



the diaper
dilemma

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INSPIRING NATURAL FAMILIES SINCE 1976

the diaper dilemma

Dress up your baby's bum in earth-friendly attire—
use cloth. It's easier than you think.



When Shawna Cummings was pregnant, she had every intention of using cloth diapers. She was concerned about the environment, she knew cloth diapers would save her family money, and she didn't want chemicals or plastic next to her son's skin. Even more compelling, Cummings had a friend whose dog had gotten into the diaper pail, eaten part of a disposable diaper, and died. "I know toddlers will get into anything and eat anything," Cummings told me. "The idea of having something that toxic around my child was just horrifying."¹

Though cloth diapers seemed like a good

idea, no one Cummings knew was using them. Even in her environmentally conscious Canadian town of Nelson, British Columbia, most of Cummings's friends used plastic diapers. When Cummings babysat as a young adult, the families had used disposables, and when she had a baby shower and requested cloth diapers, many of her friends brought her disposables instead. With no friends or family to show her how to do it, the idea of using cloth seemed overwhelming. Before even trying cloth diapers, Cummings felt it would be too much work. "I was afraid of the piles of laundry," she admits.



With adorable patterns like leopard skin, cowhide, interlocking swirls, frogs and hearts, and baby giraffes, cloth diapering has become cute.

“I was afraid of the smell and the grossness factor of poop diapers.”

Instead of starting with cloth as she had intended, Cummings, 37, put her newborn in the disposable diapers given to her. When those were used up, she bought more. It wasn't until her son was over a month old that she first tried a cloth diaper. She was surprised at how easy it was. “I didn't really notice myself doing more laundry once we started with

My cloth-diaper pail, with water and vinegar in it, didn't smell nearly as bad as the garbage can full of disposables.

SHAWNA CUMMINGS

cloth,” says Cummings, who used the Mother-ease one-size-fits-all diapering system for both of her children. “My cloth-diaper pail, with water and vinegar in it, didn't smell nearly as bad as the garbage can full of disposables.”

When I first used cloth diapers ten years ago with my oldest daughter, I, like Cummings, had no idea where to start. I knew only one mom who had chosen a cloth-diaper service, and, a graduate student on a modest income, I didn't feel we could afford a laundry service. So my husband and I went to Babies-R-Us and bought the only diaper option on the shelves. I had no idea how many diapers I needed, how to wash them, or what to do about nighttime diapering.

The past ten years have seen a veritable revolution in cloth diapering. Most parents no longer use the old-fashioned flat diaper, a single rectangular layer of cotton cloth folded into place. Instead they use prefolded cotton diapers with some kind of waterproof cover that closes with Velcro or snaps. In addition to this tried-and-true method, there are now several convenient and versatile new diapering systems to choose from. With adorable patterns like leopard skin, cowhide, interlocking swirls, frogs and hearts, and baby giraffes, cloth diapering has become cute. Far from being a chore, it's actually a lot of fun, and the wide choices of patterns and fabric have helped it appeal to more fashion-conscious parents. “I was able to convince my friends to use cloth just based on how adorable Penelope's butt looked when she was wearing JamTots!” my friend Pam McMahon, 37, a mother of three who lives in

Goshen, Massachusetts, told me. “In the summertime, I would just put her in a T-shirt because her diaper was an outfit unto itself! And boy, did people comment! I remember one person at Look Park saying, ‘Wow, cloth diapers have sure come a long way!’”²

Though users of cloth diapers are still in the minority in America, an abundance of anecdotal evidence suggests that sustainable diaper use is on the rise. “In the past two years I've noticed more and more people are using cloth,” says Angie Gregory, 29, a mother of two and owner of Mother Herb Diaper Service in Northampton, Massachusetts.³ Gregory, who used flat cotton-hemp diapers with wool covers with her children (ages two and six), has seen her diaper-laundrying business expand exponentially since opening it a year ago. A parent educator for new and expectant families, Gregory says that almost all of the 12 to 18 families who attend the monthly meetings of Cradle, a community resource center for families, diaper their children in cloth.

“People have more options than ever,” Gregory says. “The way adults learn is the same way children learn—through mimicking and education. Now that more families are using cloth diapers, more parents are willing to make the commitment and use them too.”

Cloth diapering these days has nothing to do with diaper pins or rubber pants. Instead, there are now prefitted cloth diapers that use elastic at the edges to conform to a baby's legs (the better to avoid diaper blowouts, my dear), many different all-in-one (AIO) diapering systems in which the cover and the diaper inside are combined, and pocket diapering systems where cotton prefolds (or fancy hemp liners) are inserted between a fleece fabric that wicks moisture away from a baby's tush. There are even all sorts of fancy accessories, such as organic woolen training pants and stylin' phthalate-free waterproof bags for carrying soiled diapers.

Since my first child was born, there has been a proliferation of small makers of cloth diapers, and a robust cottage industry has sprung up of mostly work-from-home moms who sell cloth diapers via the Web. There are Internet chat groups that discuss how best to use diapers, blogs devoted to cloth diapering, and a thriving

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An oft-cited study from 1979, published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, found that infants in cloth diapers were five times less likely to get diaper rash.

ing resale market for the more expensive diapers. My fourth child was born in November 2009—as a cloth-diaper consumer today, I have far more choices than I did even ten years ago, when my oldest was born. It’s exciting to have such easy access to information and so many choices. But it can be a bit overwhelming.

“For my daughter, we started off using a variety of different types because we weren’t sure what was going to work,” says Alma Gordillo, a 28-year-old mother of two, both still in diapers, in Houston, Texas.⁴ Gordillo quickly found that she didn’t like fitted cloth diapers for her daughter but loved the Jam-Tot BerryPlush diapers and Bottombumpers, American-made AIOs sewn by a family-run business based in Albion, Illinois.

If you’re buying cloth diapers primarily to save money, the no-fuss, no-frills option is to buy one, two, or three dozen prefolds (depending on your budget and how often you plan to do laundry) and two or three waterproof covers in your baby’s size. Simply put the diaper on folded in thirds inside the cover, or have fun browsing the Internet for tutorials on fancier folding techniques (a quick Google search on “how to fold a cloth diaper” yields thousands of Web pages on which that phrase appears). You don’t need to wash the covers unless they’re soiled. You’ll also need a bucket (preferably one with a lid, though ours doesn’t have one) to soak the soiled diapers in, and two sizes of waterproof bags: a smaller one to carry wet diapers when you’re out and about, and a larger laundry bag with a drawstring in which you can keep wet ones until you wash them.

