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Getting the kids back outdoors: How sustainable rainwear brand Crywolf is changing the game

For Crywolf founder Natalie Meldrum, there's a simple message to be shared. "Kids don't want to be adults, they want to be kids," she tells us from the sunny back seat of her recently restored campervan. The artist and graphic designer is travelling around the South Island of her native New Zealand, alongside her husband, Tim, and their two children.

Having already spent a few weeks driving through the striking scenery of the Southern Alps with her family, Natalie is truly living out her brand's core ethos: getting the kids back outdoors and fostering an appreciation for the planet. Following on from the successful debut of her first brand, children's footwear line Pretty Brave, Natalie launched her children's rainwear brand Crywolf in 2019.

"I always knew there was a gap in the market for really funky, high-quality kids rainwear," she says. "And as a message and a vision, who doesn't want to get their kids back outdoors?"

Now in its third year, with stock in more than 200 locations around the world, Crywolf has expanded to include a mix of playful design motifs, eye-catching colours and sustainably sourced materials.

From their colourful rubber Rain Boots to their impressive Magic Jacket (a vibrant raincoat with a unique print that shows up when the fabric is wet), Crywolf is bringing the fun and function back to children's rainwear.

Here, Natalie tells us more about what makes the brand special, why kids love it and how she's incorporating sustainability into her line.

You dove into fashion headfirst with your brand Pretty Brave. How did you get your start in design and how did that lead you to Crywolf?

I'd worked in graphic design and advertising for probably a good 10 years or so when we moved to Spain for my husband's work (he's in the sailing industry). I guess once I stepped away from the corporate world I had the opportunity to explore different ideas and get in touch with a bit of creativity! I always knew I wanted to do my own thing and develop some ideas - the Spanish love footwear, so that's kind of where the idea for Pretty Brave was born and we launched in 2015.

Later, when we moved to Bermuda for the America's Cup, I guess I just got the creative juices going again. I started sampling and doing the first designs for Crywolf while we were there. I got in touch with manufacturers and got the process going. We travelled through Africa on the way home and I literally have visions of me driving through the plains of the Serengeti, me with my Pantone swatch book, sitting there designing the first range. I think initially it was such a big success partly because it leveraged off the success of Pretty Brave, but it was a real tribute to my retailers and customers who just really supported what I was already doing. It was an easy progression for them.

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You've said you created Crywolf with a vision of "getting the kids outdoors" - why was this message important to you?

As a parent, especially as a working parent, you just want to be doing good for your kids, you know? And I just feel like there's this constant battle that just doesn't go away with social media - I mean the kids are just growing up entirely different to how we did and that's only one generation - and I really believe there's so much more to show them.

I mean, what my kids have learnt spending three weeks in a campervan going around New Zealand. Just getting back to basics you know? And I just see [the benefit] for the whole family. It's so much better for their mental and physical state, for their knowledge and their learning. So it's something I'm really passionate about - you could definitely say that's how I grew up.

And the great thing about rainwear, in particular, is that it's encouraging kids to get back out there and be kids. To be messy and to play...

Totally! I mean in New Zealand especially, it's partly known for wet weather - I mean that's why it's so green and beautiful - but it's known for the rain. And [with Crywolf] kids can just get outside. Kids want to be messy, they want to be tactile and so it's all about those things as well.

When I'm designing a collection the colours [of New Zealand] are just amazing inspiration. Even just the sky and the mountains. I mean, the Happy Camper collection was obviously inspired by camping adventures in the forest and that was really fun.

There's a playfulness in design when it comes to children's clothing, is that what draws you to it as a graphic designer?

I think it has to be fun. And I think I figured that out with Pretty Brave. You know, we follow adult trends and inspirations because that was where mums were moving - they didn't want their kids in babyish clothes. And the same goes with rainwear, but I realised pretty early on that you still have to add that magic in there for the kids. I'd say it's adult-inspired trends with 15% of magic - and that's what makes the product really on-trend but also with that fun factor.

