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Cloth Nappies vs Disposables – Why The Fuss?

Compiled by Telisa Pearson-Collett, using Zero Waste New Zealand data

According to the Zero Waste New Zealand Trust, a charitable organisation concerned with waste and sustainability issues, a baby will need up to 6000 nappy changes in the first two and half years of life. At 50c per nappy (a conservative estimate as many brands cost more per nappy), parents who use disposable nappies throw away about \$3,000 of used product into landfill, excluding disposal fees or council refuse charges (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

The trust reports that around one million disposable diapers go into landfill tips every day in New Zealand (*based on 145,000 children under two and half in NZ using 6-7 disposables per day*). In 2003, five per cent of all domestic waste comprised of disposable nappies and other sanitary products (*SWAP data, cited in www.zerowaste.co.nz*). Nappy waste is reported to cost local authorities tens of thousands of dollars a year, which is likely to mean ratepayers bear some of this cost through higher refuse charges and rates.

Moreover, the decomposing material (both the human waste and plastic and chemical packaging components) contributes to the build-up of toxic leachate from landfill sites, plus methane gas. Methane has been identified as a key contributor to global warming (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

And even buying the more expensive and purportedly “greener” ultra-degradable disposables may not help solve landfill problems. “Even if nappies were 100% biodegradable...” says the Zero Waste Trust, “... you would need to compost them in a separate system as landfill does not provide the right conditions for them to break down” (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

Some reasons to use re-usable cloth nappies.

- **They cost less.** Although the initial purchase price might seem high, when total costs are calculated over the whole time the baby is in nappies, it is estimated that cloth nappies cost less than half the price of disposable diapers. In just one year the cost saving may be as much as \$500 to \$1,000 (www.zerowaste.co.nz). And, of course, if cloth nappies are used for the second and third child, the cost savings are even greater. You can also reduce the initial cost of purchasing cloth nappies by buying them second-hand, or by using the traditional white flannel squares, which when combined with some of the excellent new nappy covers available today, are a perfectly serviceable alternative to the more expensive (but high-performing) fitted cloth nappies. This is also a good option to use with your last child (if you have not used re-usable nappies before) as you may not want to invest as much in fitted cloth nappies as a family just starting out with their first child.

- **Easier toilet training.** Research cited by the Zero Waste Trust (as well as several articles and books I've read on nappies and parenting) suggests toddlers may complete toilet training earlier if they wear cloth nappies rather than disposables. The theory goes a bit like this: because little ones can feel the wetness of the cloth on their bottoms, they begin to make the connection between the physical sensations and the resulting wetness, whereas disposables are designed to wick moisture away and often give little sensation of wetness. Some studies suggest cloth nappies may speed up toilet training by as much as six months (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

- **They're better for the earth.** Despite claims by the manufacturers of disposables about improvements in materials and manufacturing processes, throw-away diapers typically contain: paper pulp, plastics, absorbent gel granules and chemical additives in the plastics and perfumes.

All of these chemicals and materials have been found to have a serious environmental impact when they reach the landfill (www.zerowaste.co.nz)

- **They're better for baby.** In addition to concerns over the environmental impact of common disposable nappy ingredients, there is also concern that some of them may pose health risks. For example, "the chemicals and gels contained in the absorbent layer of 'disposables' are not subject to government controls or independent testing, and there is no labelling requirement on the packaging. There have been NO long-term studies into the effects on skin of constant exposure to the polyacrylate super absorbent gels found in most disposable nappies. [*The use of polyacrylate in tampons in the US was stopped due to links with toxic shock syndrome*] <http://en.wikipedia.org/> cited in www.zerowaste.co.nz).

Some studies also suggest disposable diapers may be especially harmful for boys, because of the build-up of heat within the diaper while it is being worn. Disposables may lead to the testicals being subjected to higher than normal temperatures, which was thought to have an effect on fertility in adulthood (*May 2000 Archives of Disease in Childhood, Scrotal temperature is increased in disposable plastic-lined nappies* by CJ Partsch, M Aukamp and WG Sippell., cited in www.zerowaste.co.nz).

Common myths about using cloth nappies

- **They contribute to nappy rash.** Put simply, nappy rash is caused by baby being left in wet or dirty nappies – whether cloth or disposable. You can reduce rashes if baby is kept as dry as possible and away from potentially harmful chemicals, which means changing baby frequently and as soon as possible after noticing the nappy has been soiled (www.zerowaste.co.nz). And, as granny used to say, you can't beat fresh air and sunshine, so letting babies have a bare-bottomed 'sunbathe' on a blanket outside (in the shade in summer or in a warm spot near natural light in the cooler months) can be beneficial in minimizing rashes too.