But if you’re intrigued by the different options, want to experiment, and don’t mind spending some money on startup costs, it’s fun to go beyond simple prefolds and covers to find *the best* system for you. (New parents, beware: Partners don’t always agree on this, so you might end up in a mixed marriage with two systems.) Gordillo tested a variety of diapers to find out which best fit her baby’s body and felt right for the family. Several cloth-diaper retailers, including Sunshine Diapers (www.sunshinediapers.com)⁵ and Diaper Daisy (<http://diaperdaisy.com>),⁶

allow parents to try a variety of diapers for a “rental” fee. When you return the rented diapers, you get a credit that can be applied to a subsequent purchase of the system of your choice. You can also buy gently used diapers in excellent condition at www.myuseddiapers.com,⁷ www.diaperswappers.com,⁸ and the “gently used” section of <http://diaperdaisy.com>, as well as www.craigslist.org and the cloth-diapering forums at www.mothering.com.

While trying different options may sound expensive, Gordillo resold the diapers she decided not to use. Seventy percent of the time, she says, she got back *all* the money she spent. (If you’re wondering how she came up with such a precise number, Gordillo, a high-powered CEO, is a self-described nerd who keeps Excel spreadsheets about her diaper use.) McMahon also says the pricier diapers she bought didn’t lose value even after Penelope had used them for over a year: “The best part was, when I was finished with the diapers, I sold them at auction for exactly what I paid for them!”⁹

cloth is better for the baby

One of the main reasons I’ve used cloth on all of my children is that, as a mom, I have a viscerally negative reaction to the idea of a baby having his most intimate parts in contact with plastic all day, every day, for years. Not only do disposable diapers contain several different plastics, but conventionally bleached disposable diapers contain trace amounts of dioxin, a carcinogenic by-product of the paper-bleaching process.¹⁰ Jay Bolus, a researcher who has been working on environmental and health issues for 14 years and is currently vice president of technical operations for MBDC, a company that helps businesses evaluate how sustainable their products are, puts it most concisely: “The chlorine bleaching process makes this really toxic stuff,” he tells me. “Dioxins can be toxic and persistent, stick around in the environment for a long time, and accumulate in our bodies.”¹¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) hypothesizes that dioxin exposure has the most serious consequences on devel-

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a cloth diaper compendium

diapers

FLAT

The original cloth diaper that our grandmothers used, the flat diaper is a large rectangular or square piece of fabric made from layers of gauze. It is folded to fit, and fastened with pins or Snappis. (See fasteners on opposite page.)



Cover: needed

Fabrics: bleached or unbleached cotton, hemp, bamboo

Cost: 35¢ to \$20 each, depending on fabric choice

PREFOLDS

A *prefold* is a rectangular piece of fabric with six to eight layers of fabric in the center and finished around the edges in a close, overcast stitch. Fastens with pins or Snappis. (See fasteners on opposite page.)



Cover: needed

Fabrics: bleached or unbleached cotton, gauze, bird's-eye cotton, flannel, hemp, bamboo

Cost: \$1.50 to \$17.50 each

ONE SIZE FITS ALL

Designed to fit all sizes, from newborn to toddler, these diapers come in **fitted**, **pocket**, and **all-in-one (AIO)** styles, and fasten with pins or Snappis.

Cover: needed for fitted only

Fabrics, fitted:

Outer: woven and knit cotton, flannel, organic bamboo and/or cotton velour, hemp, cotton fleece

Inner: sherpa, flannel, organic bamboo and cotton velour, hemp, cotton fleece

Fabrics, pocket:

Outer: PUL

Inner: microfleece, Coolmax, suede cloth

Fabrics, AIO:

Outer: PUL, hidden PUL with woven or knit cotton fashion visible

Inner: sherpa, flannel, organic bamboo and cotton velour, hemp and/or cotton fleece, microfleece, suede cloth

Cost: \$15.95 to \$75



CONTOUR/FITTED

Shaped like an hourglass, a fitted or contoured diaper is like a prefold, but is constructed to fit the baby's body. Fitted diapers have elastic at the legs and waist, while contours do not. Both are fastened with pins, Snappis, snaps, or hooks and loops.

Cover: needed

Fabrics: cotton, cotton/flannel, bamboo

Cost: \$3 to \$65



COVERS

Used with flat, prefold, fitted, contoured, pocket, or one-size-fits-all diapers. Can be pull-on, or fastened with snap or hook-and-loop closures.

Fabrics: PUL (polyurethane laminate), nylon, polyester, fleece, wool. Many stylish covers are available, such as these, of knitted wool: soakers, longies, shorties, interlock shorts, and pants soakers.

Cost: \$30 average; \$100 for handmade or hand-knit



ALL IN ONES (AIO)

AIOs have an hourglass shape with elastic in the legs and waist. They consist of three parts—a waterproof outer, a one-piece inner, and an absorbent insert (or soaker)—and fasten with snaps, or hooks and loops.

Cover: built-in

Fabrics, diaper: bleached or unbleached cotton, gauze, bird's-eye cotton, flannel, hemp, bamboo

Fabrics, cover: PUL or ProCare (waterproof fabrics), fleece, or wool

Cost: \$12 to \$75



POCKET

Similar to AIOs, pocket diapers have an hourglass shape and elastic in the legs and waist. They consist of a waterproof outer layer and a stay-dry inner layer. Pockets differ from AIOs in that the front or back edge of the cover is left open for stuffing with an extra absorbent insert that can be replaced without replacing the entire diaper.

Cover: built-in

Fabrics, diaper: bleached or unbleached cotton, gauze, bird's-eye cotton, flannel, hemp, bamboo, microfiber

Fabrics, insert: microfleece, suede cloth

Fabrics, cover: PUL or ProCare, fleece, wool

Cost: \$14.50 to \$35



fasteners

DIAPER AND COVER FASTENERS

Pins

A **Snappi** is a T-shaped plastic grip that hooks into the diaper fabric for a snug fit. Works best with terry-cloth, cotton, or other loose-weave diapers.

Hook and Loop (Velcro-like Aplix or TouchTape brands)

Snaps



pins



Snappi



hook and loop



snaps



hook and loop



pull-on

The “base ingredients” present in Pampers’ Easy Ups, Baby Dry, Swaddlers, and Cruisers, as well as all the Luvs products, include: petroleum, polyethylene, processed wood pulp, “absorbent gelling material,” polypropylene, and perfume.

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oping fetuses and newborn babies.¹² These harmful substances are theoretically contained inside the diaper, but I worry that they may also be getting onto a baby’s skin and even into his body.

