

Exceptional

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CANADA'S RESOURCE
MAGAZINE FOR PARENTS
OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

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School in Style

Fashion forward clothes with comfort, dignity and the all-important "coolness" factor by WENDY HELFENBAUM

Five little words, one potential headache: back-to-school adaptive clothing. For many parents of growing children who have special needs, shopping for clothing that works is one spree they'd like to avoid. Thankfully, more and more online companies are now meeting the demand for fashionable, affordable, "cool" adaptive clothing.

1
Classic Cropped Cardigan
by SOFT CLOTHING
US\$25

3
Tie Print Long Sleeve Dressy Tee
by SOFT CLOTHING
US\$16

2
Party Dress
by SOFT CLOTHING
US\$22

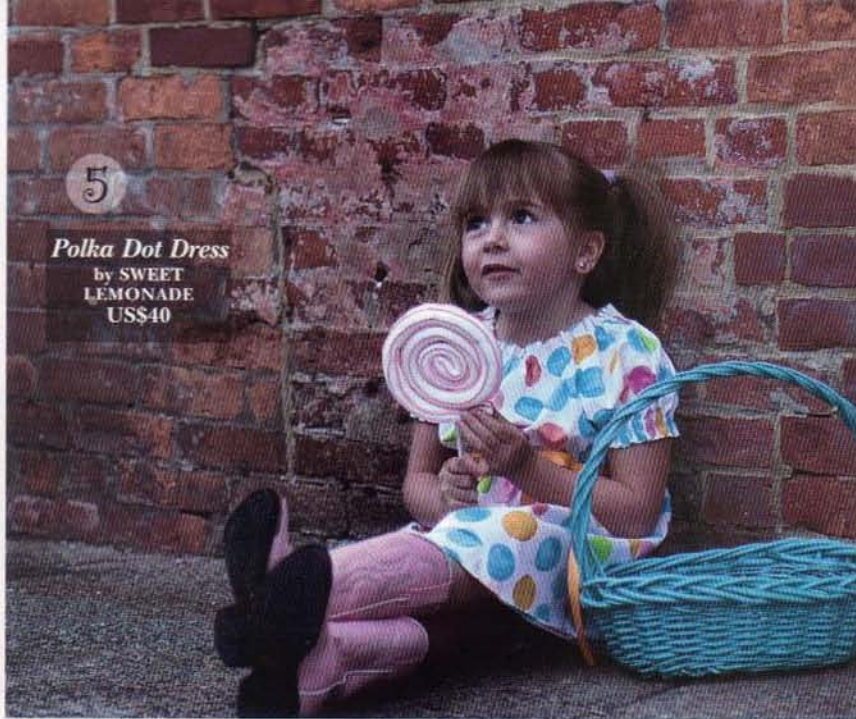
4
Classic Chino
by SOFT CLOTHING
US\$22

While working as a pediatric special needs nurse, Victoria Valencia was becoming increasingly frustrated. Many of her young patients had gastrointestinal feeding tubes (g-tubes), tracheotomies, braces or hep locks;¹ getting dressed was at best a huge annoyance, and at worst, a total nightmare.

"A lot of times, children with developmental issues want to play with their g-tubes. If it's visible, they're going to go for it. So I was always trying to find solutions. I'd put clothes on backwards [so they wouldn't be able to unzip or unbutton them], and usually ended up cutting holes in their clothing [so parents and caregivers could have access]," says Valencia, who lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

After years spent complaining about the lack of practical, adaptive clothing for exceptional children, one of Valencia's friends urged her to do something about it. Although she had no sewing, manufacturing or business experience whatsoever, Valencia decided to take a giant leap of faith.

In August 2006, she launched Mini-Miracles, an online company specializing in attractive adaptive clothing. It was a huge learning curve, because I started backwards," says Valencia. "I didn't have any technical



5

Polka Dot Dress
by SWEET
LEMONADE
US\$40

textile experience, but I did have the technical medical experience, and I knew what the clothes needed to look like."



Getting started

After buying fabric at a local store, Valencia worked with a seamstress to design a prototype. "I said, 'It needs all these adaptive features, and I need them to be on all the clothes.' I knew that I wanted the clothes to be fashionable, so that the children had some dignity and weren't singled out."

Soon, serendipity stepped in to help. A local business coach offered to help out at no cost, and the

ADAPTIVE CLOTHING ONLINE

- www.minimiracles.ca
- www.sweetlemonadedesigns.com
- www.softclothing.net
- www.speciallyforyou.net
- www.smartypantsworkshop.com

friend who originally encouraged Valencia put her in touch with a textile agent in Lima, Peru. Valencia toured manufacturing plants there, and chose ethical, fair-trade 100% Peruvian cotton for her new designs. The fabric is not only super-soft, it's also ideal for children with skin allergies.

Today, Mini-Miracles carries 10 core pieces for girls and boys: short- and long-sleeved t-shirts, one-piece bodysuits, pajamas and bandanas, all of which incorporate adaptive features. Valencia says the clothing is designed specifically to promote self-esteem and independence for exceptional children.

Help make a difference!

