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Baby Gizmo Buying Guide

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the Baby Gizmo™ buying guide

From Pacifiers to Potties...
Why, When, and What to Buy
For Pregnancy through Preschool



Heather Maclean with Hollie Schultz

From the Mom Editors of **BabyGizmo.com** and the Creators of the Award-Winning **Little Laureate** Series

Real moms reveal the secrets to successful baby gear shopping

You've waited your whole life to get your hands on that magic baby product scanning gun. And it's brilliant fun. For the first three hours. And then it gets downright overwhelming. You know you need a crib, but what about a bassinet, a cradle, or a play yard? The stroller you love comes with a carry-cot, but can you actually carry the baby in it? Will you be able to get the green beans out of the cracks in that adorable high chair? You're a smart chick—why is this so hard?

It doesn't have to be! *The Baby Gizmo Buying Guide* is the most comprehensive guide to baby products on the planet. Heather Maclean and Hollie Schultz, the founders of BabyGizmo.com, a product-testing and research coalition of moms, pediatricians, and child development experts, walk you through not only standard purchases like car seats and high chairs, but also new generation choices like luxury stroller systems and designer diaper bags. Amidst Heather and Hollie's real-life mom stories and confessions (yes, they tasted the toys on their babies' activity centers), you'll discover:



- What you really need versus what's just nice to have
- Which products to include (and not include) on your baby registry
- The best time of the year to buy certain items
- Which products to store in the perfectly packed diaper bag
- How to avoid the "bad baby product buying cycle"
- Even which products can make you pretty (hint: see page 163)

The Baby Gizmo Buying Guide will help you select the right products for your unique needs and lifestyle, so you can bask in the bliss of a perfect purchase, stroll with confidence, and know your neighbors have diaper bag envy.

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Real Baby Gizmo buying guide Heather Maclean

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the Baby Gizmo™ buying guide

From Pacifiers to Potties . . .
Why, When, and What to Buy
For Pregnancy through Preschool

Heather Maclean with Hollie Schultz

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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For our children, because they made us mothers.

For our husbands, because they had a small,
rather fun role in making us mothers,
but their constant love and support helped make
us great mothers.

Do you know how many people there are
in the whole universe?
That's how much we love you.

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Model Name / Manufacturer	Store/Price	My Impressions	Grade

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Twenty-five

Strollers

Men have cars. Moms have strollers. Equal parts comfortable ride and fashion statement, no purchase is as fulfilling or personal to a mom as her stroller. And because you will use your stroller as often as you take your child out of the house, the perfect stroller purchase is one of the most important (and most fun!) baby gear purchases a mom will make.

While safety features dictate 90 percent of the decision-making of buying other baby gear, personal preference drives stroller buys. Yes, you still need to look for good straps and a safe ride, but a good part of choosing a stroller is all about color, fabric, design, budget, and pride.

For moms who just need a quick-wheeled contraption to push pokey kids, there are $15 umbrella strollers. For moms who want a complete luxury "system" that includes bassinets, rockers, and even toddler steering wheels, there are $1,500 options. For stroller junkies like us, there are is a whole bunch of heaven in between.

Design

Strollers have never looked so fine, thanks to a little designer company called Bugaboo and a little show called *Sex in the City.* Like Manolo Blahniks, Carrie Bradshaw and company introduced the middle class mom to luxury strollers when Miranda appeared onscreen in 2002 pushing a then-$700 Bugaboo. It was too rich for most of us, but oh, how we wanted one! And enough moms responded to the graceful lines and gorgeous fabrics—ditching their clunky, navy blue plaid strollers on the way—that the mid-range stroller manufacturers sat up and took note.

The Bugaboo trickle-down design effect has hit almost every major stroller manufacturer. Graco hired Andrew Serbinski, an industrial designer who specialized in racing bikes and motorcycles, and designer Cynthia Rowley to give their strollers some visual appeal. The results: graceful arcs and more modern fabrics. Maclaren tapped designers Kate Spade, Philippe Starck, and Lulu Guinness to make their strollers more fashion-forward. Even Fisher-Price and Kolcraft have debuted new, minimalist-looking models.

We've noticed the consumers are footing the bill for these new design advancements, as prices have gone up, but we're willing to pay for it because they're all just so pretty.

Life Cycle of Strollers

As we've alluded, and as our in-garage stroller parking lots attest, most moms need more than one stroller. In truth, the average mom ends up with up to three strollers per kid because most strollers suit a particular age and particular function well, but don't meet all needs.

Here's the typical life cycle of the strolling mom:

- ☆ **Newborn:** This age demands the biggest stroller for new baby protection and stability. You need a sturdy stroller that either can support an infant car seat carrier, or sports an infant bed. Because new babies need the most stuff, the best strollers for this age double as portable nurseries, giving you the most basket room and accessories, and are able to accommodate the world's largest, most overstuffed diaper bag.
- ☆ **Older babies:** Once baby has outgrown the infant car seat carrier or infant bed, you strip the newborn parts off a stroller. You still need a pretty hefty diaper bag and still pack the kitchen sink on every outing, but you secretly wish the stroller you bought for your newborn wasn't so darn heavy.
- ☆ **Toddlers:** By now, you're completely over your giant, utilitarian stroller and ready to banish it to the attic because it's so big and heavy and you simply don't need that much room anymore. Toddlers like to walk sometimes anyway, so you purchase a convenient, lightweight, umbrella stroller.

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- ☆ **Activity strollers:** As baby's first birthday approaches, you vow to shed the pregnancy weight once and for all, and take up jogging (or, more realistically, quick walking). You'll quickly discover the limitations of your standard or umbrella stroller, as even a brisk pace will send your front wheels aflutter. Now is when you purchase an all-terrain or jogging stroller.
- ☆ **Multiple-kid strollers:** As soon as baby number two starts kicking up the ultrasound, you realize all of your single strollers are for naught, as your first child is never going to make it if they have to walk full-time. There are double strollers in all categories: standard, lightweight, all-terrain, and jogging. There are even special strollers-and-a-half designed to fit one rider full-time and one part-time.