- **You use just as many strong chemicals cleaning cloth nappies as there are in disposables.** Contrary to popular belief, reusable cloth nappies do not have to be soaked in commercial nappy soaking solutions to be healthy to use for your baby. Unless your baby is ill (in which case you might soak nappies for a time in a solution of white vinegar or tea-tree oil both of which have anti-bacterial properties), wet nappies generally don't need soaking in buckets of chemicals, particularly if, like most families with small children, you are doing laundry every day. Soiled nappies may benefit from soaking to remove stains and white vinegar will help to disinfect, whiten and soften flannel nappies. Plant-based laundry soakers are now available for this purpose too.

There is ongoing debate as to whether soiled nappies need to be washed in hot water to be healthy, pushing up both energy consumption and the cost of laundering. My personal view, is that, unless baby is ill, and so long as the nappy is dealt with soon after changing baby, there probably isn't much need to wash in hot water.

Of course, all nappies have some impact on the environment, but the Zero Waste Trust suggests the impact of reusable cloth nappies can be reduced by: using an energy efficient washing machine; using an eco-friendly detergent and eliminating unnecessary chemicals, such as sanitizer solutions. Energy consumption can be cut by hanging nappies out to dry on the clothesline rather than using a tumble drier (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

- **You could make an expensive mistake by buying the wrong kind of nappy or equipment.** Certainly, the range of reusable nappies available in New Zealand has grown dramatically in recent years (with a much bigger selection now than even eight years ago when I was expecting my first baby), and the choices can seem bewildering.

There are resources to help you in your choice, however, including several websites where parents can ask questions about different nappy systems and post feedback about products they have tried with their own families (see the footnotes for suggestions). The 2006/07 edition of the 'about birth' magazine, available from the Waikato Home Birth Association, also has a comprehensive article on cloth nappies and other baby essentials.

- **Are cloth nappies really any 'greener'?** It is worth considering where in the world your cloth nappies were manufactured and the fabrics used in their construction. Purchasing locally-made may help alleviate concerns such as perpetuating the exploitation of workers in developing countries (through 'sweat-shop' manufacturing), or the use of harmful chemicals in the fabric (providing the fabric was also made on-shore). It is important to ask questions about any product

you will use for your baby and communication may be easier with a New Zealand-based supplier.

In terms of using sustainable resources, many modern cloth nappies are made from materials such as organic cotton, hemp, or wool layers. Some overpants are also constructed from wool (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

How about a zero waste alternative?

Environmentally aware parents who want a zero waste option might consider going nappy free, by learning Elimination Communication (or EC, sometimes called Natural Infant Hygiene). Using EC techniques, babies are gently trained from a young age to use a small potty, instead of nappies. Many parents report that EC helps to create a positive, trusting relationship and is aligned with many of the key principles of attachment parenting styles.

Elimination Communication is, of course, nothing new, having been used around the world before the advent of nappies, and EC is still common in some parts of Asia, Africa and South America. "For these mothers," reports the Zero Waste Trust, "knowing when their baby 'needs to go' and holding them over an appropriate place is second nature. There is a small but steadily growing resurgence of interest in this practice among North American and European parents today" (www.zerowaste.co.nz).

For a home birth family's experiences with EC and information about the technique, see the April/May 2007 issue of the WHBA newsmagazine (purple cover).

In a nutshell

☺ **Cloth nappies don't cost the earth!** ☺

Resources

The Zero Waste NZ Trust www.zerowaste.co.nz

The Nappy Network www.thenappynetwork.org.nz

- a community group providing info and advice on washable nappies, listing NZ suppliers, plus a web forum for peer to peer nappy advice.

Diaper Free! The Gentle Wisdom of Natural Infant Hygiene (2001), by Ingrid Bauer. Book available in stores and www.natural-wisdom.com/ - website also has info about the author, & EC methods, plus parenting advice & support.

Mothering Magazine & on-line forums www.motheringcommune.com/discussions/ has discussions on all family issues including EC. Advice posted by mothers practising EC with their kids on clothing, potties & EC in public.

'**about birth**' and other WHBA magazines- available from the association (see the 'm pages in the back of this issue for details).

Other WHBA members – ask around!