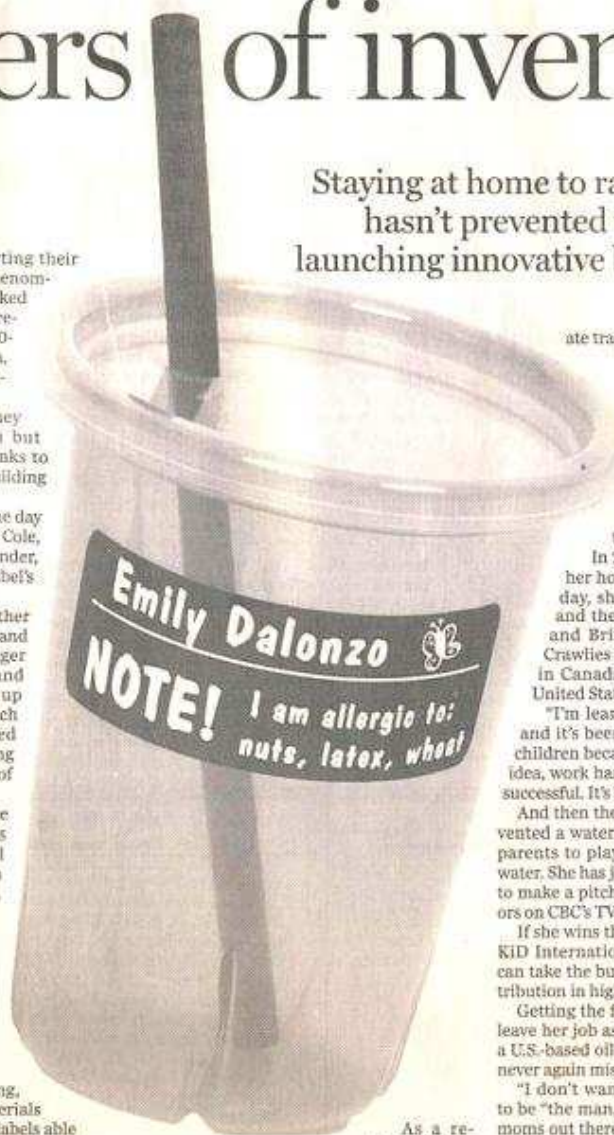
"We had to have confidence in our product; that was paramount," Ms. Cole said. "Only if we had a good product would we have any kind of staying power."

In 2003, they started taking orders for Mabel's Sticky Labels. It wasn't long before each partner left her job to focus on growing the business.

"In the beginning, we did everything, making labels, licking stamps: it was a real cottage industry," Ms. Cole said.

"Now we have five other full-time staff and six part-timers, which allows us to use our skills and social equity to expand the business."

Staying at home to raise their children hasn't prevented these moms from launching innovative business ventures



As a result, Mabel's Labels' product offering has grown to include clothing, shoe, household and stationery products for an international clientele. The business has moved beyond Web site sales to include an agent program, with 175 agents selling Mabel's Labels across Canada and the United States. While it now has an office and production facility, most of the partners still work from home.

"The whole point of this was to be able to juggle working and being home with the kids," Ms. Cole said. "We have created our own perfect work environment."

Another mother, Wendy Mullin, surprised herself by becoming an entrepreneur.

With a degree in social sciences and a diploma in sales and marketing, and having worked in the advertising, production and marketing fields, she became a stay-at-home mother when her son Sean was born.

But then something happened that put her on a new career path and led to the creation of Crawlies ([www.crawlies.ca](http://www.crawlies.ca)).

At six or seven months, Sean was desperate to start crawling but couldn't get the traction he needed to propel himself forward.

"It was frustrating as a parent to watch him struggle, so I looked for something to help him, but there was nothing," Ms. Mullin said. "I started talking to moms in playgroups and on the playground and found we were all in the same boat. That's when I knew this was a good idea and I should do something about it."

In 2003, Ms. Mullin got serious and started researching the importance of crawling from a developmental perspective. Using that knowledge, she designed a line of clothing for babies aged three to 12 months. "I chose bright, vibrant colours to stimulate the visual senses of the child. I put raised, non-slip pads on the knees, elbows and toes to help cre-

ate traction," Ms. Mullin said.

"The pads are white, providing contrast for visual acuity. And I put my caterpillar logo on the toes, so when the child is on their back bringing their feet up to their face, they can focus on the caterpillar, which helps their vision. I really tried to think of everything."

In 2004, she launched Crawlies from her home in Penetanguishene, Ont. Today, she has customers across Canada and the United States, and in Australia and Britain. Aside from the Web site, Crawlies also are available in select stores in Canada and at one retail store in the United States.

"I'm learning something new every day, and it's been a very good experience for my children because they have seen mom have an idea, work hard, launch a business and make it successful. It's been amazing," Ms. Mullin said.

And then there is Catherine Hiscocks, who invented a waterproof infant carrier that enables parents to play safely with their babies in the water. She has just learned she will have a chance to make a pitch to a group of millionaire investors on CBC's TV show *Dragons Den*.

If she wins the \$250,000 in funding for WaterKID International Ltd. ([www.waterkid.ca](http://www.waterkid.ca)) she can take the business to the next level: mass distribution in high-end stores internationally.

Getting the funding would also mean she can leave her job as an engineering technologist for a U.S.-based oil and gas company in Calgary and never again miss one of her son's birthdays.

"I don't want to work for 'the man.' I want to be 'the man,'" Ms. Hiscocks said. "Like all the moms out there, I want to be able to be home on my son's birthday and watch him unwrap his new bike. I want to enjoy how wealthy my life really is."

To make that happen, she rises every morning at 4:30, and returns e-mails and makes calls to Europe and Australia before commuting from Carlsland, Alta., into Calgary to be at her office for 7:30 a.m.

On her way home, she handles shipping requirements for WaterKID before ending each night with more e-mails and midnight calls to her manufacturer in China.

"It's been tough, but I believe in this product and I'm committed."

She started researching waterproof infant carriers in 2002 after a near miss in the pool. Ms. Hiscocks was hip-deep in the water holding five-month-old Ryan and keeping an eye on two-year-old Zachary, who moved out of reach to get a ball and went under the surface of the water.

As Ms. Hiscocks waded through the water to get to Zachary, Ryan slipped through her arms.

Fortunately, a man reached over and lifted Ryan out of the water, freeing Ms. Hiscocks to grab Zachary.

"Afterward, I sat on the side of the pool and just cried," she said. "That's when I thought I had to do something."

It took four years to research, develop, refine and test the product, and get a patent. She started selling inventory last year and won a baby products contest.

WaterKID is available in 14 stores across Canada, and 20 stores in the United States; and Ms. Hiscocks has just picked up a European distributor in London, and is talking to two more in Australia.

"I have shed a lot of tears and taken a lot of risks, but I believe in WaterKID. And I just think, 'How lucky am I to experience this journey?'"

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Among the entrepreneurial mothers' products are Crawlies, right, and Mabel's Labels, above