Primary Stroller Options

If you're looking for just one stroller to take you from birth through preschool, the following strollers are possibilities. You'll need the appropriate newborn accommodations, of course, and no small amount of durability, but it can be done with these types:

- Standard stroller
- Travel systems
- Lightweight-plus strollers
- Luxury stroller systems
- All-terrain strollers

Types of Strollers

To give you an idea of the scope of strollers (and better explain to our husbands why we really did need all 16 strollers parked in our garage), here's a quick summary of the types of strollers available in order of use, from birth to lazy kindergartner. Each stroller category below has its own special section in the following pages that will tell you what specific features to look for and

more. (You can also find our Top Five picks and thousands of other moms' opinions on BabyGizmo.com.)

- ☆ **Carriages:** Giant baby baskets on wheels, carriages are traditional and usually luxurious rides for new babies. These strollers are usually bought for their heirloom qualities and don't typically travel very well.
- ☆ **Standard strollers:** The most common stroller, standard strollers are large, can accommodate newborns to preschoolers, and offer loads of convenient features. There are single and double standard strollers.
- ☆ **Travel systems:** This is a standard stroller that comes with an infant car seat carrier as part of a coordinating set.
- ☆ **Lightweight-plus strollers:** The perfect cross between a standard stroller and a lightweight stroller, they are technically a couple of pounds heavier than a true "lightweight" class, but are sturdier, can support an infant car seat carrier, and provide more features than their lighter cousins. Although most of the models are for single babies, there are a few doubles out there.
- ☆ **Lightweight/umbrella strollers:** A lightweight stroller weighs 15 pounds or less. "Umbrella" refers to the two curved handles and the way most lightweight strollers close like an umbrella, but some lightweight strollers fold flat as well. Lightweight strollers are not suitable for newborns, most have fixed seats, and they are great for travel—but stripped of many convenience features. You can choose single or double lightweight strollers.
- ☆ **Luxury stroller systems:** A new breed of stroller with advanced design and luxury fabrics, luxury stroller systems are lightweight frames that come with multiple seating arrangements you snap in as your child grows. Most come with bassinets and standard stroller seats; some also come with infant car seat carriers and even rockers for use indoors. While some do sport footboards, sadly, for now, they are only available in the single variety.

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- ☆ **Strollers-and-a-half:** A standard stroller with a single seat for a primary rider, these strollers offer a rear footboard or tiny folding seat for hop-a-long bigger sibling to hitch a ride every once in a while.
- ☆ **All-terrain strollers:** These are rugged, outdoorsy strollers with special wheels and more flexible handling that allow you to tread over uneven, unpaved, and even unusual surfaces like sand. Some all-terrain strollers will allow you to walk at a brisk pace, but are not suitable for a full jog, because the front wheels swivel. There are both single and double versions.
- ☆ **Jogging strollers:** The only stroller designed for safe running, jogging strollers have a sturdy construction to withstand the speed, a fixed front wheel, hand brakes, and parent tethers so they can't get away from you. There are singles and doubles to be had.
- ☆ **Multiples strollers:** If you have triplets or more, there are special strollers designed just for you. With multiple seats to safely sit same-aged siblings, multiples strollers are large, but a lifesaver for moms born with only two arms.

Budget

How you slice up your stroller purchases depends primarily on your budget. If you're on a tight budget, you can certainly get away with a single standard stroller that you can use for up to four years. You can even score one for $70, or less if it's slightly used (and this is the one category we will give you our blessing to beg, borrow, and eBay to your heart's content).

However, because you will shove, slam, and drag your stroller, and because your child will kick, rip, and vomit on your stroller, there's a good chance many oft-used cheaper strollers won't last from sibling to sibling.

The average mom ends up with a standard, an umbrella, and an activity stroller. If you buy them separately, nice mid-range models from a discount store will mean you will likely spend a total of between $500 and $1,000. While most middle class moms think a luxury stroller system is out of reach, we did the math, and if you add up all the separate strolling and baby activity

gear they offer in one package, the $500 to $800 price tag can actually save you a few hundred bucks. You do get a much nicer, strut-worthy system as well, but you do have to outlay the cash all at once rather than working it into your expenses every couple of months.

Universal Stroller Features

While the construction and function might vary, all strollers share some universal features. They all have seats. They all have wheels. And if they want us to like them, they all have cup holders. Here is an explanation of the key stroller features for all types, including our comments about what we adore and what we abhor.

Safety

Look for a stroller that is stable, well constructed, and has strong safety straps. Also, check that the stroller is locked open every single time you unfold it. Some may seem locked, when in fact they aren't. The most common accidents with small children in strollers occur when strollers collapse while a baby is inside (usually because they aren't snapped and locked open properly) and when babies slip out through the seat bottom but get tangled in the straps. Always strap your child in with a safety strap between the legs, each and every time.

Height Limits

While every stroller has a weight limit, there aren't really height limits on strollers. Even so, most kids will grow too tall for a stroller long before they grow too heavy for it.

Every stroller design is different, but if you have tall children, note how easily they could squeeze into the seat or where they might comfortably rest their legs. An immobile snack tray that gets in the way of an older toddler's knees might force you to retire your stroller earlier than you might like. Some straps will be too snug between the legs too soon. And some are built so low, your preschooler's ankles run the risk of being eaten by the stroller wheels.

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Stroller Weight

Unless you live on the ground floor with no stairs in a flat state and walk everywhere, you're going to have to pick up your stroller from time to time. Suburban moms will be shoving them into the trunks of minivans, while urban moms will be dragging them down subway stairs or wrestling them into the backs of taxicabs.

