For needy kids only

By BILL BELL
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There is nothing like it in New York, this private, by-
appointment-only storefront boutique that Julie Brown
runs exclusively for infants and toddlers — and without a
price tag in the place.

"Sometimes it amazes me, too," says Brown, the founder and
executive director of Room to Grow New York Inc.

Room is a nonprofit organization that she launched last November in an
East Harlem apartment that an anonymous landlord allows her to use
rent-free. There, surrounded by everything from tiny, tiny sneakers to
an entire box of baby clothes and diapers, parents can select what their children
need.

Brown, 33, got the idea while working as a psychotherapist at the Karen
Horney Clinic on the East Side. "I wanted to do away with the stigma that peo-
ple associate with charity," she says, "and I wanted to concentrate on children in
the most critical years of development."

This, she says, is the first three years of life.

And this is why, when children celebrate their third birthday, their par-
ents can no longer shop at Room to Grow.

She sees about four families a day, all referred to her by one of the 20
social service agencies that Brown recruited for her project. Families spend
about an hour browsing, and there is no charge for anything.

"The only things we don't stock are diapers, food or furniture," says
Brown, whose inventory of clothing, books, toys, stuffed animals, blankets, even
rattles and baby bottles, fills every shelf and corner.

Everything was donated by individu-
als or companies, and everything is
new or slightly used — "gently used,"
says Brown.

Hallmark donated 300 boxes of
crayons, Ralph Lauren donated
clothes that Brown uses to
display little dresses, Bloomingdale's donated
everything from clothing, books, toys,
and even pays Brown's salary, which
she began
cin
to

Boutique outfits babies — free

by Pontormo. "It sold for $35 million in 1989," says
Brown. "I loved being part of that scene.

But something was gnawing at her —
"I started feeling that I should do
something with more meaning to me."

She enrolled at New York University, majored in social work, and, in 1996, began working with
abused and neglected children at the Horney clinic. It was there that she got
the idea for Room to Grow.

It took a year to develop the concept and a few more months to round up the companies that contributed
everything from legal services to brochures.

"I wasn't sure what I was doing," says
Brown. "I just called up companies and
ask if they would help, and they did."

At some companies, employees col-
clected clothing and toys. As word
spread, mothers began sending items.
Brown kept everything in her
Greenwich Village apartment until
Room's grand opening.

Brown, who graduated from the
Children's Aid Society, refers clients to Room, along
with lists of the items the children
need or want.

Brown calls, makes an appointment
and goes over the list with clients at
the store. Sometimes, the decision on
what they take depends on what's
available. There are few strollers or
high chairs, for example, because of a
lack of space.

"Intuition dictates some things,"
says Brown. "I kind of eyeball the situa-
tion, and by now, I've got a pretty
good sense about it."

So far, so very good. "I was expecting
to just plod along for the first year,"
she says. "I'm amazed at how fast we
grew."