

Kids Spark Business Ideas For Entrepreneurial Parents

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CLEVELAND (AP) — Smashed bananas and a frightened first-grader have led to business ideas for some entrepreneurial Ohio parents who drew inspiration from their children.

Kristi Thomas knew she was on to something when her daughter's classmates started digging her lunch bags out of the trash. Thomas drew animals, flowers and inspirational messages on ordinary brown bags each day to help her shy 6-year-old, Madison, feel comfortable in her new surroundings at school.



Thomas of Akron started drawing on her daughter's lunch bags about four years ago. Now she sells her creations in more than 150 stores nationwide. Her company, Lunchology.

The home-decorated lunch bags gave Madison, now 11, the encouragement she needed and inspired Thomas to turn them into a business that she called Lunchology.

Lunchology bags now sell in more than 1500 stores across the country, including Whole Foods Markets and Buehler's grocery stores, and at www.lunchology.com online.

"You really can learn a lot from your kids," Thomas said.

Thomas, of Akron, is negotiating a deal with Target, and more opportunities might be just around the corner.

Lunchtime also led to a sturdy idea for Medina mom Mary Harris, who hated unpacking gooey, smashed bananas from her kids' backpacks.

Bananas were one of the few fruits that her children Alex, now 10, and Katie, now 12, would eat. But they got smashed by the time lunch rolled around.

Harris searched local grocery stores and specialty stores for some sort of banana protector, but all she found were clunky lunch boxes.

So with the help of a designer and a mold maker, she created a prototype and launched Banana Saver. The yellow, banana-shaped plastic container has a stem hole on one end and a flat-stick slot on the other for making frozen bananas.

She sold them through her kids, friends and family then set up www.bananasaver.com to attract customers across the country.

“I’ll just keep chugging along and see where it takes me,” she said.

Jim and Jennifer Levine wanted to enroll their three young children in a program that would introduce them to music, art and dance.

When they couldn’t find a place with all three, Jennifer hinted to her husband that perhaps he should open one. Jim Levine had recently sold his security business in Washington, D.C., and moved with his family back to the Cleveland area.

After consulting with childhood education experts and a pediatrician, Jim Levine launched CHABAM (Children Have Active Bodies and Minds) in suburban Woodmere.

He combined his experience as a businessman and a father with the arts-education background of curriculum director Jeannie Fleming-Gifford to create a program that would inspire kids and fit families’ needs.

The center features two programs that incorporate art, music and movement — one requires parents to sign up their kids in advance and the other accepts drop-ins. Families need flexibility, something Levine said he learned from his own children.

“The best business ideas come from your own experience,” he said. “If you need something, chances are there’s a whole bunch of other people out there that need it, too.”