Anyone who’s used conventional plastic diapers knows that the stuff inside the diapers sometimes comes out. We’ve all seen the small white beads of gel on a baby’s skin when changing a diaper that’s been on too long. Diaper manufacturers even warn consumers that the diapers should not be torn or ripped. A warning label on a package of Pampers Extra Protection con-

siders this product a choking hazard: “To avoid risk of choking . . . do not allow your child to tear the diaper or handle any loose pieces of the diaper. Discard any torn or unsealed diaper or any loose pieces.”

If you’re wondering, as I was, what else is in a plastic diaper that might be toxic to a child’s health, try calling a customer-service representative at Procter & Gamble (P&G), the company that makes Pampers and Luvs. Ask her what ingredients are in their diapers. With an advertisement image in your mind of a happy blond baby in an Ultra Pampers Plus, you might expect this to be a straightforward conversation. Instead, the spokesperson will get very nervous on the phone, refuse to give you her name (but insist that you give her yours), remind you that the conversation is being recorded, put you on hold four times in 40 minutes so she can check with her boss to find out what she is “at liberty to disclose,” and tell you that you are asking about “sensitive and proprietary” information—even after you’ve explained that all you want to know are the names of the ingredients in the product that touches your baby’s skin every day, all day long.¹³

At the end of the conversation, you still won’t know all the ingredients in a Pampers, because some of these ingredients “cannot be disclosed.” Translation: *You do not, as a consumer, have the right to know exactly what your infant is wearing on his genitals.* If

that doesn’t give you pause, discovering the nature of the contents of these diapers will. The customer-service representative, after a good deal of awkward silence and hemming and hawing, will tell you that, among other things, the “base ingredients” present in Pampers’ Easy Ups, Baby Dry, Swaddlers, and Cruisers, as well as all the Luvs products, include: petroleum, polyethylene, processed wood pulp, “absorbent gelling material,” polypropylene, and perfume (to mask the chemical odors of the other ingredients).

You can then spend the next ten days trying to understand the components of these different plas-

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JAY BOLUS

tic polymers and realizing that disposable diapers are made of petrochemical products derived from petroleum, a nonrenewable resource that has caused wars and environmental devastation, and so much of which has been extracted from the earth that pundits hypothesize the end of the oil age to be near. But instead of wasting all that time on hold, on the Web, and in the library, you could simply decide that you know enough already: These diapers are made from several kinds of plastic, dead and pulverized trees, and synthetic perfumes. In a word: *yuck*.

Debates about the health aspects of disposable vs. cloth diapers have centered on which makes a baby more prone to diaper rash. But the so-called scientific evidence cited to “prove” that one type of diaper is better than the other is often politically skewed. An oft-cited study from 1979, published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, found that infants in cloth diapers were five times less likely to get diaper rash.¹⁴

Betsy Thomas, founder and co-owner of Bummi’s, a maker of cloth diapers based in Montreal, Quebec, says that if cloth diapers are used and washed correctly, they can keep a baby rash-free. “In our store in Montreal we get people who have just come straight from the doctor’s office with wild rashes,” Thomas says. “Their doctors have instructed them to buy cotton for their babies.”¹⁵

Diaper rash aside, what about the negative long-

Sweden, having concluded that plastic diapers use three times as many natural resources as cloth, is considering a financial rebate for families who invest in cloth diapering.



A study of 48 **healthy children**, published in *Archives of Disease in Childhood* in 2000, found that **scrotal skin temperatures** were significantly higher in **boys** who wore **disposable diapers** than in boys wearing **cloth**.

term consequences of disposable diapers on a baby's health? Many people in health care are concerned about this. "You want to think about what you're putting on the most vulnerable skin—a newborn baby's skin," says Dr. Deborah Gordon, a family physician in Ashland, Oregon, who has been practicing for 30 years and specializes in preventive medicine. Gordon believes we should not be using disposable diapers on infants.

"Cloth diapers are absolutely healthier and better for the baby," she says.¹⁶

Kai Abelkis, sustainability coordinator at the Boulder Community Foothills Hospital in Colorado, which uses only cloth diapers on the 1,500 or so infants born there each year, agrees. "We'd rather put a natural product around a child's private area than something that has chemicals and petroleum," Abelkis says.¹⁷ "We believe that cloth diapers are a better option."

Abelkis also points out that there is a conflict of interest when American hospitals give new parents free samples of name-brand disposable diapers: "We don't give away Pampers or any other freebies," Abelkis says. "We have a policy against it. When you get something from a hospital, there's an underlying blessing on that product. We believe that each family should make their decisions based on a holistic approach toward parenting."

Cloth diapering is also healthier for babies because it promotes more interaction between a parent and baby. While the super-absorbent polymers (SAPs) in plastic diapers can hold many times their weight, and in these difficult economic times parents will change a baby's diapers as infrequently as possible to save money, cloth diapers must be changed more frequently. My husband and I change our new baby almost as often as she pees—which is often. During diaper changes I look into her big blue eyes with those impossibly fine eyelashes, kiss her tiny toes, and

gobble up the rolls of fat around her belly. By changing her often, the baby and I get lots of good face time; we have long conversations (baby: "Ah-bah!" me: "Ah-bah? Ba-ba!"); I know how well hydrated she is; and I am also teaching her not to get used to soiling herself.

Cloth diapers may be even healthier for boys than for girls. A boy's penis and testes are on the outside of the body in order to keep them at a cooler temperature than 98.6°F. But plastic diapers—especially when

they're not changed often enough—keep the genital area hotter than nature designed it to be. A study of 48 healthy children, published in *Archives of Disease in Childhood* in 2000, found that scrotal skin temperatures were significantly higher in boys who wore disposable diapers than in boys wearing cloth.¹⁸ The researchers from the Netherlands hypothesized that the overuse of disposable diapers may be one of the reasons for the decline in male reproductive health, and concluded that disposable diapers keep a boy's body too hot: "The physiological testicular cooling mechanism is blunted and often completely abolished during plastic nappy use," the authors reported.

