

A Sleeping Baby? Magic!

INFANT SLEEPSUIT IS OPENING EYES

BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN

The many inventor clients I've worked with through the years have presented all sorts of new products—often with promises that don't deliver. I met Maureen Howard in 2005, when she approached me with a novel design for a sleep garment that calmed a fussy baby. "Yeah, right," I thought. I had two children, and it took them a long time before they would sleep through the night.

But I always enter projects with an open mind—and after listening to Maureen's story, as well as learning her unique background that qualified her to invent and develop such a novel invention, I was sold. Here is Maureen's story.

Edith G. Tolchin: Why is the Baby Merlin's Magic Sleepsuit® different from any other baby sleeper on the market?

Maureen Howard: I began experimenting with various ideas of how to help provide a safe and secure sleep environment for my first baby, when he was about 3 months old and getting too big and strong for swaddling. He began to kick and squirm out of the swaddle, leaving a loose garment in the crib with him—which I knew was dangerous. I tried a sleep sack, which was safe and helped keep him warm but did not provide the secure, contained feeling he needed to help him go to sleep on his own, like in his car seat or stroller. So my goal was to simulate this environment but with a garment for use in the crib. Thus, I created the initial prototype that is now the Magic Sleepsuit. It worked immediately.

The Magic Sleepsuit has a number of design features that help provide the secure feeling in a safe environment. To my knowledge, this is the only product that combines the benefits of both the swaddle and sleep sack in one product. Like the swaddle, the Magic Sleepsuit provides comfort and security and helps muffle babies' reflexive startles to prevent the baby from waking prematurely, and provides proprioceptive input to help calm the baby. However, it is not as confining as the swaddle, so it is appropriate as the next step from the swaddle. Like the sleep sacks, it zips on and off so that the baby sleeps safely without any loose blankets in the crib.

Additionally, the Magic Sleepsuit promotes back sleeping, the recommended safe sleep position by the American Academy of



Maureen Howard, creator of the Baby Merlin's Magic Sleepsuit, says the initial prototype worked immediately.

Pediatrics. It can be worn alone with a diaper, onesie or light cotton undershirt. It has open hands and feet for heat dissipation, unlike the swaddles and sleep sacks.

EGT: Tell us about your background, profession, and how they tie in with your invention.

MH: After obtaining my bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Delaware, I pursued a Master of Physical Therapy degree from Temple University. I started work at the world-renowned Children's Hospital of Philadelphia as a pediatric physical therapist. I then worked independently as a physical therapist with preschool and school-age children. After the birth of my second child, I left my job to be a stay-at-home mom and worked on developing a business to share the Magic Sleepsuit with babies and parents.

My education and experience as a physical therapist gave me the tools I needed to create the concept behind the Magic

Sleepsuit. With an understanding of human physiology, I know that babies calm to certain types of proprioceptive input such as gentle weight and secure positioning. This explains why babies often sleep well in a car seat or stroller and when being held closely. I also know that babies have immature sensory systems and have certain reflexes that can startle and wake them prematurely. By muffling these reflexes and providing this input, it calms and soothes babies. Helping babies with these comfort needs and keeping them at a comfortable, consistent temperature, they sleep better and longer. As a mom, this provided me with the rest I needed and the knowledge that my babies were well rested and happier during wake time.

My husband, Bob, has helped tremendously with the business side of the company, as I had no real experience in this. Together, we have learned a great deal and created a solid business and marketing plan that we continue to improve and grow.

EGT: How has being the mom of four added to the development, improvement and/or enhancement of the original Magic Sleepsuit from its prototype days?

MH: The initial prototype was tested on our oldest child. When my second child was having similar issues sleeping, I used it again. When it worked, I started thinking about creating a business to share my invention. When it worked again with my third child, I really started working on the business development. By the time my fourth baby arrived, the Magic Sleepsuit was selling on my website and in stores.

It is definitely busy and challenging to juggle being a mom and business owner. My husband still works outside the company full time and then works at night after the kids are in bed on the Magic Sleepsuit business needs. The kids have been involved with all aspects of the company.

