

How can my baby become a model?

Want to see if your kid has what it takes to make it in modelling? Here's some advice for aspiring stage parents.



BY STACEY STEIN | MAY 15, 2018



PHOTO COURTESY: KATHRYN TAM

At 11 months old, Grace Wilson had already appeared in ads for global brands like Ralph Lauren and Carter's when she landed a highly coveted gig as a model for **Baby Gap's** holiday campaign. From an outsized billboard in Times Square to transit ads in Hong Kong, her image was plastered around the world. Sporting a **pom-pom-embellished beanie** and a winsome expression, Grace was catapulted to international baby-modelling stardom—and it's easy to see why.

But if you think little Grace cashed in, you're wrong. Her total earnings amounted to US\$450. Oh, and that's before the agent's 15 percent commission. And so it goes in the wacky world of child modelling and acting, where your kid may earn as little as \$50 for a one-hour photo shoot or tens of thousands of dollars for a commercial that plays across the United States.

That's an important takeaway for parents who dream of their little one striking it rich in the business: Even if your kid is lucky enough to land gigs, don't expect to hit pay dirt.

"Go into the whole thing expecting to make zero dollars and hope to make that \$100,000 commercial," says Liz McKinnon, a Vancouver-based talent agent with Boss Management, whose Boss Babies division represents newborns and kids up to age three. "You have to go in with zero expectations because there are so many babies and toddlers out there. For a diaper commercial, they might see 1,500 toddlers."

Still want to see if your kid has what it takes to make it? Here's some advice for aspiring stage parents.

Do your homework

The industry is fertile ground for scam artists who prey on naive parents. "It gets me so angry when people phone up and say 'I want to join your agency—we've already spent \$2,500,'" says Lee Gallagher-Ingram, president and founder of Minor Details, a Toronto-based model and talent agency. A former model herself, Gallagher-Ingram says she has encountered parents who have been fleeced for thousands of dollars. To suss out which agencies are legit, do the research. In British Columbia, check the government's list of licensed talent agencies; in Ontario, check the Consumer Beware List. While the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), the Canadian union that represents professional performers, can't recommend agencies, it maintains an agent directory. All agents on the list have joined the Entertainment Industry Coalition and signed a Code of Ethical Conduct.

Beware of fees

Any agency that charges an exorbitant fee upfront should set off warning bells. For kids ages newborn to three, Minor Details charges \$125 in their first year, all of which goes to the company that manages the agency's website.

Another red flag is if an agency demands money for professional in-house photos. This isn't necessary for kids under three (a smartphone pic will do just fine). And for older kids, you shouldn't be obligated to use an in-house photographer.

Standard agent fees are 20 percent for modelling (as in print jobs) and 15 percent for union TV work. Gallagher-Ingram recommends avoiding agencies that promise work.

Keep it simple

You may think that photo of your kid sporting a backwards baseball cap and face-eating sunglasses is too precious for words, but a talent agent won't. "I ask parents for a nice, clear photo where we can see what the baby looks like—no hats, no sunglasses, no food on the face," says McKinnon. This is echoed by Gallagher-Ingram: "If you attach a photo with a hat or soother or any ridiculous shot, the application is automatically declined." Another automatic rejection for Gallagher-Ingram is sending a photo of your kid with no clothes on. A foamy bath photo may be cute for Grandma, but when she receives one, it just makes her cringe because she never wants parents to think it's OK to send photos that contain nudity.

Expect a lot of competition

Of course, your child is the most unique/adorable/sweet-tempered kid out there, but so is everyone else's. Minor Details gets about 200 applications a week for kids ages newborn to 12, including about 100 applications each week for babies alone. Gallagher-Ingram accepts between two and five babies a week. So how does she decide who makes the cut? Several factors come into play, including location—most jobs in Canada take place in the Greater Toronto Area. Even when an application checks all the boxes, Gallagher-Ingram is unlikely to accept a child if she already has a lot of kids on her roster who are the same age and gender and have a similar look. Apply to several agencies to maximize your child's chances.

Know your child

Sure, your kid loves to swim, but will they love to swim every 15 minutes on and off for eight hours? That was what Nicole Fraser's then-four-year-old son, Calix, had to do when he

shot a commercial for Verizon. It wasn't an easy day, even with the breaks, snacks and safety specialist to keep a close eye on Calix. While babies typically won't be on set for more than an hour or so, young kids are allowed to be on set for up to eight hours a day, which can test the patience of even the chilliest kid.

"I have two boys who have a lot of energy, and they're expected to behave on set," says Fraser, who is based in Surrey, B.C. "Sometimes it's hard to rein them in and keep them focused. They just want to go home and watch their iPads, so that's tough sometimes." The flip side to this is the pressure felt by parents. "There are a lot of people who are there for the shoot that day and it costs them a ton of money for all the crew," she says. "It's all hinging on your three-year-old and how they decide to behave that day, so that can be stressful."



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As for little Grace, by the time she was 14 months, her thriving modelling career came to a halt, soon after her mom, Kathryn Tam, returned to work. By that point, she had amassed a grand total of US\$3,000 from the nine jobs she booked. "That goes straight to her college fund," says Tam, who is based in Brooklyn. Tam says she had wanted to try Grace's luck with modelling because people were always raving about how adorable and photogenic her daughter was—plus, she had time to take her to castings while on mat leave. Looking back, she is sanguine about Grace's brief foray into the biz—she knew it would be a short-term thing. "Usually, it was pretty fun," she says. "There's food and catering, and they had baby wranglers and sometimes a play area. But modelling is a lot of work. She's happy just being a kid. Grace doesn't need the stress of 'working' yet."

More words of wisdom:

Don't sign a contract

For kids under 12, Gallagher-Ingram warns against signing a contract. "Then you're locked into that agency," she says. "You should be free to leave if you aren't happy."

Make sure you're available

Expect a lot of schlepping around, often at a moment's notice. Last-minute notice is typical in the business. "We'll probably call you the day before and expect you at an audition the next day," says McKinnon. This means either having a flexible work schedule, being a stay-at-home parent or having a solid support network.

Have realistic expectations

Child modelling is a fickle business, rife with rejection, even once you sign on with an agent. “It’s like winning the lottery on being the right look, getting the right commercial and fitting the right vision at the right time,” says McKinnon. “Parents have to keep themselves in check.”