While the best, sturdiest strollers used to be the heaviest, engineering advancements and the use of an aluminum chassis has cut the weight of many strollers by 10 pounds or more.

When stroller shopping, one of the first things we check is the weight of the stroller. Here's how those measurements translate into momspeak:

- ☆ **Under 10 pounds:** A dream. You can lift it with one finger. Like Superman.
- ☆ **10–15 pounds:** Still very light. You can lift it with one hand. Not forever, but you can.
- ☆ **15–18 pounds:** Light enough to easily swing up into a car's trunk by a single handle without throwing out your back. Light enough to carry through an airport without wanting to cry. But we wouldn't strap it to our backs and hike with this weight.
- ☆ **18–23 pounds:** Now you'll start to feel the stroller's weight. You're more lugging it around when it's folded than carrying it.
- ☆ **23–25 pounds:** See above. Now multiply the lugging by a factor of two.
- ☆ **25–30 pounds:** You had better really love the stroller, because you won't love this weight.
- ☆ **30+ pounds:** If you have this size stroller, you either have a carriage (and a bodyguard to carry it for you), or a double stroller that, heavy as it is, cannot be avoided. You will more pull this stroller out of your car and let it crash to the ground than actually lift it, and beg passing strangers to lift it back into your car for you (especially if you're still sporting stitches).

Folding

Equally as important as how sturdy and heavy a stroller is, is how it folds. You want a stroller that collapses easily, with one hand if at all possible, and folds into the most compact size. (On BabyGizmo.com you can find a wonderful chart listing all strollers' folded dimensions to help you determine which ones will actually fit in your trunk and which strollers would need to be strapped to your roof. We'd love to have included it in this book, but it would be outdated by the time you are reading this. Real-time information is one of the best by-products of the Internet. Only slightly better than online Scrabble.)

Most strollers fold well, but you'll hate a stroller that doesn't. Like really hate. Like balancing your checkbook hate. A bad fold isn't necessarily a complicated one. Even complicated systems can be quickly mastered and executed in a matter of seconds. In our opinion, bad folds are the ones that require you to wiggle, spit, and pray, and sometimes just don't happen. We've been stuck in the parking lot, cursing our fancy stroller, unable to get it to fold, but afraid we'll break something if we shove it too hard. Wanna know which ones suck to fold? Drop a few brand names and people will be quick to tell you.

We're also interested in a fold that results in the smallest, tightest bundle possible. If it also ends up standing upright, we ask it to marry us.

Folding lingo can be quite confusing, because some of it refers to the final, folded shape of the stroller, some refers to the method used to fold the strollers, and some is just terminology made up by manufacturers to sound cool. To add to the chaos, many strollers will claim several different folds in one or even make up new names that are a combination of old ones because they are trying to tell you both how the stroller folds and what it will look like folded. And maybe they're hoping we just get so blinded by the jabberwocky that we buy the one with the most words on the box. Which, sadly, has worked on us before.

Let's see if we can't slog through the terminology (remember, some strollers can have more than one of these folds):

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- ☆ **Flat fold:** Basically folds forward or backward in half, so it remains just as wide as it was unfolded, but now twice as thick, only kind of flat. Kind of. This is the bulkiest of all folds. The sworn enemy of our small trunks.
- ☆ **Umbrella fold:** The stroller folds forward and inward into a thick bundle, log shaped rather than flat. While the motion is different from how you actually fold an umbrella, the end result is a tight, stroller bundle that resembles a thick, folded umbrella (the big, giant golf kind, not the cute, in-your-purse kind).
- ☆ **Three-dimensional fold:** Simply another name for the umbrella fold.
- ☆ **Two-piece fold:** Common for luxury stroller systems, this fold requires you to unclip a seat from its base, then fold the base and store the two pieces separately, usually stacked on top of one another. The most time-consuming fold, and rather large. Like twice as large as a regular flat fold.
- ☆ **Compact tri-fold:** A two-handed fold in which you lift folding levers on both sides of the handle. Result is similar to a finished umbrella fold.
- ☆ **One-hand fold:** The entire stroller can be collapsed using one hand, albeit with usually a couple of steps for the hand. You usually push a button, twist a handle, and pull on something to complete the collapse.
- ☆ **One-touch fold:** A fantastically easy, foolproof folding system that allows you to push a single button with your thumb while holding a handle; you pull said handle and the stroller collapses. Very close to the one-hand fold, but a little better. (It's no magic Jetsons fold, though. You don't just push a button and stand back; exertion is required.)
- ☆ **One-step fold:** "One step" literally refers to your stepping on something. You step on a rear bar or lever, and the entire stroller lurches forward into a flat fold. It's easy, but these folds do kind of scare us. We don't like the idea that our kid is sitting in a stroller that could fold should we stumble against a single bar near our feet.

- ☆ **Five-second fold:** A quick fold that can be completed in five seconds, but does require the use of one foot and one hand. You step on one lever, then another, then push the stroller closed with your hands. End result is an umbrella fold.
- ☆ **Quick fold system:** A patented system for certain all-terrain strollers that allows you to grab a strap in the seat and lift up, and the entire stroller then collapses into a bundle. Unlike the one-step fold, we actually do like this one because you can't accidentally fold it on the run.
- ☆ **Standing fold:** Our favorite fold! Any of the above folds—one-step, one-handed, and so on—can also use a standing fold. Instead of collapsing away from you onto the ground, a standing fold brings the stroller toward you and ends with it in a folded, but upright, self-standing position. Genius system that keeps us from having to bend over, allows for easy loading into our car, and keeps our nice strollers looking nicer longer.

Locking Mechanism

When strollers are folded, you want them to stay that way. Not all strollers lock closed, but most do. Look for an easy-to-operate lock that holds the stroller as tightly closed as possible. One of our biggest pet peeves is loosey-goosey locks, which make transporting a folded stroller a giant pain.