As if that weren't enough, plastic diapers have also been linked to asthma, an illness that affects millions of children.¹⁹ A study published in *Archives of Environmental Health* found that mice exposed to several brands of plastic diapers experienced eye, nose, and throat irritation, as well as bronchial constriction similar to that seen in asthma attacks. Chemicals, including toluene, xylene, ethylbenzene, styrene, and isopropyl-benzene, were off-gassing from the diapers, and were thought to be the cause of respiratory distress. The cloth diapers studied did not cause the mice symptoms of respiratory distress.²⁰

For Amanda Bird (not her real name) of Taylorsville, Georgia, a 27-year-old mother of two whose firstborn was in disposables but whose second child was in cloth from seven months on, cloth diapers had another unforeseen health benefit: They helped Bird

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BETSY THOMAS, FOUNDER AND CO-OWNER OF BUMMIS

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get a better night's sleep: "When you're cosleeping, disposable diapers are really loud," Bird says. "With cloth diapers there's no crinkle, so you don't wake up every time the baby shifts positions."²¹

a high-stakes operation

When I was an infant in the early 1970s, my parents knew cloth diapers were the better, healthier option, and most American hospitals used cloth. Even today, in many parts of the world, cloth diapers (or no diapers) are the norm. P&G introduced Pampers in 1961, and subsequently launched a major advertising campaign to get parents to buy their highly touted

plastic product.²² The ads worked: Today, parents in America and Canada who choose to exclusively use cloth diapers are very much in the minority. A *Mothering* reader survey conducted in 2006 revealed that only 24 percent of respondents used cloth diapers exclusively.²³

P&G earned over \$79 billion in net sales in 2009.²⁴ Their annual financial report for that year boasts that they are number 1 or number 2 in the disposable-diaper market in much of the developing world, and that the opportunities for expansion are "boundless."²⁵ Household care products, which include disposable diapers and disposable wipes, earned

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the company \$37.3 billion.²⁶ Pampers, P&G's largest brand, reported net sales of about \$8 billion in 2009,²⁷ up from \$6 billion in 2005.²⁸ Kimberly-Clark, which makes Huggies, reported earnings of \$4.6 billion on diaper sales in 2008.²⁹

To call these manufacturers giants is an understatement. They are goliath companies with extremely aggressive and often ethically questionable business practices, many of which have been exposed and questioned in *Wall Street Journal* reporter Alecia Swasy's *Soap Opera: The Inside Story of Procter & Gamble*.³⁰

cloth is better for the environment

Although the plastic-diaper industry has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to refute claims that disposable diapers are bad for the environment,³¹ some of the claims are simply irrefutable. Disposable diapers contain petroleum-based ingredients that are made from oil, a nonrenewable resource. Kimberly-Clark, which announced a net sales decrease of 6 percent in the second quarter of 2009,³² mentions the problem of diminishing petroleum in their 2008 annual report to shareholders as a possible risk to the company's financial well-being: "A number of the Corporation's products, such as diapers, training and youth pants, incontinence care products, disposable wipes and various health care products, contain certain materials which are principally derived from petroleum. These materials are subject to price fluctuations based on changes in petroleum prices, availability and other factors."³³

A child who wears plastic diapers creates an enormous amount of waste. We have a concept of "taking the garbage out," but really, the garbage does not go anywhere. Plastic diapers clog our already overtaxed landfills, which leak noxious gases into the atmosphere and pollute our rivers, streams, and oceans. It's sickening to realize that no one alive today has lived long enough to see a single disposable diaper

completely decompose, because it is estimated that each disposable will take hundreds of years to do so.³⁴ If you want to see what this means visually, gDiapers has made an 86-second video of footage from soil trials in Australia comparing three products: a chlorine-free disposable diaper, a conventional disposable diaper, and a gDiaper insert (also made partly from petrochemicals).³⁵ After an entire year in a compost pile, while the gDiaper insert has mostly decomposed, the bright, white disposable diapers look exactly and eerily the same. (According to the Vancouver study referenced below, neither the SAP nor the cellulose the gDiapers contain is biodegradable.³⁶)

Or ask J. Maarten Troost, author of *The Sex Lives of Cannibals: Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific*. Troost details how the pollution of disposable diapers has come even to a remote island in an atoll in the Republic of Kiribati, 5,000 miles from anywhere. Stinking disposable diapers used by islanders were littered around his house³⁷ and stuck to the coral reefs, rotting and fetid in the sun. One day, when Troost was out diving, he unexpectedly found some live coral (the pollution on Tarawa is so bad that most of the coral around the island is dead), which he describes as a "few splashes of color on an abused reef." Unfortunately, Troost writes, "Elsewhere the color was provided by those with advanced degrees in marketing and package engineering. There was rubbish everywhere, cans and rags and diapers listlessly swaying in the current. Swimming through and around this garbage were parrotfish and Great Trevallies and longnose emperors. . . . It was disheartening seeing what was being done to their habitat."³⁸

Closer to home, disposable diapers are among the most common consumer products by weight and volume in American landfills. Toronto is generating so much waste that cannot be accommodated by its landfills that, every day, the city is actually shipping more than 70 truckloads of waste to landfill space in Michigan.³⁹ From January to August 2007, more than 440,000 tons of Toronto's trash was sent to Michigan.⁴⁰ In some

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DEBORAH GORDON, MD

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CONSIDER THIS: If we estimate that a diaper-wearing child goes through **five diapers a day**, and if the average child wears diapers for approximately 34 months, **a single child will use 5,000 diapers** during the period from birth through toilet training. If these are single-use diapers, that means **5,000 diapers in the landfill**.

On the other hand, if we estimate that the average fitted diaper can be worn **150 times**, your baby will need **34 cloth diapers** for those 34 diaper-wearing months.

Illustration by Martens & Kiefer

Seven billion gallons of oil are used annually to make diapers.

municipalities in Quebec, the problem of landfill waste has become so severe that the province is subsidizing families to buy cloth diapers.⁴¹ Sweden, having concluded that plastic diapers use three times as many natural resources as cloth, is considering a financial rebate for families who invest in cloth diapering.⁴²

For the Boulder Community Foothills Hospital, the decision to switch from disposables to cloth was motivated in large part by environmental and health concerns. The numbers are staggering and horrifying, and you've probably already read them elsewhere: Today, an average American child who uses only five plastic diapers a day (most use many more) will end up contributing 5,000 disposables to America's landfills. Seven billion gallons of oil are used annually to make diapers.⁴³ Even 20 years ago, something like 82,000 tons of plastic and 1.3 million tons of wood pulp (250,000 trees) were used in one year to make throwaway diapers.⁴⁴ At the Boulder Community Foothills Hospital, sustainability coordinator Kai Abelkis estimates that, since a laundry service was contracted to wash their custom-made cloth diapers, they've kept more than 22,500 diapers from the landfill each year. "Reuse is much better than brand-new," Abelkis says. "It's part of the whole package of a healthy earth."

