

Final Project – “The Environmental Impact of Diapers”

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Introduction

It is ironic that many of the practices of raising a child in our culture actually harm the environment he or she will live in. Many environmental concerns are associated with parenting, related to food, transportation choices, and the massive consumption of stuff “needed” to have a child. This article explores the subject of diapers which are an iconic environmental problem associated with childrearing. As an environmentally aware pregnant woman, I want to explore the issue of diapering a baby, looking at how this can be done with minimum environmental impact.

I do not yet have direct experience with parenting so I have been talking with other parents as I consider alternatives available to new moms in order to reduce the environmental impact of raising my child. While most expressed a strong drive to grow their families in a green manner, the realities of parenting in our present disposable consumer culture present barriers to making green choices. It’s not easy being a mom, and choosing green alternatives such as cloth diapers over disposables often involves extra labour and sometimes cost.

The diaper debate

In North America, 90% of babies use disposable diapers and this produces huge environmental consequences. The manufacturing process for disposable diapers uses huge amounts of resources. In North America, 1 billion trees go into diaper production each year. In Canada alone, diaper production consumes approximately 65,500 tonnes of pulp, 8,800 tonnes of plastic and 9,800 tonnes of packing material. However, the waste that results after they are used is an even bigger problem. Over the course of their first two to three years, each baby uses approximately 6000 diapers, which creates two and a half tonnes of waste per child. In Canada we throw away 1.7 billion disposable diapers every year. This accounts for approximately 2.5% of all residential waste going to landfill.

Once in the landfill, dirty diapers become very toxic. With their mixture of plastic, paper, and feces, diapers are prone to leach contaminants and diseases. They

absorb large quantities of water (that's what they are designed to do,) and their materials remain intact for many years. In landfills where composting conditions are less than ideal, disposable diapers can take over 500 years to decompose.

Cloth diapers have much less of an impact in manufacture and result in much less waste since they are usually reused and used until they end life as rags, and in a landfill they disintegrate in 6 months. The major environmental toll from diapering a baby in cloth is the energy and water used for washing. The total amount of water needed to wash a baby's diapers is comparable to the amount of water of 5 toilet flushes a day.

Cloth diaper-wearing children tend to toilet train earlier, because the cloth retains moisture, which allows the child to feel when he or she is wet and/or dirty and associate the feeling with elimination. Because disposable diapers wick away moisture, children may not realize they are wet, and this can delay toilet training by six months.

Cost comparisons between cloth and disposables mirror the environmental impacts. Cloth diapers involve an initial cost outlay of 50-100 dollars for a supply that will last the baby 2.5 years, then added laundry costs amount to 100-200 dollars a year, totaling \$250 to \$500. Disposables cost approximately 2500 dollars over those same two and a half years. If there are clear economic and environmental advantages of using cloth why have disposables become the norm?

Why don't more people use cloth diapers? I talked to several parents about their attempts to make green diaper choices, and the barriers they faced in doing this.

Diapers are similar to other sustainability issues such as recycling in that the effort and responsibility is shifted down to individual households, and the labour is mostly performed by women. Cloth diapers involve the extra effort of laundering diapers whereas there is a perceived 'convenience' in being able to just throw out disposables. Most parents I asked about cloth diapering insisted that it wasn't much work because with small children they are always doing loads of laundry anyway they also claimed that this is less work than constantly shopping for diapers and taking out extra loads of trash each week.

Another barrier to using cloth diapers is income – poor families often cannot afford the investment of money for initial diaper purchase so they wind up buying disposable diapers week to week, which costs much more in long run. Other realities

facing poor families, such as lack of access to laundry facilities and single working mothers with little extra time for household tasks, also hinder their ability to use cloth diapers.

The choices and actions of individuals and households are enabled or constrained by larger contexts created by corporations and institutions. We are embedded in wasteful disposable economy of “convenience.” I feel that households need to be supported in sustainability initiatives by communities, corporations, and governments. For example, the waste created by disposable products like diapers is an externality that is subsidized by taxpayers, not paid for by companies like Pampers and Huggies. If corporate responsibility regulations forced them to be accountable for the entire life cycle of a product, these companies could be motivated to make their diapers more biodegradable or easier to recycle.

Another alternative is to provide better institutional and governmental support for households to be more sustainable. Municipalities such as Cologne and Bielefeld in Germany calculated that each baby’s 2.5 tonnes of disposable diapers resulted in an average \$400 in municipal waste costs. They started providing credits for of \$50 to families toward purchase of cloth diapers and the rate of cloth immediately use went up by 40%. Closer to home in Seattle, “Seattle Solid Waste” has a program that subsidizes cloth diapers for low income families. In Vancouver, we send 18000 tonnes of diapers to the dump each year; diapers comprise 2% of our city’s solid waste. Initiatives that follow the lead of Seattle and some German cities could help Vancouver city to reduce this number.

Conclusion

There are compelling moral arguments for parents to make green choices such as using cloth diapers instead of disposables. Sustainability is connected to child rearing in that it is a value system that takes into account the needs and rights of future generations. I want to nurture my child in a healthy and safe environment, but I am concerned that my child may be denied opportunities to flourish and blossom because of pollution, deforestation, global warming, over-consumption, and the depletion of fossil fuels and non-renewable resources. It does not make sense that practices of raising a child should contribute to these environmental problems. Parents have an opportunity to teach our

children by example how to care for the environment. I want my children to feel that I not only took good care of them, but also took good care of the world. Small-scale household choices such as choosing cloth diapers can bring about change.

While there are many good reasons for parents to choose cloth over disposable diapers, it is still hard to make green choices as a parent, especially for those who are already stressed and overworked. I believe the responsibility should not be just on the parents. The cloth/disposable diaper debate is an issue that is encompassed by wider social, economic and environmental factors. The environmental waste problems created by disposable diapers are vast, and there needs to be more corporate responsibility for the waste they create. Municipalities and governments can be offer incentives to help households make green choices. The community can provide education, awareness and support for parents making green choices. In my community, most parents I've talked to about diapers encouraged me to use cloth and said it is not much more effort. This message is important to be heard to counter the heavy advertising presence of disposable diapers that makes them seem like the norm.