Construction and Durability

Some strollers are made of steel and built to last. Others are made of plastic and will fall apart before your first kid's first birthday. More durable strollers tend to be more expensive, of course, but are a wise investment if they last longer.

Whatever stroller you choose must be sturdy enough to hold your kid. A stroller that cracks or has wheels that fall off when you're in mid-stride is not good for you and not good for baby.

All brand new strollers seem nice and solid in the store on the flat, glossy floor. But we put them to the test by bringing along a 4-year-old who is guaranteed to test the top of the stroller's weight limit. We strap our little test subject in, and then try to hop a curb. If there's not a short shelf nearby that you can push the stroller up onto, tip the stroller back onto its back wheels and pretend you're about to jump a log. Make no mistake, the salespeople hate this, but you can tell tons about the solid construction of a stroller by the way it feels tipped up with 40 pounds inside. If the stroller feels like it's about to snap in half, we move on.

Five-Point Harness

While strollers come with three- and five-point harness straps, five-point is better, especially for younger babies. Many systems allow you to convert a five-point into a three-point—nice for older children who only need to be snapped in at the waist and hate to be held back at the shoulder.

Strap Covers

Straps covers are a very nice feature much appreciated by babies because the straps can actually be sharp enough to scratch tender skin, especially around the neck. Strap covers can be purchased separately, but they never match quite as well and tend to pop off and get lost far, far too easily. As Oprah says, "Love is in the details," and we look for strollers that offer strap covers as a sign of how much the manufacturers think about the little things.

Reclining Seat

While most stroller seats recline, some recline more than others. Many offer "multiposition" recline, but the only position we care about is a full recline. Tiny babies require a full recline, as does any sleeping passenger. While many strollers advertise a full recline, they don't always deliver it. Full recline means flat, not sort-of-leaning-backward.

We've overlooked the importance of this feature before and then hated how our children were slumped over in strollers that didn't recline enough.

How easy the seat back reclines is another important consideration. More often than not, you'll discover your child is nodding off, and you want to gently recline the seat to coax her into a permanent dreaming state. A smooth, easy recline is best.

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Stroller Color and Pattern

Let's be honest, looks are important to all of us. We'd guess a full 80 percent of our final purchase decision is based on the stroller color and pattern. They could cover a roller skate in Burberry plaid and we'd want it. Thankfully, we have hundreds of choices from solid colors to plaids to graffiti-inspired to cartoons. There are bright reds, safety cone oranges, moss greens, and simple blacks. Many upscale strollers now offer the fabric separately, so you can even swap out the color for the next gender kid, or simply when you're sick of it.

For the most part, strollers are pretty safe, they share the same set of features, and so we give you permission to choose based on nothing else than the one you thought was prettiest. We have, and we still do.

Seat Fabric and Padding

More expensive strollers show their worth immediately in the seat fabric. Fancy strollers have fancy Italian fabrics and plush seats. Cheap strollers have scratchy polyester with hardly any padding at all. Nicer fabric will wear better and is easier to care for than cheaper fabric, so consider the fabric's contribution to the overall durability and worth of your stroller. And kids do appreciate a little extra padding, especially when we have them on mall duty for six hours at a time.

Washable Fabric

Many strollers have removable fabric for easy washing; just as many do not. But all should be at least spot cleanable.

We've found that how easy a fabric cleans is directly related to the price of the stroller. Cheap strollers stain easily, not helping their overall appearance of cheapness. Nice strollers usually clean up quite well.

Pay attention to how many seams and folds the seat has, and how deep the cracks are. Some baby food combinations—wet vanilla wafer comes to mind—will dry like mortar and you won't be able to chip it out with a jackhammer.

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Seat Edge

Just like on a fancy ergonomic office chair, strollers that offer a waterfall edge are better for a small rider's leg circulation. Some seats offer a curved front, while others just dead-end in a taut line.

Many strollers now offer an adjustable edge that can be raised for small babies and lowered for older riders. Our favorites are the ones that completely lift to a 90-degree angle, closing off the foot space entirely, making a cozy infant bed.

Footrest

For good posture and development, strollers should have a footrest for their small riders. Some footrests are nice, big shelves, while some are simple straps. In this case, size doesn't matter. As long as a child has something to rest the feet on, anything will do. Besides, bigger footrests add unneeded bulk and weight to the stroller.

Stroller Basket

When it comes to the basket, size matters. The bigger, the better. While most strollers do deliver in the basket department in terms of size, not all baskets are easily accessible. Pay close attention to how a basket is accessed, especially when the seat is fully reclined for an infant car seat or a sleeping child. A big basket is useless if you can't actually reach into it.

Some of our favorite baskets actually have a lower and load function that allows you to always be able to get at them. Baskets you have to access from the front? Not our friend.

Canopy

Large canopies are important for small children, especially because they can't wear sunscreen for the first six months. While the sunshade is obvious, canopies can also help shield a baby from cold, wind, and rain. Like our friend the big basket, the big canopy is best. The very best canopies rotate 180 degrees forward until they hit the baby snack tray to completely protect your child.

We also like peekaboo windows and pockets on the back of the canopy for storing our car keys or cell phone.

We're not big fans of canopies that have locking bars on the side to keep them extended because we inevitably forget we've got them locked down, and almost break them when we fold the stroller. We know they're there to keep the canopy extended, but most good strollers have solid enough canopies that the lock isn't needed. Living in the Windy City, we've had our share of upturned umbrellas, but have never had a canopy flip open on us. We won't throw out a stroller for having canopy locks, but we will routinely refuse to lock them.

No matter what size the canopy, it should always provide adequate ventilation to your child. Stick your own head up under there and make sure it isn't too stuffy and you can still feel the breeze.

