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Company guides parents in preparing fresh baby food

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Nearly 10 years ago, around the time her first child was born, Joan Ahlers recalls her introduction to commercially-prepared baby food.

"I opened a jar of peas," she said. "They didn't smell very good. They didn't look very good."

After she checked out other store-bought baby food and found it equally unappealing, Ahlers, who enjoyed cooking, obtained some advice from her mother and a friend about preparing homemade baby food.

Later, when her sister, Cheryl Tallman, had a child of her own, Ahlers assembled a package for her which included instructions on made-from-scratch infant meals and ice cube trays in which to freeze it for future use.

Tallman — who recently moved to Petoskey — was looking for a new business opportunity in her new surroundings and sensed some marketability in the baby-food kit.

In the past year, the sisters launched Fresh Baby, a company that offers such kits for sale through several channels. At the business, headquartered in the Emmet County Professional Building at 616 Petoskey St., Tallman serves as chief executive officer and Ahlers as sales director.

The "Fresh Start Kit," with a suggested retail price of \$34.95, includes a book and videotape with guidelines for preparing various baby foods and for introducing new food items to infants as they grow. It also includes a quick-reference card with information on various nutritional topics and two trays in which baby food can be frozen for storage after advance preparation.

In general, fruits, vegetables



Cheryl Tallman of Petoskey displays the contents of the "Fresh Start Kit" offered by Fresh Baby, a company she founded with her sister, Joan Ahlers, of New Mexico.

and flavorings can be readied for a baby's consumption using the kit through a six-step process: wash, peel and cut; microwave; puree; pour into trays; freeze; and serve.

Tallman said a parent commonly can prepare a week's worth of baby food in one sitting and freeze it until needed.

"The kit's designed to have a parent spend 30 minutes a week," she said. "That's not a lot when you consider the benefits of healthy eating will last a lifetime."

Ahlers said she's found producing baby food at home can help address a variety of nutritional concerns. Without having to heat the food as part of a preserving process, she said the chance that nutrients will be destroyed is minimized. And when one regularly buys fresh produce from which to prepare a baby's meals,

others in the family are likely to include such healthful items in their diets as well.

Added Tallman: "When you make baby food at home, you save hundreds of dollars. In this economic climate, almost everyone is interested in that."

Janet Havens, a registered dietitian at Northern Michigan Hospital, said homemade and commercially-prepared baby foods can both typically meet infants' nutritional needs, adding that she served the homemade variety to her own children years ago.

To minimize the possibility of food-borne illness, Havens noted that one should make sure baby-food preparation surfaces are carefully cleaned, ingredients are properly washed and the food cooked adequately.

So far, Fresh Baby's kits — with materials provided by several manufacturers around the United States — are sold through baby-product catalogs and by about 25 retailers nationwide. They also can be ordered from Fresh Baby by telephone or the Internet.

"I'm hoping to have at least one strong retailer in Petoskey before the (2003 summer tourist) season starts," Tallman added.

Fresh Baby works with a handful of sales representatives who cover the Midwest, West and Northeast. Tallman also hopes to establish a relationship with WIC, a nutrition program that various states operate for residents meeting income guidelines, through which more kits could be distributed.

"We're doing phenomenal," she said. "I'm extremely happy with how sales are going."

In the near future, Tallman said she hopes to introduce another product that will help promote healthy eating among older children.

Before their move to Petoskey, Tallman and her husband, Roger, lived in New York for nearly 20 years. Before establishing Fresh Baby, Tallman was the founder and CEO of an Internet consulting company, Touchstone Media Group. She also worked in sales for IBM for several years. The couple have a son, Spencer.

Ahlers, who has a background in pharmaceutical sales, currently spends much of her time as a stay-at-home mom. She, her husband, Gary, and four children live in Los Alamos, N.M.

The sisters typically converse via e-mail or in person during trade shows.

To learn more about the Fresh Start Kit, call Fresh Baby at 348-2706 or visit www.myfreshbaby.com.