EGT: How did you create your prototype? How many versions did you have before you got it "perfect"?

MH: The original prototype, I created myself. I am not much of a seamstress, so it was rough but worked. After my second baby used the first prototype for nearly nine months (and nine months with my first baby), it was in bad shape. I searched online for someone who specialized in soft goods prototypes.



“My education and experience as a physical therapist gave me the tools I needed to create the concept behind the Magic Sleepsuit.”

— MAUREEN HOWARD

I found someone, but he eventually referred me to someone else who did short run-short goods manufacturing. This company was located across the country, so it was a long process of back and forth. I had to send materials, and they sent prototypes back for review. I think we got to the eighth version before I was happy. Then the real fun started, getting the “product design evaluation” and having the product safety tested so that it met all regulations for sale to the public. Once I had the final prototype and it passed all required safety tests, I searched for a manufacturer to make large production runs. We then began to work with EGT Global Trading to help find several possible candidates. In the end, I received multiple samples from multiple manufacturers and chose one to finalize and manufacture our product. I then worked to get all the labeling, color choices, sizing, materials, and so on, to get a “perfect” product.

EGT: We hear horror stories about product recalls. How safe is your product?

MH: I have done a lot of research on safety and have done design evaluations on the product to be sure that it adheres to all safety regulations required in its category. I have each pre-production sample tested on each of my production runs to be sure

that the manufacturer maintains all requirements needed to pass all testing. I also have our final product inspected prior to shipment to our fulfillment centers. EGT Global Trading advises us on any changes in safety regulations.

I have carefully constructed the Magic Sleepsuit with safety in mind. The sleepsuit is designed for back sleeping only in the crib. In all of my literature, on my website, packaging, and so on, I remind our consumers that the sleepsuit is for back sleeping only in the crib. When a baby can roll while in the sleepsuit, that is when I recommend not using it.

The scooped neckline is designed to keep fabric away from the baby's face for safety. I also designed the arm and leg holes to be open at the hands and feet to help heat dissipation and help prevent overheating. The sleepsuit should fit properly so that the baby cannot wiggle out of it. It also needs to fit properly to do what it is intended to do in providing a secure feeling.

EGT: How is it working with overseas factories? Did you face any obstacles?

MH: Initially, it was very difficult. Communications with a foreign company is very challenging. Most communication is done by email, which is not always efficient.

The worst setback was that just before I went into my first production run, my manufacturer stopped communicating with me and would not return emails for a period of about two months. As it turned out, culturally, the manufacturer was embarrassed that it could no longer fill our order at the original costs they quoted because of material and labor cost increases and taxes. So instead of asking for an increased price, they simply decided to not return emails. Because I had been working for months with this company and was very close to getting my shipment produced, I offered to increase what I would pay to get it to finish the order.

Things are running pretty smoothly now with a manufacturer I have been using for several years. I just added a second manufacturer to help fulfill my needs due to expansion. But it also gives me some additional peace of mind that I have a backup.

EGT: How have safety regulations for baby products changed over the years?

MH: Our work with EGT Global Trading has been critical for the ever-changing safety regulations and requirements. Consumer product safety law provided the CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) with significant new regulatory and enforcement tools as part of amending and enhancing several CPSC statutes, including the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act. The CPSIA included provisions addressing—among other things—lead content in products, phthalates in products, toy safety, third-party testing and certification, tracking labels, import rules, and civil and criminal penalties, among others.

EGT: How many styles and fabrics are you now selling? Which sizes, colors, and so on?

MH: I have two sizes: a small for babies 3-6 months or 12-18 lbs., and a large for babies 6-9 months or 18-21 lbs. I also have two different types of exterior fabric, fleece and cotton. The fleece comes in yellow, blue and pink. The cotton comes in yellow, blue, pink and cream. This gives us 14 SKUs.

EGT: Where is the product being sold? Was it difficult attempting to export and sell in overseas markets? Any regulations challenges?