the hype about hybrids

Yet even though people understand both the environmental and the health reasons to use cloth diapers, the vast majority of Americans are not making the switch. Several small companies are trying to lure more customers to their products by offering "hybrid" diapers: cloth shells with disposable inserts. The best known of these is the gDiaper refill, patented by an Australian couple in 2004. The company gained widespread recognition when a cover story in *Vanity Fair* revealed that Julia Roberts's son wore gDiapers.⁴⁵ Compared to the diaper giants, gDiapers is a small operation: Headquartered in Portland, Oregon, they have only 16 employees. But they've seen their business grow steadily. "In the last five years consumers are getting more environmentally conscious," says cofounder Kim Graham-Nye, who explains that they chose to launch the company

in Portland because the city has become a center of sustainability. "Environmental consciousness is a megatrend. All of society is getting more environmentally aware, and parents are getting there even quicker."⁴⁶

Graham-Nye, a breastfeeding, cosleeping mom who herself used cloth diapers in Australia with her two sons, as well as elimination communication (see Christine Gross-Loh's article in this issue), says the gDiaper refill is an ecological option for parents who are too busy to use cloth: The wood-pulp interior is made from sustainably grown trees, soiled refills are designed to be taken apart and flushed down the toilet, and wet refills can be put in a home compost bin. The energy used to make the diapers, down the supply chain, is renewable. Because the company cares about their environmental impact, they worked for three years to get independently certified for Cradle to Cradle environmental sustainability (an independent certification process to determine if an economic, social, or industrial system is both efficient and as close to waste-free as possible); in September 2008, the gDiaper refill was awarded Gold certification (the highest rating is Platinum). Jay Bolus, MBDC project manager for the gDiapers project, explains that for a company to get certified, it must "make a safe product from materials that can be recaptured and recycled, or go back to nature safely and create healthy soil and plants."

Yet some environmentalists and cloth-diaper advocates are concerned about the depiction of this disposable product as an ecologically viable alternative. Graham-Nye, who is very environmentally informed, and who, along with her husband, was credited by *Cookie* magazine for bringing the diaper into the green age,⁴⁷ says she's been pretty beat up by the cloth-diapering community. The problem? The refills contain a SAP, one of the same super-absorbent polymers found in all disposable diapers. Graham-Nye told me that she didn't want this SAP in the product originally. In the absence of a way to make the refills absorbent enough without the polymer, Graham-Nye was reassured by scientists and engineers that it was a good choice. But people outside her business aren't so sure that a throwaway product containing SAPs is really ecologically sustain-

Some environmentalists and cloth-diaper advocates are concerned about the depiction of this disposable product as an ecologically viable alternative.

At the **Boulder Community Foothills Hospital**, sustainability coordinator Kai Abelkis estimates that, since a laundry service was contracted to **wash** their custom-made **cloth diapers**, they've **kept more than 22,500 diapers from the landfill** each year.

able. “That’s definitely the one weak spot in all of this,” says Bolus. “Because they are flushed or thrown away, it means you are not recapturing something that is petroleum-based, so you have to go back to the oil well.”

There is also concern that the gDiaper liner is not safe for America’s sewers. When, in 2006, the City of Vancouver, Washington, conducted a small study of the impact of the diaper liners on Vancouver’s sewage and wastewater systems,⁴⁸ city officials discovered several problems. They found, for instance, that after the disposable pads became saturated with water, they swelled to the size of soccer balls, and that a sticky residue from the liners caused clogging that had to be manually cleared.⁴⁹ (Note: The clogging was due to both the absorbent chemical gel *and* the liner’s cloth material.) City officials concluded that the liners (meaning both the outer cloth component and the inner chemical components of the diaper) had so much potential to get entangled in the pump system, as well as to cause potential health problems and pollu-

tion in the Columbia River (where Vancouver’s treated wastewater is released), that until more research is done showing that the liners are safe, they should be bagged and disposed of in the garbage.⁵⁰ Partly because of the criticism, gDiapers has started making a cloth option: a highly absorbent hemp-cotton insert that can be machine-washed and reused.

Recently, when I took my baby to a baby yoga class, I met a mom there whose five-month-old, Juniper, was in cloth gDiapers. It was the first time I’d seen the system outside of cyberspace. The covers are adorable, and

“Environmental consciousness is a megatrend. All of society is getting more environmentally aware, and parents are getting there even quicker.”

KIM GRAHAM-NYE
COFOUNDER, gDIAPERS

the wide Velcro cleverly fastens in back. “When our washing machine broke, I tried the disposable inserts to see what they were like,” Xandria Thompson, 20, told me. “They were definitely better than the Seventh Generation disposables, which gave my daughter a wicked rash, but they’re still disposable and not as good as cloth.”⁵¹ For Thompson, the gDiaper refills, while less irritating to Juniper’s sensitive skin, don’t seem very eco-friendly. She doesn’t compost, and uses a septic tank for sewage, so she can neither compost nor flush the inserts. Even using the refills, Thompson found herself embarrassed by the amount of waste her family was generating—she shares cans with three other families, and the garbage is picked up only once every two weeks. Still, she’s glad to have the option, and doesn’t feel that this disposable system will take cloth users away from cloth diapers, as some critics fear: “I think they’re a nice alternative if I’m trying to travel, or if I were sick or something, but they’re definitely not pulling me away from cloth. In the end, I still feel like I’m wasting a brand-new product every time I use one.”

Cotton Babies, one of the largest makers of cloth diapers, employs 47 people in St. Louis, Missouri, and offers consumers a hybrid system of reusable cloth inserts and disposable inserts: Flip disposable inserts, which come in packages of 18, are designed to be used inside cloth covers. Cotton Babies does not claim that Flip disposable inserts—made from SAP, wood pulp, nonwoven bamboo,

FOR MY MIDDLE CHILD

You are the sound of geese
In spring
Flying over the heads of my boy and me
Hanging clean diapers on the clothesline,
Tiny T-shirts,
A triumphant flag to say,
New Baby On His Way!
You are the sound of geese
In spring
Your cold unmittened hand
Pointing—gasp—at the V in the sky
Oh, you say,
And I close my eyes
To feel the new one quiver.

—JENNY DALEN

Many have stopped buying bottled water, and started eschewing plastic packaging whenever we can. Yet so many of us are still convinced by the ads to use “disposable” diapers, even if the very name is a misnomer.

and starch-based glue⁵²—are flushable or biodegradable. On her Cotton Babies blog (<http://clothdiapers.blogspot.com/2009/09/are-flip-disposable-inserts.html>), cofounder Jenn Labit recommends you compost them in a flower garden. Although she has been criticized by environmentalists and cloth-diaper advocates, Labit insists that the Flip actually helps parents keep their babies in cloth: “People who are in disposable diapers are more likely to take the step into cloth if you can build a bridge,” Labit says. “If you have the reusable product at home, we find our customers not taking them on the road, because they don’t want to haul around poop diapers. We’ve kept the package small enough that it is good for travel, but not enough to become a habit.”⁵³

Yet Alma Gordillo, who had two children in diapers at the same time, has traveled all over the world—including Norway, Mexico City, and across the US—without using a single disposable or hybrid diaper. When I talked to her about it, I felt inspired that, with a little advance planning, of course it’s possible to travel with cloth. She would use prefolds and covers, bring a waterproof drawstring bag full of clean cloth diapers, and two other Wet Happened? waterproof bags (one for soiled diapers, one for wet ones), and wash the diapers with the rest of the family’s laundry. “You have to change the diaper anyway and then do something with it,” Gordillo said. “I see people change diapers and leave dirty diapers in regular trash cans, but you aren’t supposed to throw human waste in the trash can. It’s so gross. Even if I used disposable diapers, I wouldn’t be throwing them away in a public place, so I would have to be carrying them around anyway.”

