

*The latest poop on the cloth vs. disposable debate may surprise you*

# Diaper

by Vivien Santana Hughes



skimo mothers used moss, modern moms use wood-pulp-lined plastic, and now more parents are turning back to cotton—all these materials just to absorb a natural, if messy, function. The fight to diaper your baby's coveted bottom has resulted in war: Cloth versus disposable, or The National Association of Diaper Services versus the free-spending Diaper Manufacturers Group. While environmentalists decry the tons of disposables overflowing our landfills, the disposable diaper manufacturers are striking back with their own studies and slick ad campaigns. The issue is to the Nineties what breastfeeding was to the Eighties—and left among the fallout are many confused, conscientious parents.

The facts show that more of us are heeding the call to reuse and recycle. Diaper services have reported steady gains throughout the Eighties, and after Earth Day 1990, “we had a substantial increase in business,” says Jim Houlihan, manager of Babyland Diaper Service, which serves San Diego, Orange and Riverside counties.

He adds, “We cannot be a single-use society—it’s wasteful and it’s dumb.” Los Angeles County-based Dy-Dee Diaper Service has seen their business surge 60 percent over the last three years. In addition, both companies report an increasing amount of hospitals and childcare centers using cloth—seven hospitals were added by Dy-Dee since last April.

Public opinion about environmental concerns has caused legislators across the United States to debate the taxing or outright banning of non-degradable disposables. (Nebraska has enacted such a ban effective in 1993.) Due to the landfill crisis, recent California state legislation requires a 25 percent reduction in the waste stream by 1995, 50 percent by the year 2000. Because of this, many cities are looking at what exactly is going into their landfills. Carl Haase, senior sanitary engineer for the city of Los Angeles, says that city’s surveys show 4 1/2 percent of total residential waste is made up of disposable diapers. While Babyland Diaper Service is currently enrolled in a disposable diaper recycling project that has, according to Houlihan, diverted more than 100 tons of plastic, Haase and other solid waste experts see the soiled diapers as a contamination hazard (due to the raw sewage coming with them) that would be difficult and costly to separate, at least in the foreseeable future.

The disposable diaper industry is not sitting on their bottoms through all of this. Jumping to their own defense, they refer to a

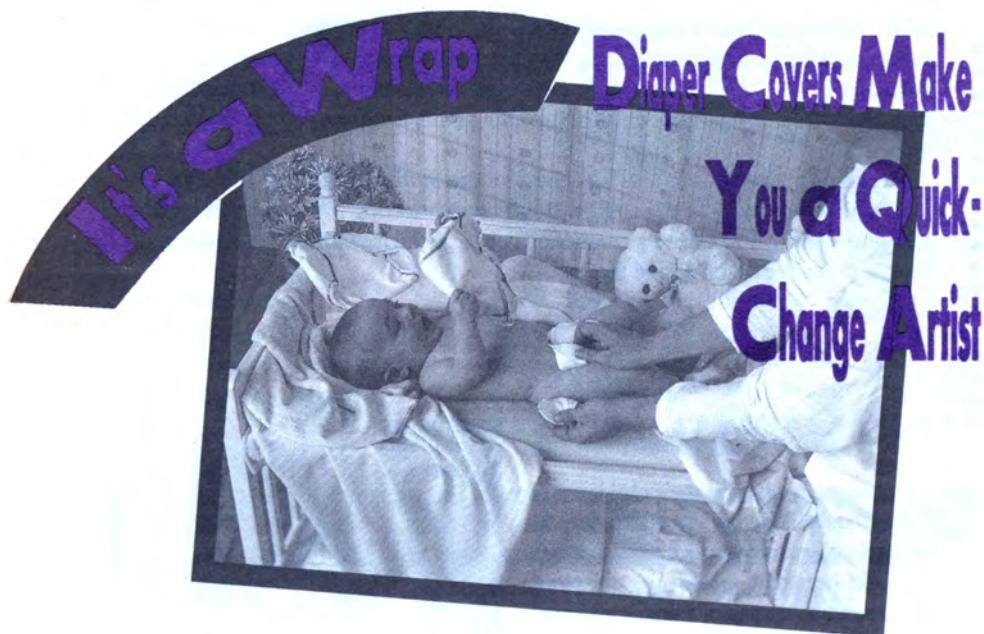
Gallup Poll that showed that the majority of mothers prefer disposables. In an attempt to appease environmentalists, Proctor and Gamble (makers of Luvs and Pampers) has opened a few pilot test facilities to compost their diapers and claim that about 80 percent of the materials can decompose in this way. The manufacturers also cite the 1990 Franklin Associates study, sponsored by their trade group, which concluded that “while disposables generate more solid waste, they use less energy and water than reusable cloth diapers.” This latter claim is refuted by a 1991 diaper services study that found that “single-use diapers use over 70 percent more energy than the average reusable diaper.” On the health front, a recent University of Texas study concluded that there was increased fecal contamination in childcare centers where children wore cloth diapers and plastic pants with no clothing over them. But,

