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Local resident pioneers baby food kit

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For the Monitor

Parents of small children were alarmed by a program aired recently on Channel 4 News, exposing the health and nutritional dangers lurking in store-bought baby food.

Reporters found that baby food loses much of its nutritional value through high-temperature processing necessary for the vacuum sealing of food containers. An investigation of the marketing practices of several chain stores revealed the fact that baby food often stays on supermarket shelves long past its expiration date or is "recycled," until it's "actually older than your baby," the news report cautioned.

Although the managements of several chain stores have promised to look into the matter and prohibit the sale of non-fresh baby food, many parents feel wary about feeding their babies processed food.

The Fresh Baby system, launched nationwide in September 2002, provides an easy, healthy, and economic alternative to store-bought products. The founders, sisters Cheryl Tallman and Joan Ahlers, say their concept allows parents complete con-

trol over the foods their baby is consuming while significantly cutting costs, increasing the food's nutritional value, and teaches healthy eating habits from an early age on.

Co-founder and Director of Sales for Fresh Baby, Ahlers, who lives in Los Alamos with her husband and five children, said she didn't invent the system of making baby food at home.

"Even 30 years ago, the idea of steaming and pureeing high-quality fruits and vegetables and freezing them, wasn't new," she said. "But there was no easy-to-follow guide out there, just a lot of trial and error. I wanted to come up with a simple method that would take the guesswork out of baby food preparation."

Drawing on the expertise of generations of parents, and incorporating findings from exhaustive research in the field of pediatric nutrition, Ahlers came up with her own concept of easy and healthy homemade baby food.

When her sister had her first child in 2001, Ahlers shipped the rudiments of a Fresh Start Kit to the new mother.

Tallman was immediately enthusiastic. As working mom with little time to spare, she found it took her only about

one half hour a week to prepare enough food to last throughout the week. She felt in control of her child's diet, and noted the baby was eating a more diverse variety of foods, many of them not available on the mass market, and enjoying them. The food was high quality and always fresh.

Both Ahlers and Tallman noted that their kids seemed to have fewer childhood ailments, such as earaches. Also, they estimate the system saved them from \$300 to \$450 during their babies' first year of life.

To their amusement, the sisters began to be known as "super-moms" among their friends, and Tallman, an entrepreneur who holds a degree in biomedical engineering, drew on her extensive business managing abilities to turn her sister's idea into a product that "would inspire parents nationwide," Ahlers said.

After 10 months of product development, more research, and valuable input from Fresh Baby's advisory board of health care specialists, some of them registered nurses in pediatric ICU units, Fresh Baby's first product, the Fresh Start Kit, was ready to be launched.

BABY Company helps babies get a healthy diet

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The kit contains an easy-to-read combination workbook and cookbook that includes information on introducing solid foods, the Fresh Start baby food making system and over 40 recipes.

What's innovative about the meal ideas is that they encourage variety to expand the baby's palette, cut back or eliminate additives and "fillers," and advocate natural flavors from herbs and spices, Ahlers said. The book is intended to be personalized so parents can monitor their child's eating habits and taste preferences.

A 22-minute video, intended to boost parents confidence "that this is really easy to do," helps parents select high-quality ingredients and prepare them, she continued.

BUSINESS



FRESH BABY Joan Ahlers of Fresh Baby shows off the company's first product, The Fresh Start Kit, in her Los Alamos kitchen.

A Quick Reference Card contains helpful hints about what age to introduce certain foods, food interaction, common ailments, nutrient source information, and healthy eating habits. Two covered freezer trays are included in the package.

Fresh Baby is selling "very well" since it was launched last year, Ahlers said. "We're really excited about this."

In addition to New Mexico sales points in Santa Fe and Taos, CB Fox Department Store in Los Alamos is carrying the product. The store's buyer, Mary Mah, is enthusiastic.

"Prepared food shouldn't be the main part of your diet at any age," she said. "We are already carrying the KidCo Food Mill, and it is selling well. These days, increasing numbers of parents seem to be

looking into making their own baby food. The Fresh Baby system is very manageable, and lets parents make healthy, palatable food."

While the Fresh Start Kit is designed for use when the baby is first introduced to solid food, it may be continued with variations until the child is 18 months old, Ahlers said.

The success of the first product has spurred the sisters to embark on the development of a second system designed for toddlers from ages 2 to 5.

"We're doing all the work and research right now. It'll be as simple, nutritional, and good as Fresh Start," Ahlers said.

For more product information and how to order the Fresh Baby Fresh Start Kit, visit the website www.freshbaby.com.