As tempting as it is for cloth-diaper advocates to criticize diaper companies that claim to be eco-friendly but make disposable products, it’s important to remember that even the biggest makers of cloth diapers are microbusinesses with a fraction of the advertising budgets of P&G and Kimberly-Clark. They don’t have the resources to launch the kind of advertising campaign that can change behavior practically overnight. Still, as a society, we are becoming more aware of our unsustainable

habits and are striving to change them. Many of us now bring our own mugs to the coffee shop, and our own reusable bags to the grocery store. Many have stopped buying bottled water, and started eschewing plastic packaging whenever we can. Yet so many of us are still convinced by the ads to use “disposable” diapers, even if the very name is a misnomer: You *can’t* dispose of them, and when you throw them “away,” they don’t go anywhere. It’s time to stop using the fallacy of convenience as a reason to put human waste in landfills and wrap our babies’ genitals in plastic. Perhaps Lori Taylor of the Real Diaper Association put it best: “Would *you* wear plastic underwear all day long?”

At any given moment our baby has something different on her tush. It may be a raggedy prefold from when her oldest sister was born, a Kushies AIO I picked up at a children’s consignment shop for less than half price (about \$6/diaper), a hand-me-down Mother-ease, or a new JamTot some friends chipped in to buy us. We’ve also been practicing elimination communication, which has been working so well that more than 90 percent of the time the baby poops not in a diaper but in a little chamber pot. Nor do we use disposable wipes: Washcloths with warm water work just as well. We soak poop diapers in gray water, and wash the diapers along with the rest of the family’s clothes, in cold water with biodegradable soap. Though some cloth users find they need to wash diapers with their wash cycles set to WARM or HOT to get the soap off and avoid rash, our baby has been rash-free since birth. At night I load her up with an extra prefold, and sometimes put a cloth pad protector under her—or I put her in a Mother-ease without a cover, and when it’s wet I take it off, throw it in the direction of the hamper (I do this without getting up), and put on another one.

For Alma Gordillo, changing cloth diapers has always been a labor of love. In fact, she loves them too much to part with them. “I’m keeping some of my diapers for my kids in a hope chest,” she told me. “I’m keeping them as part of a time capsule to show them: ‘This was your childhood and this was your life.’ They’re that special.”

“Would you wear plastic underwear all day long?”

LORI TAYLOR
REAL DIAPER ASSOCIATION

Even the biggest makers of cloth diapers are microbusinesses with a fraction of the advertising budgets of P&G and Kimberly-Clark. They don’t have the resources to launch the kind of advertising campaign that can change behavior practically overnight.

troubleshooting



Leap over obstacles to cloth diapering with these handy tips

Thinking of using cloth diapers but feeling overwhelmed? Cloth-diaper enthusiasts may make it look easy, but that doesn't mean it will be easy for you. If you want to try cloth—try it! Don't feel it's an all-or-nothing proposition. Though it may take more effort at the beginning, we promise that it will soon become second nature.

Think of it this way: If you use one cloth diaper a week on your child, that's already 52 plastic diapers a year that don't end up in the landfill. Even that makes a difference.

Here are some **real-life solutions** to common cloth-diaper challenges:

Problem: "I wanted to use cloth but I just didn't like how often I had to change the diapers."—*Anjie, mother of Dane (8) and Aubrey (7); Ashland, Oregon*

Solution: Pocket diapering systems, such as FuzziBunz and JamTots' Kangaroo, wick moisture away from a baby's skin, while the cotton insert or prefold inside the pocket gets soaked. These diapers don't need to be changed as often as more traditional cloth systems.

Problem: "It was a challenge to get them to fit. My daughter was born with really skinny legs and would have blowouts when she was teeny tiny. By three months, she became so chunky that the diaper covers would leave rings on her fat thighs."—*Jennifer, mother of Hannah (2)*

Solution: Soft Bums (www.softbums.com) makes a diaper that has a hidden, easy-to-use drawstring elastic to adjust the leg size and the rise size. It gives your baby a better fit no matter what size legs she has. Rocky Mountain Diapers (www.rockymountaindiapers.com/ClothDiapers.html) and Clover Fitted Diapers (www.preciousdignity.com) also have adjustable leg holes.

Problem: "I work full time and I see my son only in the evenings and on weekends. I didn't want to spend the little time we have together doing laundry."—*Abby, mother of Oliver (19 months); Medford, Oregon*

Solution: A cloth-diapering laundry service is the way to go for busy working moms. The Real Diaper Association has a list: Go to www.realdiaperassociation.org and click on "Diaper Services" in the left-hand sidebar (you can find other services online). If there's no service near you, buy enough diapers so that you need to wash them only every three or four days,

when you'll be doing laundry anyway, and if necessary hire a mother's helper to do the laundry.

Problem: "I'm a pretty eco-conscious person, but we didn't even try cloth. We travel a lot, and the idea of washing diapers seemed like more work than we would be willing to put in."—*Sarah Jane, mother of Rosalee (4) and Mateo (1); Nashville, Tennessee*

Solution: Traveling with cloth diapers requires a little extra planning, but really, all you need are a suitcase for the diapers, two waterproof bags (one for wet diapers, one for soiled), and access to a washing machine. Most people traveling with small children end up doing laundry anyway; you can wash diapers with the other clothes.

Problem: "At first, I felt cloth diapers were too expensive. We didn't have enough money to start a stash."—*Amanda, mother of Jack (8) and Kate (4); Taylorsville, Georgia*

Solution: Although you save a lot of money in the long run, the startup costs of using cloth can be daunting. Buy diapering systems for half price or less at secondhand children's clothing stores, or surprisingly cheap "seconds" from diaper-laundering services (these diapers have small blemishes or holes). Get hand-me-downs (cloth-enthusiast moms in your community will want to share!), or ask friends, family, and coworkers to contribute a gift certificate or buy you one diaper each to get you started. Several companies also offer affordable new-diaper options: Cotton Babies recently launched a new product, Econobum, for families struggling financially. You can buy a one-size-fits-all diaper cover and a one-size prefold together for under \$10, or a dozen diapers with three covers for about \$50.