I'm kind of known for the prints as well. Kids don't want to be adults, they want to be kids. But at the same time, the mums don't necessarily want them to be in babyish or cheesy designs. The Crywolf range goes right up from 0 to 14, so I'm always having to keep in mind that the prints will go across that age group as well, which has its challenges because what a three-year-old wants will differ from what a teenager wants. Within the range, I really think about prints and designs that will cross through all those ages.

Fashion can be such a form of self-expression, too...

I think that's the other thing with kids, in particular. I'm quite classic in my style but you don't want to control what kids are wearing all the time. It doesn't have to be perfect. If you let them make their own choices... I love it when they throw together some random stuff and it helps them to express how they feel, who they are and lets them feel like it's okay to try new things. I think that's really important. That's what fashion and clothing does, it lets everyone be an individual and I think Crywolf is about that as well, encouraging self-expression.

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Have your own children enjoyed the benefits of having a mum who's got her own clothing line for kids? Do they get to road-test all the products first?

Yeah, they do! My son is 11 now and my daughter is 13, so they're coming to that higher end of the age group, but my kids have definitely enjoyed it. I always ask them their opinion on prints and colourways, particularly my daughter because she's just a mini-me like that, super creative and I really and fully appreciate her opinion and take it on board. I mean she's had ideas on prints before, she's really decisive and knows exactly what she likes and I just think that's such a cool quality. Even just growing up with a mum who has different businesses, they ask really interesting questions. My son's always asking about margins you know, he's fascinated by unit price and ROE. So that's really interesting. But they'll come and tell me what they want, share little features like 'hey mum, this would be really cool if it had a pocket here' or little things like that - so they're always wearing my little Crywolf assistant hat.

Sustainability is a part of your messaging and of your brand's philosophy. Why was that important to you? Has it always been a big part of your lifestyle?

I think for me it always made sense that if I was going to have an outerwear brand it needed to be quality and had to be high performing. For me, if our message is "we want to get the kids outside" then it's got to go hand-in-hand with appreciating the environment. And that goes back to what materials the product is made from, the full lifespan of the product, what's its end-use and how do we keep it in circulation. I'm really inspired by adult outerwear brands like Patagonia, who are just super transparent and paving the way, really.

92% of your products are made using recycled materials including recycled polyester, organic cotton and Repreve (a fibre made from recycled water bottles). Can you take me through the process of finding the right materials, how you decide what to use while also delivering a luxurious product?

I think it's always important to say that sustainability is a journey. Especially as a new brand, it's really challenging to come in and have everything made with recycled materials. It's always been a journey of me saying "this is what I want" and taking steps to get there. So, this season it was really exciting to take a look at my product range and see what I've achieved in three seasons and for there to be such a huge amount of the products using recycled materials. It's about getting the right manufacturers on board from the onset and making sure they're open to exploring new materials and that they want to have those conversations, to be part of that journey - because a lot of manufacturers are not interested. It's not their thing, it's too hard or complicated and they don't want to go down that track. So I've been really selective from the beginning of who I want to work with and then constantly pushing the conversation in terms of material offerings. Things move really quickly so open communication channels and being open to seeing what can be done better is important. Product testing is also really important. The Rain Boots were an interesting one as it's almost more challenging than some of the other materials like recycled polyester. So, I've been doing quite a lot of work around what it means to have sustainable rubber in a rain boot - it's just a huge amount of research and making sure I do it properly, but we're getting there.

You've also got a "less is more" philosophy, encouraging people to do their best when it comes to the environment, which means buying products that are designed to last longer, passing clothing onto friends and family. Do you consider that to be the best approach as we all learn to consume more mindfully...

Absolutely. I think that as the range has grown, it's been good to step back and see how the whole range has pieces designed to mix and match. A lot of them are unisex and can all be passed down to siblings or friends and it just gets more longevity out of the product. We're also looking at different things at the moment in terms of end-use - where is the garment going to go at the end of the cycle? We're looking into setting up a buy, swap, sell project initiative. There are a few things going on in the background that are really starting to take shape.