Stroller Handle

Stroller handles can be a single straight bar, a curved bar, two separate handles, or two curved hooks. Some are even ergonomic. While some moms prefer the single handle, others prefer two. It's really a matter of personal preference, and which handle you think will best accommodate your shopping bags.

When you're test-driving a stroller in the store, be sure to try it one-handed, as more often than not, you'll be lucky to have one of those free. For a complete real-world test, also try pushing the stroller with your belly, steering it with your elbow, or pulling it from the front so you can baby talk to your baby, hopefully shushing them enough so you can try on one more outfit before they kick you and your crying kid out of the store.

Some stroller handles are wonderfully padded, and some are not. Some are even inexplicably covered in a mean, ridged rubber that hurts a poor mom's hands. We like the most padded ones possible, but look for a quality covering. Foam chunks falling off the handle has prematurely aged more than one of our strollers. How can you tell if the padding is quality? Pinch at it in the store (and then blame your husband if anything actually falls off).

Height-Adjustable Handle

Many strollers offer a height adjustment setting that allows you to raise or lower the handles. This is not necessary for the average mom, but is an absolute lifesaver if you or your husband are super tall or super short, as it can save your back and keep you from kicking the stroller as you stroll.

The handle should be at a comfortable height, generally at waist level or slightly below.

While we do love to use our stroller handles to hang any and every thing, be careful never to overload a stroller from the back—especially lightweight strollers—as they can tip backward.

Reversible Handle

One of our favorite new stroller features is the reversible handle. With a few simple clicks, a reversible handle allows you flip the handle in the opposite direction and push your stroller with your baby facing you rather than out at the world. This is especially useful for smaller babies, whom we like to see at all times. In big strollers, sometimes tiny ones are hidden behind the canopies when they are front facing, and we appreciate the opportunity to remedy that.

Maneuverability

All strollers will wheel your baby from here to there, but the amount of effort it takes to push them varies greatly. Some strollers glide like a dream. Others you have to really shove. Check turning radius, remembering that more often than not, you'll be trying to squeeze your stroller down tight store aisles and into small spaces. Some strollers turn on a dime with one pinkie. Some you have to dig into so hard to take a corner that your wrists ache. When shopping for strollers, remind yourself that you're going to be pushing one for the next 1,460 days. A stroller that maneuvers well is the difference between loving those days and cursing your purchase.

Wheels

While the traditional stroller has four same-sized wheels, sometimes those wheels are doubles (for eight in all), sometimes they are double in the front only, and sometimes they are larger in the back. Some strollers now even rock the three-wheeled look.

The number of wheels is irrelevant; you're looking for a good turning radius, easy maneuverability, and quality wheels. Some wheels are rubber,

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some are air filled, some simple plastic. Avoid the plastic if you can. Like our old Big Wheels, crappy plastic wheels will wear unevenly and eventually you'll end up with flat spots. No good.

Rubber wheels are best. Some are sealed, and some allow you to fill with air accordingly; each stroller company has its own preference. Self-filled wheels have both advantages and drawbacks: filling them yourself means you can adjust for varied terrains, but it also means you can get a flat.

The bigger the wheels, the easier the stroller will be to push, but the larger it will be when folded.

Suspension

The best strollers offer suspension—a springing system over the wheels to help absorb some of the shock of bumps and potholes, giving baby a smoother ride. Some strollers have suspension only on the back wheels, but we like it in the front and the back. Note that full-wheel suspension can make a stroller seem extra "wobbly." A quality stroller will have a strong frame, even though the suspension wiggles when you shake it. A lower quality stroller will feel so rickety, you think it might fall apart (as, trust us, it eventually will).

Brakes

Any stroller you ever buy, even the $9 umbrella ones, should have a brake to prevent runaways. While some braking systems are hand operated off the stroller handle, most are levers you kick to engage. Some back wheels have individual brakes that must be set individually, but we prefer the ones with a single brake bar that locks both wheels at the same time.

You want solid brakes that will catch and hold; heavier strollers should have stronger brakes. And pay attention to the ease with which brakes are disengaged. Some are simple to undo, but others will darn near break your toe.

Cup Holders

The simple, lowly parent cup holder is the convenience feature we cannot live without. We've tried, and we truly almost died. And while there are universal, after-market cup holders available, they never work quite as well as ones built right in.

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Not all cup holders are the same. Some hang off the side and get in the way when we're folding the stroller or shoving it into our trunk. Some are too shallow to hold a jumbo coffee. The best ones are nice and deep and positioned between the two handles.

Parent Consoles

Some strollers come with an entire parent console straddling the handles. Some are hard, molded plastic; others are soft, fabric pockets. We like multiple cup holders and carved-out spaces to throw our keys, but we find covered compartments, built-in glasses cases, and wipe containers to be overkill.

Sadly, most of the best strollers are sorely lacking in the parent console category. You can buy any number of pouches to hang off the back, but that's where we have our spectacular diaper bag. In many cases, we are forced to just make do with the cup holder.

Child Snack Tray

While most strollers come with a stroller bar in front of baby, many instead (or in addition) offer a snack tray. We love snack trays as they help us corral snacks. Snack trays don't have to be giant sized to be useful, and the larger ones do contribute to a bulkier fold size and end up scraping on the concrete every time we collapse our stroller.

Many child snack trays come with cup holders as well, but they are almost always too shallow, even for a sippy cup.

Look for a snack tray that can be swung open to one side so an older toddler can more easily climb in. Some snack trays remove completely for when you're looking to de-bulk your ride.

Snack Tray Toys

Some snack trays come with attached toys, which sounds good in theory, but in practice they end up in the way, extra grimy, and our kids are usually stimulated enough when they're on a roll not to care about batting at something in front of them.

Newborn Pillows

Many strollers offer extra headrest and body pillows for newborn use, which is a great feature because newborns need all the support they can get. You can buy pillows separately, but they look nicest and fit the best when they come with your stroller.