Problem: "When my fourth was born, the hospital here used cloth. He was early and tiny, and they just did not fit him well."—*Lynette, mother of six (24, 21, 20, 18, 15, 14); Colorado Springs, Colorado*

Solution: Bummi makes a teeny-tiny prefold diaper of organic cotton that fits preemie babies and small newborns who weigh from four to nine pounds. Their Velcro-closing Super Brite cover has an overlapping system that works for skinny baby legs.

—Jennifer Margulis

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❖ **Interested in more facts on cloth diapers?** Go to www.mothering.com/links and check out the Special Cloth Diaper How-to Videos section, and the past articles: "Dumping Disposable Diapers," by Lindsay Evans; "Crazy for Cloth," by Laura Schmitt; "A Tale of Two Diapers," by Peggy O'Mara; "The ABCs of Going Cloth," by Elizabeth Gawlik; and "Disposable Diapers Linked to Asthma."



Jennifer Margulis, PhD, is a contributing editor of *Mothering* magazine and the mother of four (10, 9, and 6 years, and 6 months). She lives in Ashland, Oregon, and has used cloth diapers on all of her children. Read more about her at www.jennifermargulis.net.

diaper resources



RESOURCES FOR DIAPERS, COVERS, AND DIAPER BAGS

AMP Diapers www.ampdiapers.com
 Aristocrats www.aristocratsbabyproducts.com
 Babies in Bloom www.babies-in-bloom.com
 Baby Belly Boutique www.babybellyboutique.com
 Baby Best Buy www.babybestbuy.com
 BabyBunz www.babybunz.com
 BabyKicks www.babykicks.com
 The Baby Lane www.thebabylane.com
 The Baby Marketplace www.thebabymarketplace.com
 Baby Mine Store www.babyminestore.com
 Baby's Abode www.babysabode.com
 Babyworks www.babyworks.com
 Bambino Mio www.bambinomio.com
 Banana Peels Diapers www.bananapeelsdiapers.com
 Bébé Verde www.bebeverde.net
 Be By Baby! www.bebybaby.com
 Bella Bottoms www.bellabottoms.com
 Best Loved Baby www.bestlovedbaby.com
 Better for Babies www.betterforbabies.com
 Birth and Baby www.birthisandbaby.com
 Blueberry www.blueberrydiapers.com
 Bodacious Babies Boutique www.bodaciousbabies.blogspot.com
 Born to Love www.borntolove.com
 Bottombumpers www.bottombumpers.com
 BumGenius www.bumgenius.com
 Bumkins www.bumkins.com
 Bummis www.bummis.com
 Bum-Ware Cloth Diapers www.bum-ware.com
 Comfort Silkie www.comfortsilkie.com
 Cotton Babies www.cottonbabies.com
 Cottontail Baby www.cottontailbaby.com
 Cozy Baby Boutique www.cozybabyboutique.com
 Cozy Cocoon www.cozycocoon.com
 Crankypants www.crankypantshome.com
 Daisy Doodles www.daisy-doodles.com
 Diaperaps www.babysorganicnursery.com
 Diapering Decisions www.diaperingdecisions.com
 DiaperKit.com www.diaperkit.com/store
 Diapers Etc. www.diapersetc.com
 Disana www.disana.de/engl/produkte/wickeln/index.html
 Doudou Bebe www.doudoubebe.com
 DryBees Cloth Diapers www.drybees.com
 Ecobumz www.ecobumz.com
 Evolution Diapers www.evolutiondiapers.com
 Fab Baby Gear www.fabbabygear.com
 Fluffy Bottom Babies www.fluffybottombabies.ca
 Franklin Goose www.franklingoose.com
 FuzBaby www.fuzbaby.com
 FuzziBunz www.fuzzibunz.com
 GEN-Y <http://gen-ydiapers.com>
 Go Green Sustainable Industries www.lollidoo.com,
www.ggsillc.com
 GoodMama <http://shop.thegoodmama.com>
 Green Acre Designs www.greenacredesigns.com

Green Baby Gift Box <http://greenbabygiftbox.com>
 Green Mountain Diapers www.greenmountaindiapers.com
 GreenPea Baby <http://greenpeababystore.com/cart/home.php>
 Happy Bambino www.happybambino.com
 Happy Heiny's www.happyheiny.com
 Heavenly Organic www.heavenlyorganic.com
 Hip Mountain Mama www.hipmountainmama.com
 Honey for the Bear www.honeyforthebear.com
 Hugga Buns www.huggabuns.com
 ImseVimse www.imsevimse.co.uk
 JamTots www.jamtots.com
 Jillian's Drawers www.jilliansdrawers.com
 Kanga Care www.rumparooz.com
 Kelly's Closet www.kellyscloset.com
 KidBean.com www.kidbean.com
 Kissaluv's www.kissaluv.com
 Knickernappies www.knickernappies.com
 Little Comet Tails <http://littlecomettails.kingston.design.com>
 Little for Now www.littlefornow.com
 Maine Cloth Diaper www.maineclothdiaper.com
 Metro Minis www.metrominis.com
 Mommy's Touch www.mommystouch.com
 Monkey Hugz www.monkeyhugz.com
 Mother-ease www.mother-ease.com
 A Much Better Way www.amuchbetterway.com
 Muttaqin Baby www.muttaqinbaby.com
 The Natural Baby Company www.thenaturalbabyco.com
 Naturally Trendy www.naturallytrendy.com
 Natural Pod www.naturalpod.com
 Natural Pure Essentials www.naturalpureessentials.com
 Nature Baby www.naturebaby.com
 Nature's Fabrics www.naturesfabrics.com
 Nicki's Diapers www.nickisdiapers.com
 Nikky Diaper Covers www.nikkydiapercovers.com
 The Nurture Center www.nurturecenter.com
 Oasis Child www.oasischild.com/site/home.html
 Organic By Nature www.organicbynature.ca
 Organic Cotton Alternatives www.organiccottonalts.com
 Parenting By Nature www.parentingbynature.com
 Piddle Poddles www.piddlepoddles.com
 Pittsburgh Cloth Diapers www.pittsburghclothdiapers.com
 Polar Babies www.diapercovers.com
 Precious Dignity www.preciousdignity.myshopify.com
 Preston's Pants www.prestonspants.com
 ProRap www.prodiaper.net
 Real Diaper Association www.realdiaperassociation.com
 RG Natural Babies www.rgnaturalbabies.com
 Rocky Mountain Diapers www.rockymountaindiapers.com
 Sew Crafty Baby www.sewcraftybaby.com
 Silly Stripes Shoppe <http://hyenacart.com/SillyStripes>
 A Small Green Footprint www.asmallgreenfootprint.com
 Smartipants www.smartipants.com

