

Using Reusable Nappies - it makes sense

Contributed by Behemoth

When our daughter Lily was born we used disposable nappies despite knowing that there were some environmental drawbacks. It wasn't until I looked into these that I found out just what they were:

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From birth to potty, a child in 'disposables' may use up to 5,000 nappies. This means that we throw away as many as 9 million 'disposables' every day.

Over 5 million trees are felled and 14,000 tons of plastic are manufactured every year to supply Britain with 'disposable' nappies.

'Disposable' nappies contain plastic produced from crude oil - a non renewable source. Plastics can survive hundreds of years in landfill sites.

A disposable nappy will take between 200 and 500 years to decompose.

95% of 'disposable' nappies end up in household rubbish, in effect about 8 tons of raw pulp and sewage is thrown into our dustbins every hour.

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Throw away nappies are not just expensive for parents! The UK alone produces about 800,000 tonnes of nappy waste per year, which local authorities must collect and dispose of. For every £1 spent on 'disposables', it cost the taxpayer 10p to dispose of them! The total national cost of this single use, limited customer product is £40 million a year.

Research has shown that at least 4% of household waste is 'disposable' nappies. This means that your local County Council spends over £200,000 per year of tax payers money to dispose of 'disposable' nappies!

'Disposables' contain paper pulp, plastics, absorbent gel granules and chemical additives in the plastics and perfumes. All these chemicals and materials impact on the environment and there are concerns about possible health risks from some of them.

Disposable nappies can release viruses into the waste stream, including live polio, weeks after being thrown away - around homes and on rubbish sites.

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The gels and chemicals that make up 'disposable' nappies 'absorbent layer' are not subject to government controls or independent testing. Sodium polyacrylate, the superabsorber that makes 'disposables' so absorbent, was removed from tampons in 1985 because of its link to toxic shock syndrome. Its possible effect on babies' thin skin and reproductive organs remains unstudied. Meanwhile, troubling anecdotal evidence about health concerns and these chemicals continues to build.

But the simple clincher was:

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throw away products endorse a throw away society. Your choice of a reusable product helps you teach your children to take care of things and to conserve their environment.

(Sources – The Nappy Box Website and similar stuff on Friends of the Earth and elsewhere)

When most people think of reusable nappies they seem to have ideas of 1950's style terry towelling nappies, nappy rash, multiple leakage events, buckets of festering ordure and lots of washing. Though most of the principles remain the same things have moved on a bit.

For the nappy there are several 'systems' available but they all follow the same basic principle, which is the same as disposable nappies.

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First, a piece of absorbent cotton cloth is folded into a rectangular pad.

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Second, a biodegradable liner is put over this pad. This has two functions. It stops crap getting all over the cotton, making it easier to get rid of the crap and easier to wash the cotton and it acts as a one way barrier stopping the pee in the pad irritating your baby's skin. You can still use a barrier cream as well if you want.

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Third, the pad and liner are placed in a 'wrap'. This is basically the modern version of plastic pants but nowadays they are made out of a soft breathable fabric with Velcro fasteners or poppers, oh the luxury, these kids don't know the meaning of the word chaffing.

When a nappy is changed the liner and any solids go down the toilet. The cotton pad goes in a biodegradable bin bag in a flip top bin, provided by the nappy service. If the wrap is clean it can be reused until at least the next change. The wraps, which you buy and keep, can be washed in your washing machine.

You can wash your own cotton pads if you want to but why would you? Once a week, a nappy service can collect your bag of dirty cotton pads and leave a bag of clean ones. The cotton pads are all laundered together in accordance with the Department of Health HSG(95)18 guidelines. Also, the big laundry is more efficient than many washing machines running.

We've been using the service for about a year now and our 16 month old very active baby has been through crawling, walking and rough and tumble playing without any accidents. Any leakage has been down to us not putting the wrap on properly. Changing a nappy is no more difficult or time consuming than a disposable and we've used them out an about and at friends, you just need a carrier bag for the dirty cotton pads and the conventional nappy sacks for the liners and any solids if you can't dispose of it on the spot. Again, this is no different from disposables. You get the occasionally unpleasant messy one, but that happens with disposables as well. When we've accidentally dropped vests and wraps in with the pads we've got them back washed with the next clean load. The only downside is that the bin can hum a bit by the end of the week when you open the lid, though it can go outside if you want.

The cost of our service is £7.30 a week. Disposables retail at about 12p each for 'own brand' or more for big brand names and you could expect to use about six a day. Therefore the service is probably marginally more expensive compared to own brand nappies and about the same as brand name nappies. You buy the wraps separately and keep them, though they keep their value and you can sell them on when your baby grows out of them. They cost £6 each for the service we use and you need about five or six for the cycle of using, washing, drying and forgetting to do it. They can cost more and be quite decorative rather than plain white.

For more information and to find a local service try this link: <http://www.changeanappy.co.uk/>