Rain Cover

A rain cover is an additional accessory that many stroller manufacturers now include for free. It's a specially designed plastic cover that shields your entire stroller from the rain, but still allows proper ventilation for your child (which is why we highly recommend it over your regular Hefty bag).

How important they are to you depends on where you live. If you're an urban mom and have to walk a lot, they are a must-have. If you're a suburban mom who lives in her car, rain covers are a nice-to-have. We love ours, but we frequently forget to bring it. When unexpectedly caught in a downpour, we just tend to run really fast and hide somewhere until it stops raining.

Foot Muff/Weather Boot

A foot muff, also called a "weather boot," is like a tiny, half sleeping bag attached to the bottom of the stroller seat that can help keep your baby's feet and legs warm in cold weather. They are a wonderful luxury addition, not entirely necessary, but a great alternative to the receiving blanket we used to use that inevitably ended up being dragged behind us through puddles in the parking lot.

Test Drive

Finally, before you purchase a stroller, take it for a test drive. You might be able to find the best prices online, and the pictures all look great on the Internet, but when it arrives and you find that you kick the basket when you walk, you'll be kicking yourself.

We've taken more than one day trip across town just to visit a baby boutique and test drive a certain stroller. In person, you can touch the seat, feel the fabric, pull on the canopy, push it around, test the brakes, check its turning radius, and of course, learn how it folds and unfolds. Stroller salespeople

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in specialty stores are notoriously well versed in not only the strollers they sell, but the strollers they don't (and they're more than happy to tell you why they don't sell certain brands).



Carriages

Created in 1733 for an English duke, the first known baby stroller resembled a small horse-drawn carriage and was meant to be pulled by small dogs or ponies. Shaped like a shell with snake patterns painted on it, the carriage did include a comfortable seat for baby and even springs for shock absorption. The cumbersome design did not become parent operated until handles were added 50 years later. A luxury toy for the upper class, baby carriages were large, ornate, nonfolding, and a nuisance to pedestrians on crowded sidewalks.

The baby carriage, sometimes called a "pram," of today has changed very little. It is still a large, cumbersome basket on gigantic wheels that does not collapse and clears quite a path on the street. Meant for urban strolls or walks around "the grounds," carriages are still beloved by the metropolitan upper class, modern-day royalty, and celebrity moms. They offer baby a plush ride and many even sport ornate curtains to deter peeping paparazzi.

Carriages are bulky and far less portable than any other category of stroller. Most do not include big baskets or any other typical stroller features such as cup holders or adjustable handles. But what they lack in conveniences, they make up for in élan.

Carriage

Also Known As
Pram, baby buggy
Age Range
Birth to 9-plus months
Total Usage
9-plus months
Recommendation
Nice to have
When to Buy
Before baby is born, so you can enjoy it immediately.

Construction

The most famous carriage company in the world is Silver Cross, which has been hand finishing their prams since 1877. Each carriage is individually numbered and personally signed by the artisan, craftsmen who pass their skills down with each generation.

Most carriages are a study in historical nostalgia and evoke a feeling of a quieter, simpler life. The baby bed is roomy and plush, yet very open to the mom, who can take dreamy walks while actively bonding with her bouncing baby.

Snooty Vocabulary Lesson

Carriages are called "prams" in Britain and well-heeled American circles, but we bet most of them don't even know that "pram" is actually short for "perambulator." So what's a perambulator? It technically means a baby carriage, of course, but it's derived from the verb *perambulate*, which means to walk around and survey things, or to stroll.

Feeling smarter? Us too. Now if only we could figure out how to use our trivia superpowers to score one of those $2,000 prams . . .

Carriages are beloved for the protection they offer small babies thanks to their steel construction, and are known for their smooth suspension. The most exquisite carriages feature a hand-sprung chassis, leather suspension straps for extra cushioning, and even hand-spoked wheels.

Size

Traditional carriages are large, like four feet tall and 66 pounds large. Much like the Hummer, that much size may seem unnecessarily extravagant to some, but many people feel the point of a carriage is to give a baby a large, magical, traveling space.

In fact, the appeal of the carriage is mythical. Pushing it, you feel elegant, and somehow the extra space makes you feel like you've got an extra special baby. You need an extra special bank account, of course, and if you have it, we certainly don't fault you for perambulating with your baby in style.

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Portability

While many carriages do not fold, more often these days, they do. In the 1970s, many manufacturers allowed for the bed portion of the carriage to be removed, and the "carry-cot" was born. The portable bassinet feature allows parents to carry their baby from the street into the house without the bulky frame and wheels.

Age Range

Most carriages have a weight limit of up to 30 pounds, although by the time babies attempt to climb out, they need to be transferred to a new stroller.

Most parents only use traditional carriages for the first few months, from birth to around 4 months. This limited age range makes them a nonnecessity, luxury purchase for most, but for many, they are quality heirlooms to be passed down from generation to generation.

Wheels

Most carriages have large, air-filled wheels that are fixed, although some modern models have added swivel capabilities, as even the toniest mom sometimes has to steer around dog poop.

There should be firm brakes on both back wheels that you can access easily.

Steering

Carriages are large, but most of them push like a dream. Look for one that steers smoothly and doesn't allow for too much give when turning corners or traversing uneven ground.

Stability

Look for a solid, durable carriage with a wide base that resists tipping over, even if baby should roll to the side (although when babies can roll over by themselves, for safety, you need to pick a new stroller).

Material

The fancier carriages have fancier fabrics, everything from brushed linen to silk to the finest combed cotton. Look for a durable, moisture-resistant fabric that can be spot cleaned.

Baby Bed

Typically, the baby carriage compartment features plush fabrics and a soft mattress, but make sure the fabric is not near baby's face and that the mattress is firm enough for safe infant sleeping. And just like any mattress in any baby sleeping space, the mattress should fit firmly in the frame, allowing no more than one finger width of space.

