

CONSUMER NEWS



Happy Feet

Children's Footwear Takes an Eco-Turn

By BRITA BELLI

Kids outgrow shoes at an alarming rate. And gone are the days of the all-white walking shoes that live on as bronzed bookends or pencil holders. Kids' shoes are a quickly expanding market, filled with mini adult versions of everything from flip-flops to slippers to heeled dress shoes. Companies with a green perspective are looking to balance what's most important in a child's shoe—durability and flexibility—with materials and methods that are better for the planet. These environmentally conscious shoes are generally more expensive, but kids' shoes are also a favorite hand-me-down, especially during those fast-growing toddler years. That makes quality construction all the more appealing, whether as a parent to multiple kids, or a mom or dad in a network of other like-minded parents.

Environmental shoe companies are balancing durability and flexibility with materials and methods that are better for the planet.

A Patagonian Promise

"It is an investment if you're going to do quality," says Craig Throne, general manager of footwear at outdoor clothing company Patagonia. "But the shoes do get handed around a bit. If you make a quality product, it doesn't get trashed."

Patagonia prides itself on making clothes that are meant to last for years and take a beating. The company put the same conscious foot forward last summer when it launched its kids' shoe line. Patagonia has been making climbing gear and outdoor wear for more than 30 years, and is committed to using sustainable materials—including recycled polyester and organic cotton in its clothes—but footwear is a new venture. "The shoes are right at the

formative stage," says Throne. "The first step is that we're using relatively high recycled content, including rubber off the factory floor. Our hemp shoes are antimicrobial and wear pretty well, although not as well as leather."



Throne admits that leather is the company's "big struggle," and one that Patagonia doesn't have a strict policy on. Parents questioning the durability of a shoe with recycled content need only hold a Patagonia kids' "Pup" (\$60) in their hand—the shoe is rugged and sturdy enough for hiking or climbing, with a tightening tab on the laces that prevents the need for bow-tying. The kids' "Sprat" (\$55), a 100 percent organic cotton Velcro shoe, with hemp fibers in the laces and recycled rubber in the soles, look ideal for school days or warm weather romps. The kid's "Cub" (\$55), which comes in "powder pink" has managed to combine a rugged hiking boot with feminine fuzziness—and the elastic laces that seem not to require tying are fairly genius.



Of course, packaging plays a big role and in Patagonia's case that means 100 percent recycled content boxes with soy-based inks and fun graphics that encourage kids to reuse the boxes. "We want to give kids something better, and we're getting them to participate and be more aware of the outdoor world," says Throne. Through an innovative website it started in the fall, The Footprint Chronicles, Patagonia is allowing customers to track



the whole lifecycle of its products—including shoes—from the sustainable materials used to the wasteful packaging to the shipping distance indicated through red dots on a global map.

Smarter Kids Make Better Companies

Even young children are beginning to make the connection between their actions and the environment, says Lisa DeMarkis, head of the kid's division at Timberland, which is launching its first line of sustainable kid's shoes this spring. "Kids today are learning about the environment at younger and younger ages—in many cases, they're even teaching their parents," DeMarkis says. "It's important to show kids that even small choices made every day can add up and have a positive impact."

The company strives to use the most environmentally friendly materials when possible—such as recycled soda bottles (PET) in linings or meshes, recycled laces and organic cotton canvas. But the bottom line is to make sure that the shoes meet performance goals. "At the end of the day, the shoe has to stand up to kids and their daily adventures," DeMarkis says.

Styles include the Euro-stylish Sphereon collection for boys, with air flow for odor inhibiting and cushioned insoles for comfort, and the brightly colored Baldaci collection for girls, slip-ons made with sturdy soles and water-resistant materials. Curious customers can read the "nutritional labels" right on Timberland's 100 percent post-consumer recycled shoeboxes. Both styles require 3.1 kilowatt hours of energy to produce, five percent of which came from renewable sources, according to the labels. Prices range from \$45 to \$55, based on the size.

Losing the Leather

Deep eco parents may not be able to get past the use of leather in their kids' shoes, a constant in styles from large manufacturers. And it's not just a matter of cruelty anymore. While that is a major issue for animal rights supporters—due to hideous conditions in overseas slaughterhouses (pri-

marily India and China, reports People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)—turning animal skin to leather leaves a nasty environmental legacy, too. The process requires copious amounts of energy and a toxic stew of chemicals including formaldehyde, coal tar and some cyanide-containing finishes. The tanning process is just as pollutant-laced, and both leave chemicals in the water supply and on the hands (and in the lungs) of workers.

While animal-free vegan shoes have been available to men and women for some time, it's trickier to find options for kids (though there's always the very popular and lightweight Crocs). Many of the go-to vegan shoe sites, including allveganshopping.com, vegetarianshoesandbags.com, alternativeoutfitters.com, veganessentials.com and Pangea's veganstore.com, lack shoes for small feet. Shoppers can find a selection of options at the all-vegan, fair trade and environmentally friendly site KidBean.com. From the soft-soled adorably designed Isabooties (\$26) made with synthetic Ultrasuede, to flexible pleather uppers for first-time walkers (\$32) to slip-on hemp shoes in a rainbow of earth tones with recycled tire soles (\$20), the shoes seem ideal for toddlers just learning to balance who need a good deal of flexibility and "feability" in their shoes. The site was started by a mom tired of having to hunt and pick through various websites to find a full spectrum of natural, vegan baby products.

For parents of budding dancers, a vegan alternative ballet slipper can be had from the Cynthia King Dance Studio in Brooklyn, New York. The dance instructor and studio owner approached a local shoemaker when she couldn't find an affordable outlet for vegan slippers, and now provides them to the world at large for \$25 (plus shipping and handling) via her website.

CONTACTS: Cynthia King Dance Studio (vegan ballet slippers), (718)437-0101, www.cynthiakingdance.com; Isa booties, (303)564-0751, www.isabooties.com; KidBean, www.kidbean.com; Patagonia, (800)638-6464, www.patagonia.com; Timberland, (888)802-9947, www.timberland.com. **E**

BRITA BELLI is managing editor of E.

a,b) Timberland's Baldaci for girls and Spheroon for boys. c,e,f) The Patagonia Sprat, Cub & Pup. d) Isabooties.



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