MH: The product is sold through my website (www.magicleepsuit.com), Amazon.com, Diapers.com, Right Start, One Step Ahead, and a number of boutique retailers throughout the U.S., several in Canada, and several in Europe and Australia. I can ship from my fulfillment center anywhere in the world and have done so. I started selling in October 2015 through Amazon.uk in order to get faster and cheaper shipping to customers in Europe. We did have to make sure the shipment going to the Amazon UK fulfillment center complied with all UK requirements for safety, labeling, etc.

EGT: How did you develop your packaging—labels, hang tags, retail packaging, and so on?

MH: I created all of our original concepts for the logo, labels, hang tags and retail packaging. I then hired graphic designers to help finalize the design and create JPG files to send to my manufacturer, which actually has them produced and included with our product. Any changes as a result of new label rules of the CPSIA I send to our graphic designer, who makes changes that are then sent to the manufacturer.

EGT: Do you have plans to design any new products?

MH: I am asked constantly by my customers to design a larger-size sleepsuit because their babies love it so much but eventually grow out of it. I am currently working on other products that will serve to transition babies out of the sleepsuit. I hope to have these ready in the fall of this year.

EGT: What have you learned while creating this product?

MH: Perseverance and belief in yourself and product are foremost. I have been through some difficult times dealing with difficult customers, suppliers, retailers, competitors, etc., and have persevered based on my continued belief in the product and purpose that it serves. In the long run, keeping the customers first has resulted in many referrals and our ability to help others.

I have also learned how to better manage my time, how to not sweat the little things in life and to appreciate my children, family and employees.

EGT: Can you share words of wisdom or encouragement for readers in developing their inventions?

MH: If you truly believe in your product, take time to write a business plan, get good advice, have a support system in place, and then go for it. Read and research the market, the product, the manufacturers, etc., to see if your idea has merit and if it's feasible to build a company around your idea. Don't let anyone stop you from pursuing your dream.

Don't take on too much work or too much debt just for the sake of growth or profits. Make achievable goals and take some baby steps at first. You will make mistakes, but if you are in control they will not hurt too much. Persevere, stay on course, and do not stray from your goals and purpose. ☺

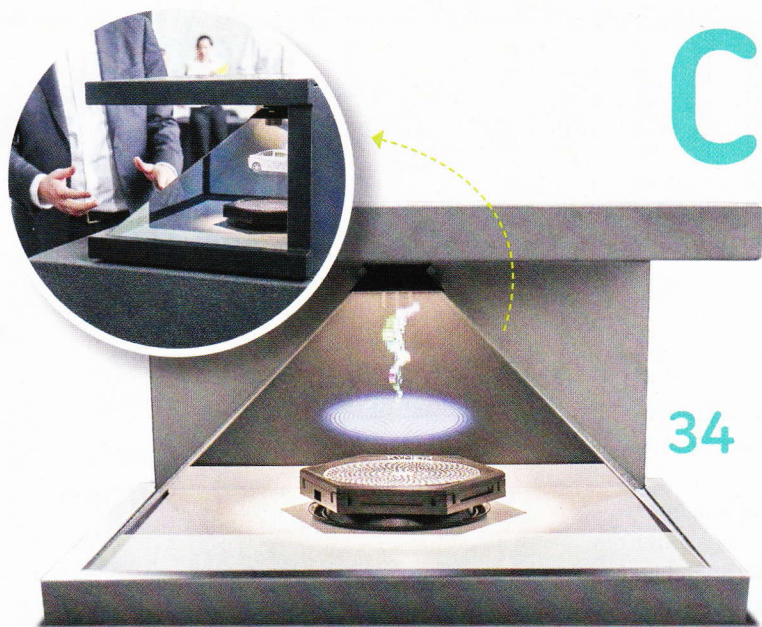
For information, visit www.magicleepsuit.com.

Edie Tolchin has contributed to *Inventors Digest* since 2000. She is the author of *Secrets of Successful Inventing* and owner of EGT Global Trading, which for more than 25 years has helped inventors with product safety issues, sourcing and China manufacturing. Contact Edie at egt@egtglobaltrading.com.



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