Mindful of the SIDS danger of soft bedding and tight sleeping quarters, many carriages now have special ventilated mattresses and even ventilation systems in the bed.

Price

While most carriages cost around $1,000, you can find $400 and $4,000 versions.

Why we love them: Carriages are the very embodiment of rich romance. And we love pretending we're famous.

Why we don't: They're giant, not very maneuverable, and for all the money, our babies outgrow them so very quickly. Sigh.

Features to Consider

- ☆ Portability
- ☆ Wheels
- ☆ Maneuverability
- ☆ Stability
- ☆ Fabric
- ☆ Mattress

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NOTES: *Carriages*

Model Name / Manufacturer	Store/Price	My Impressions	Grade



Single Standard Strollers

The workhorse of strollers, single standard strollers are the largest single stroller, the most common stroller, and for many families, the primary pick.

They usually have large, padded seats with multiple reclining options, roomy baskets, double wheels that swivel in front for a smooth ride, and tons of features. They are heavier than lightweight strollers, but still light enough to be pulled in and out of most trunks quite easily.

Price

We're going to start with the price range, because it affects so many aspects of the stroller. The more you spend, the more features you'll get, the longer the stroller will last, and the nicer it will look. Because this is the stroller most parents use the longest, we recommend investing in a good one that will actually outlast your kids. A crappy stroller will roll its way to the trash before your first kid is done with it. A well-built, well-maintained stroller can be sold on eBay or Craigslist for up to 70 percent of its original price.

Standard strollers range in price from $79 to $500. Real quality kicks in around the $120 to $200 range.

Single Standard Stroller

Also Known As
Full-size stroller, pushchair

Age Range
Birth to 4 years

Total Usage
4 years

Recommendation
Must have, unless you choose another option from birth

When to Buy
Before baby is born.

Age Range

Not all standard strollers can be used from birth because newborn babies, with no neck control, need an almost flat recline and special support.

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Although the actual stroller seat might not be able to accommodate a newborn, most standard strollers do offer infant car seat carrier attachments to allow parents to snap newborns tucked into their car seats into the stroller from day one.

Ideally, with a high enough weight limit and durable enough stroller, you should be able to use a standard stroller from birth through the end of your stroller days. However, most strollers aren't that ideal, as they break down or wear out their welcome. Most likely you will be tired of lugging so much weight and room around by late toddlerhood, but in a pinch, if you're a one-stroller-only gal, the single standard stroller is for you.

Weight Limit

The weight limit of most standard strollers is generally higher than any kid you'll care to keep pushing around. Most top out at 40 pounds, although some models do go all the way to 50 pounds.

Weight of Stroller

Standard strollers are the heaviest single strollers. They range in weight from 20 to 28 pounds. Every year, manufacturers try to shave a bit of weight off their strollers without sacrificing too much sturdiness, and oh, how we appreciate it!

Folding

Due to their weight and bulk, standard strollers are all flat fold. Look for one with the easiest fold, one-handed if possible.

Reclining Seat

Especially if you're going to use this stroller with a newborn, find a seat that fully reclines. And make sure the reclining function is smooth and easy to operate.

Portability

While they are heavy, they aren't too heavy to travel with. It's not the most fun trip, but it can be done.

Why we love them: We love strollers and standard strollers are the standard. The workhorse of strollers, they fit most purposes, most children, and most budgets.

Why we don't: We don't don't.

Features to Consider

- ☆ Fully reclining seat
- ☆ Shock-absorbing wheels
- ☆ Large, easily accessible basket
- ☆ Snack tray
- ☆ Sun canopy
- ☆ Footrest
- ☆ Parent console
- ☆ Harness type
- ☆ Brakes
- ☆ Ease of fold
- ☆ Weight
- ☆ Suspension
- ☆ Locking mechanism
- ☆ Pattern
- ☆ Infant car seat carrier adapter

NOTES: *Single Standard Strollers*

Model Name / Manufacturer	Store/Price	My Impressions	Grade

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Travel Systems

A travel system is a single standard stroller packaged with a complementary infant car seat carrier designed to be clipped to said stroller. Like peanut butter and jelly, the stroller and car seat in a travel system set are made for each other—with matching color, matching fabric, and guaranteed mechanical compatibility. It's the most popular pick for the new mom who likes all her gear to match, and for those seeking peace of mind that their infant car seat will work with their stroller.

Only a handful of stroller manufacturers make car seats as well, and many moms consider the ability to clip the infant carrier into the stroller a necessity for the first six months of baby's life. Most strollers have adapter pieces that allow the most popular infant car seat carriers to work with their model, but travel system sets guarantee a perfect match.

The Components

The infant car seat carrier and the standard stroller in the travel system set are not special models made just for a travel system. They are regular models, sold separately most everywhere, just packaged together by color and pattern, with hopefully a break in price. Don't be blinded by the pairing; each component should be evaluated individually. Read our sections on infant car seat carriers and single standard strollers to know which features to look for.

Travel System

Also Known As
Stroller system, car seat/stroller system, pram system, car seat–compatible stroller

Age Range
Birth to 4 years

Total Usage
4 years

Recommendation
Nice to have

When to Buy
Before baby is born.

Err toward the Better Car Seat

Because the combinations of which model car seat comes with which model stroller are endless, you'll have quite a decision to pick the best match. Our advice is to research all car seat carrier and stroller models individually as if they never came in a set at all, decide which models you like best, and then see if you can find them as a travel system set. Too many moms think the planning is all done when they are presented with a travel system and just choose based on color, but not all travel systems offer the safest car seats or the best strollers.

If in doubt—you love the stroller but aren't crazy about the car seat that comes with it or vice versa—err on the side of the better infant car seat carrier, as the perfect car seat is more important for your baby.