Snap-EZ www.snap-ez.com
 SoftBums www.softbums.com
 So Green Baby www.sogreenbaby.com
 Squishy Tushy www.squishytushy.com
 Stork Organic Baby www.storkorganicbaby.com
 Sun Seedlings www.sunseedlings.com
 Sustainablebabyish www.sloomb.com
 Swaddlebees www.swaddlebees.com
 Sweet Pea Diapers www.sweetpeadiaper.com
 Thanks Mama www.thanksmama.com
 Thirsties www.thirstiesbaby.com
 Tiny Birds Organic Baby & Family www.tinybirdsorganics.com
 Tiny Tots www.tinytots.com
 Tiny Tush www.tinytush.com
 TK Cuddlers www.tkcuddlers.com
 Tots Bots www.totsbots.com
 Two Potato Tots www.twopotatotots.ca
 Under the Nile www.underthenile.com
 The Vermont Diaper Company www.vermontdiapercompany.com
 Wahmies www.wahmies.com
 Wee Little Sprouts www.weelittlesprouts.com
 Wee Ones www.weeones.biz
 Wild Child Woolies <http://hyenacart.com/WildChildWoolies>
 Wonderoos www.wonderoos.com
 Zoom Baby Gear www.zoombabygear.com

WORK-AT-HOME-MOM (WAHM)—MADE DIAPERING STORES AND PRODUCTS

www.etsy.com An online marketplace for handmade goods, including lots of diapers!
www.hyenacart.com More than 286 stores, all run by WAHMs

OTHER ACCESSORIES

Pins and Fasteners

Little-Lions metal locking head pins www.little-lions.com
 Snappi diaper fastener www.snappibaby.com
 Tiny Tush heavy duty diaper pins www.tinytush.com

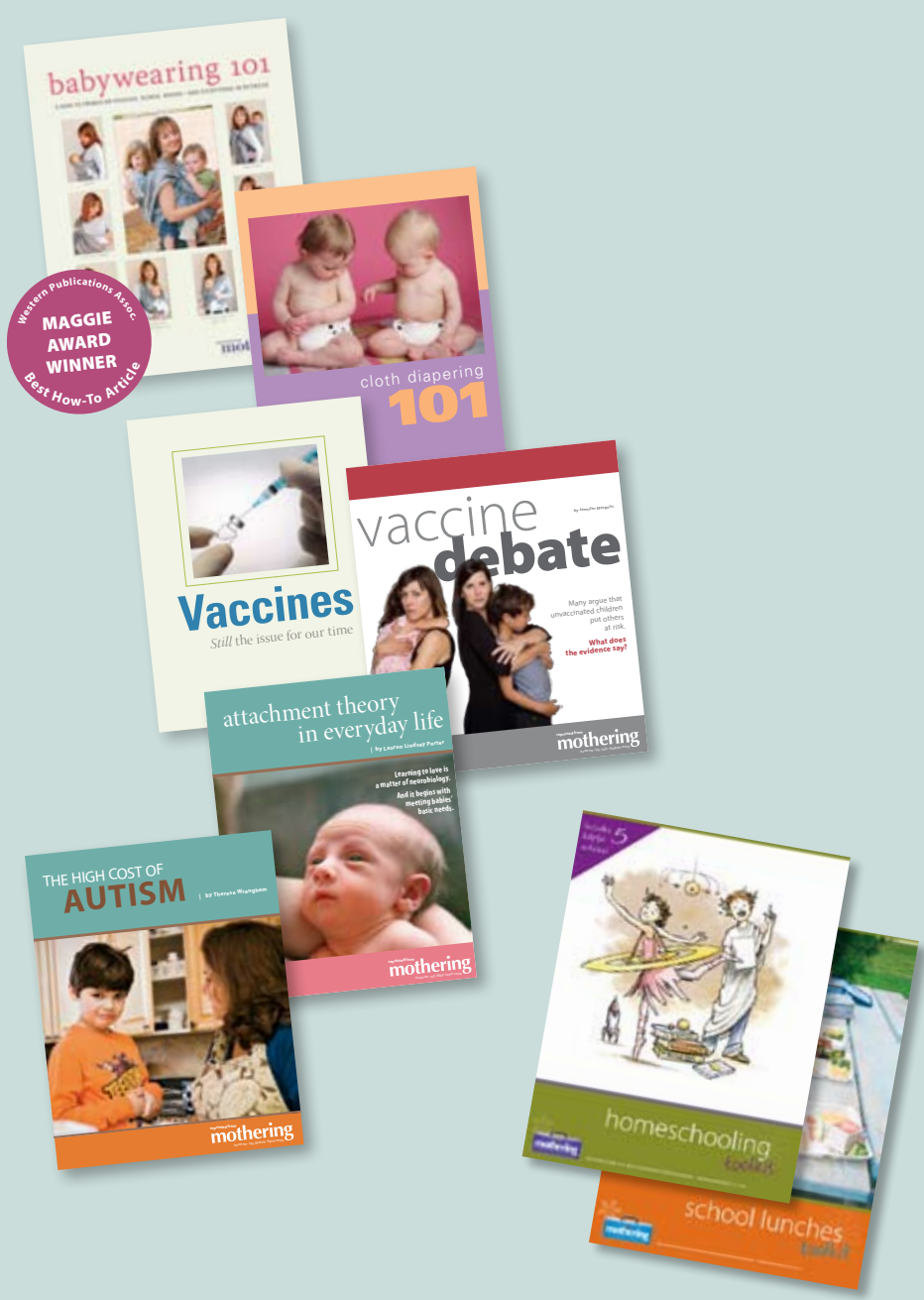
Pail Liner and Wet Bags

Bummis tote bag www.bummis.com
 The Generation Baby wet sack www.generationbaby.ca
 Goodmama hanging pail wet bags www.thegoodmama.com
 JamTots zippered wet bag and pail liners www.jamtots.com
 Loving Touch wet bag <http://hyenacart.com/lovingtouchwetbags>
 Planet Wise wet bags and pail liners www.planetwiseinc.com
 Wahmies fun prints wet bags www.wahmies.com

Diaper Care Products

Giggle www.giggle.com
 Mama Rose's Naturals www.mamarosesnaturals.com

—Eden Haywood-Bird



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