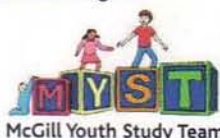
The McGill Youth Study Team is a specialized group of educational researchers committed to the study of attention and problem solving among persons with autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, and other genetic syndromes. We are looking for children (5 years and older), adolescents and young adults to participate in our studies that include computer and problem solving games. Small gifts are provided to all participants.

If you and your child are interested in participating and/or would like more information please contact Heidi Flores, lab coordinator, at (514) 398-8273 or MYST@mail.mcgill.ca

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All research carried out in the MYST lab is supervised by Dr. Jake Burack



¹ A small tube that is inserted into the arm or other site on a patient's body. It has a catheter on one end and medication or fluids are administered through the catheter lock. (www.wisegEEK.com/what-is-a-hep-lock.htm)



Choc-a-lot Dress
by SWEET LEMONADE US\$40

"Everything has g-tube pockets lined with waterproof materials to prevent stains, snaps at the neck for access if they have hep locks or a tracheotomy, and snaps in the front,"

explains Valencia. "The pants have snaps on the outside and zippers on the inside for easy diaper changes. If the client has a cast, a prosthesis, a brace or a splint, they don't need to wear tacky jogging pants that are big enough to fit over, and they don't need to slit a hole down their jeans. They can wear these pants and open

the zipper a little bit to allow room. I've also included pockets on the front; if they don't need them, they can use them for their trinkets, just like any other child."

The company also carries some models for adults, and takes custom orders for clients with specific needs.

Adaptive clothing usually has one or more of the following features:

- Flat seams, which reduce friction
- Easy access via snaps, Velcro or stretchy fabrics
- Extra room in the rear section of pants to accommodate diapers
- A longer rise in the back to accommodate sitting in a wheelchair
- Elastic waistbands, which makes getting dressed easier

Adaptive clothing is suitable for people who:

- Have a limited range of motion or impaired dexterity
- Use a wheelchair
- Have cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, developmental disabilities or rigidity
- Have catheters, colostomy bags, IV's or g-tubes

www.autismawareness.ca



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(All above by SOFT CLOTHING) 7: *Party Dress* US\$22

8: *Sensory Tee* US\$10 & *Classic Chino* US\$22

9: *Tunic Dress* US\$24 10: *Classic Cropped Cardigan* US\$25

11: *Hipster Tee* US\$16.99 over *Long Sleeve Sensory Tee* US\$15

& *Nautical Striped Mini* US\$23 12: *"Unisex" Jeans* US\$28

"Some parents of children with autism request that the snaps or zippers are in the back, so there's no way [the kids] can get in there," she says.

Leah Syroid, of Lloydminster, Alberta, says discovering Valencia's line of user-friendly adaptive clothing has been a lifesaver. "My four-year-old son Mathew has Mitochondrial disease (a neuromuscular disorder). He is g-tube fed, and this is where Victoria's clothing comes into play," explains Syroid. "She makes one-piece bodysuits with g-tube pockets. You just lift up the pocket to hook him up for his feed. These bodysuits are a key ingredient to what I need on a daily basis."

Valencia has tried hard to keep costs down while using high-quality

materials. Items range in price from around \$13 to \$50. Most important to Valencia is that you can't tell by looking at the clothing that it's been adapted. "Working with these little ones has been such a blessing to me; I wanted to be able to give some small token back to them, and dignity is a big thing," she explains. "People should be focusing on their abilities, rather than their disability, and that's what I wanted the clothing to do."

Since its launch, Mini-Miracles has grown and now sells to clients in Norway, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Now a busy mom of a two-year-old foster son with special needs as well as a one-year-old daughter, Valencia donates 10% of

her profits to children's and special needs charities.

Smooth and cool for back-to-school

Another online company, Soft Clothing for All Children, based in Brooklyn, NY, addresses a completely different wardrobe concern that can get in the way of a smooth transition back to school: sensory sensitivity. Soft recently released a line of seamless, tagless back-to-school wear, which it touts as being both "trendy and hip". From graphic tees to jeans that feel like sweatpants, the manufacturer caters to kids ages four to 12 with sensory sensitivity who may find off-the-rack clothing uncomfortable. Soft's director Jessica Ralli, who is also a special educator, notes that, "One of the main inspirations behind Soft was a desire to help kids in the classroom. Kids with sensory sensitivity can be bothered by tags, seams and clothing textures to a point where it interferes with their ability to learn and participate in classroom activities. We want our sensory sensitive kids to be able to participate in school and those events comfortably, so they can focus on what is important: learning, making friends, and enjoying their childhood!"

A grandmother's gift

In 2008, Debbie MacMaster welcomed the birth of her grandson Ryan with both joy and sadness. Ryan had suffered a severe injury during birth, which resulted in cerebral palsy. "I noticed how difficult it was to dress him, because he was quite rigid initially," recalls MacMaster, who lives near Syracuse, New York. "I started looking for adaptive clothing; there was a lot available for the elderly and adults, but I just couldn't find anything adorable for children."

Get the tools and support you need to help your exceptional child soar to new heights.

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