To better prepare yourself for picking the perfect infant car seat (and to learn when to safely use and not use it), check out our detailed section on infant car seats (pages 98–106).

Beware the Bad Stroller

While we recommend you concentrate on the car seat portion, don't forget about the stroller entirely. Many travel systems are put together not for the convenience of parents, but for a manufacturer to unload unpopular strollers that aren't selling well singly. In the blush of first baby gear purchases, it's easy to think all the strollers rolling along under the car seat carriers are the same, but six months down the line, when you unclip the seat and discover you're left with an unwieldy, monstrous stroller that doesn't maneuver well and folds like a nightmare, you will not be a happy mama. And when mama's not happy, nobody's happy!

Travel Systems Sold Separately

Because some of the best stroller makers don't make car seats, those of us in love with those strollers were stuck using infant car seat carriers that didn't color coordinate. Doesn't sound like a big deal, but pushing a bright red stroller with a blue plaid car seat is hardly ideal. Thankfully, some of the car seat makers and stroller experts started working together and have released their respective products in matching fabrics and colors. You usually have to buy the pieces separately, but they look great together.

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Price

Travel systems range in price from $100 to $400. Most are in the $200 range.

Why we love them: We love "matchy-matchy."

Why we don't: We love it to a fault. And sometimes get stuck with a subpar stroller because of it.

Features to Consider

- ☆ Car seat quality
- ☆ Stroller features
- ☆ Car seat attachment to stroller

NOTES: *Travel Systems*

Model Name / Manufacturer	Store/Price	My Impressions	Grade



Lightweight-Plus Strollers

A relatively new type of stroller on the market falls right between a standard stroller and a lightweight stroller: the lightweight-plus. Lightweight-plus strollers offer the strength and stability to carry your newborn or infant car seat carrier, but at half the weight.

Lightweight-plus strollers are a little bigger and a lot more stable than a lightweight stroller. An infant car seat carrier rides securely on top, but the stroller you're left with after your baby grows up is nimble, light, and easy to travel with.

Hard to Spot

Lightweight-plus strollers can be hard to find in a crowd because they are usually miscategorized—either thrown in with standard strollers or mixed with the lightweights. Most online stores don't differentiate either, but on BabyGizmo.com we give them their own, special category (because we think they are such a special stroller).

The way to spot a lightweight-plus stroller is by stroller weight and infant car seat compatibility. True lightweight strollers weigh less than 15 pounds and are not meant for newborns. (While a few lightweights do advertise they can accept an infant car seat carrier, we personally wouldn't put our newborn in a stroller that weighed less than 15 pounds.) Standard strollers weigh over 20 pounds. Lightweight-plus strollers are between 16 and 19 pounds and can accommodate a newborn or an infant car seat carrier.

Lightweight-Plus Stroller

Also Known As
Buggy, lightweight stroller, standard stroller, midweight stroller

Age Range
Birth to 4 years

Total Usage
4 years

Recommendation
Must have, unless you choose another option from birth

When to Buy
Before baby is born.

Longest Age Range

While standard strollers can be used from birth to about 4 years, they are large and heavy enough to make you regret them before your child turns 18 months. Many parents, desperate to lighten their load, turn to a lightweight stroller. Lightweight strollers, however, offer smaller baskets, fewer convenience features, and stiffer seats that can be a shocking downgrade to a mom used to having a place to pile everyone's winter coats, 12 shopping bags, two Cokes, and a diaper bag.

Lightweight-plus strollers are genius because they give you much of the room and features of a standard stroller, but in a tinier, lighter package. We actually found we never wanted to retire our lightweight-plus stroller because we didn't want to lose the big basket, the stability, and the cup holder. And because it was only two pounds heavier than a lightweight stroller, we never had to.

Maneuverability

In our opinion, due to their smaller but superior design, lightweight-plus strollers handle much better than standard strollers. Like a lightweight stroller, they fit in tight places and can turn corners more easily, but unlike lightweights, they won't tip over in a stiff breeze.

Reclining Seat

Because they are safe for newborns, lightweight-plus strollers should have a fully reclining seat. Make sure it reclines smoothly and easily.

Carry-Cots

A few lightweight-plus strollers actually make carry-cots, also called bassinets, that attach to their strollers. They are very beautiful, and allow a mom to stroll carriage-style with her newborn, but also take baby into the

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house to sleep. The bassinets are usually around $200 extra, not cheap, but cheaper than a carriage or luxury stroller system.

If you choose a carry-cot, verify that the fabric is breathable, the baby has proper ventilation, the mattress is firm, and you cannot fit more than one finger between the mattress and any side.

Price

Because they weigh less, many mid-range lightweight-plus models are cheaper than their standard counterparts. Some upscale lightweight-plus strollers cost considerably more than a typical standard stroller, but not more than a comparable quality standard and lightweight stroller purchase together. And because the lightweight-plus stroller serves as both, we think you come out ahead. Lightweight-plus strollers range from $59 to $350.

Why we love them: Pound-for-pound, they are the best single stroller purchase you can make. They last the longest, can be used for the most varied functions, and would be our pick if we could only pick one.

Why we don't: We know it defies the laws of science, but we still wish we could stuff a few more parent conveniences and a bigger basket on them without adding to the size or weight.

Features to Consider

- ☆ Carry-cot option
- ☆ Fully reclining seat
- ☆ Shock-absorbing wheels
- ☆ Large, easily accessible basket
- ☆ Snack tray
- ☆ Sun canopy
- ☆ Parent cup holders
- ☆ Harness type

EVENFLO ET AL. EX1031

- ☆ Handle
- ☆ Footrest
- ☆ Locking mechanism
- ☆ Brakes
- ☆ Ease of fold
- ☆ Weight
- ☆ Suspension
- ☆ Pattern

NOTES: *Lightweight-Plus Strollers*

Model Name / Manufacturer	Store/Price	My Impressions	Grade