

NORTHWEST EARTH INSTITUTE ECO-TIPS

CHOOSING WASHABLE DIAPERS

Every new parent faces the diaper dilemma. The dominant culture says, "Choose convenience," but your conscience says, "What about the impact on the earth?" Should you choose disposable diapers, a diaper service, or washing diapers at home?

ENERGY AND WATER ISSUES

Most of the information consumers receive about the issue comes from the disposable diaper industry. It commissioned life-cycle studies in the early 1990s showing that disposables used less water and energy than cloth and distributed the results to new mothers and the media. It even created curricula for school children. The diaper service industry and environmental groups commissioned their own studies, which showed the opposite. (Yes, it is counter intuitive because what we see is the water used to wash diapers, but the studies showed that water used to manufacture disposables was greater.) The public concluded that it didn't really matter.

NATURAL RESOURCE USE

In reality, neither the water nor energy use for diapers has significant environmental impact. What got lost in the controversy is what does matter—the beginning and end of the product lifecycle. Each child in disposables requires 541 pounds of wood pulp, which comes from trees, and 74 pounds of plastic, which is made from oil. Each child in cloth diapers requires 22 pounds of cotton. Thus, the magnitude of resource use for disposables greatly outweighs that of cloth. Each year disposable diapers in the US consume 250,000 trees.

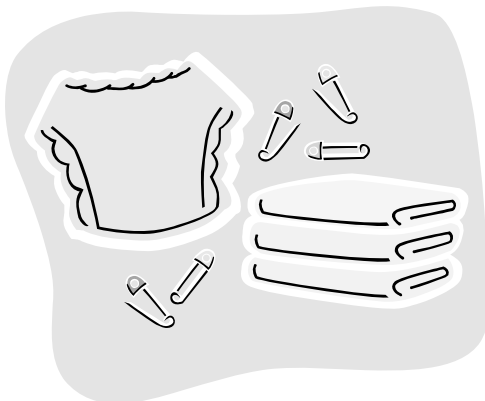
WASTE

Disposable diapers produce a significant amount of solid waste. They put fecal material in the landfill where it doesn't belong, and we don't really know what the environmental impact of the waste materials will be several centuries from now. Over a baby's diapering life, at least 5,000 diapers will be thrown away. Disposable diapers make up the third largest source of solid waste in landfills, after newspapers and food and beverage containers. One new parent says, "We pictured the volume of disposables it would take to diaper our daughter for two years. My husband calculated that the number of diapers would fill our living room from floor to ceiling."

HEALTH OF THE BABY

Doctors who watched the transition from cloth to disposable diapers, say that diaper rash is more prevalent now. According to Dr. Robert Mendelson, the disposables contain super absorbent chemicals and are therefore not changed as often as they should be. Ammonia

builds up and irritates the skin. Some environmentalists are also concerned about trace dioxins in the paper and the fact that the absorbent chemicals and fragrances can cause allergic reactions. No long-term studies have been done to substantiate these concerns.



COST AND TIME FACTORS

The cost of disposables is about \$1000 per year, not including extra garbage fees.

A diaper service nearly matches the convenience of disposables. For a cost slightly less than disposables, the service delivers freshly laundered diapers to your

door each week and takes away the airtight container of soiled diapers. Rinsing is not necessary because the serviced diapers are treated to slow the growth of germs and odor. Not all communities have this service, however.

Home washing is clearly the cheapest way to diaper your child at less than \$250 a year, and those who do it say it doesn't take much more time. You keep the dirty diapers in a pail filled with water and a half-cup of borax, dump them into the washer to spin out the water, and then wash in hot water.

RESOURCES

If you choose diaper service, see ads under "Diaper Service" in the Yellow Pages. Or check www.diapernet.com or 610-971-4850 to see if there is one in your area.

If you choose to launder your own diapers, you might want to do a little research because there are four different types: flat pre-folds, flat contoured, fitted, and all-in-ones (fitted with a waterproof barrier). Purchase about three dozen diapers so you're not washing all the time. Cloth diapers are available at stores like K-Mart, J.C. Penny, and Fred Meyer, but if you want commercial quality, you need to go a specialty store or order from a catalog.

The diapers are generally placed in a wrap that fastens with velcro. Many parents are happy with the \$5 wraps from the department stores while others prefer the Nikky's or Bummi's brands, which cost about twice as much. See www.babyworks.com or www.mothering.com (click on Shopping Guide) for both diapers and wraps.