pediatrician and author Dr. William Sears calls the study questionable and claims it was actually funded by Proctor and Gamble. “This study, if analyzed critically, could only come to one conclusion, that putting clothes over diapers may decrease the spread of diarrhea germs in daycare. The type of diaper probably had nothing to do with the spread of germs.” You figure it out.

One of Proctor and Gamble’s efforts to appear less wasteful has left them with poop on their face. Because they advertised that disposable diapers are now readily compostable, P & G was accused of misrepresentation in an action brought by California attorney general Dan Lungren (along with nine other states). Admitting no wrongdoing, the company agreed to a settlement, which includes a total payment of \$50,000 in damages to the involved states, disclosure in their ads that composting is available to less than one percent of the population, and no representations in future ads that disposable diapers have any environmental benefit (unless they can support that claim). State lawmakers also required American Enviro, makers of Bunnies, the cornstarch plastic disposables, to remove the term “biodegradable” from the label. Using a thinner plastic than the leading brands, the diapers are now being promoted as treesaving since they are filled with mostly cotton instead of the common wood pulp. While also admitting no wrongdoing, American Enviro is still \$50,000 poorer.

Whether you’re talking cotton diapers or throw-aways, it seems that everyone has an agenda or a vested interest. Ultimately, it comes down to—what is really best for your precious bundle? Diane Kubo is marketing director of Babyland Diaper Service, which delivers both cloth and disposable diapers. While disposables are convenient, popular and have their uses, says Kubo, “If babies could talk, they’d choose [the fabric] that you and I wear.” And that’s probably not plastic.

**Disposable  
diapers  
account for  
4 1/2 percent  
of household  
waste**



**M**y 6-week-old niece lay naked on the carpet, screaming at a decibel level that would pain Tarzan. The time had come for my first solo diaper changing experience and I was frantically trying 50 ways to fold a diaper. The pathetic finished product was impossible to pin together so, in desperation, I found a lone toddler-size disposable, which covered the tiny newborn up to her armpits.

That was eight years ago—modern technology and Velcro have made folding and pinning a thing out of diapering's dark ages. A recent convert to cloth, I reluctantly made the change because of my second son's persistent rashes. Two days of cotton eliminated a problem I had agonized over since he was born. And I made a surprising discovery: Using cloth diapers from a service (no soaking) along with Velcro-fastening diaper covers is easy. Really. Take this from someone who thought the green movement had to do with interior design. And they come in a wide variety of hip patterns and fabrics from zebra stripes to silk-screened pastels.

On average, covers need to be washed after around three to four diaper changes. Four covers is the minimum amount you'll need; about eight is more realistic. Many stores (including Toys R Us) carry inexpensive nylon wraps, but here's a sampling of other diaper covers and their features.

**BIOBOTTOMS:** The Cadillac of covers, these are made of absorbant 100 percent wool and are surprisingly soft (not itchy) and water resistant. The natural fiber is breathable, which helps prevent rashes and makes your baby feel cooler—even in summer. Or try all cotton Tenderbottoms. Both about \$16. Waterproof Cottonbottoms are terry outside, cotton inside with a polyester layer in between. About \$14. All have snaps in addition to Velcro closures. Call (800) 7661254 for a *Biobottoms*

*Fresh Air Wear* catalog of diapering accessories and kids' clothing.

**DIAPERAPS:** The premium version is 100 percent cotton fabric bonded with a waterproofing material that still allows air to circulate. To keep your toddler from inadvertently mooning Aunt Emma, the new double-Velcro closure tabs are extra secure. Retail for \$7.99. Lower-priced Diaperaps Lites come in 50/50 cotton blend or polyester and retail for \$5.99 and \$4.99, respectively. All three have elasticized waists and leg openings and come in a variety of fun patterns. At J.C. Penney and specialty stores or call (818) 886-7471 for retail outlets.

**BUMPKINS:** These waterproof polyester covers feature an air-vented design—like a running jacket—to prevent heat build-up and a front leak shield to keep everyone dry. The reinforced Velcro tabs won't curl after repeated washings and the elasticized legs keep the diaper in. Besides standard pastels, the colorful collection includes zebra stripe, watercolor floral and neon dinosaur. About \$6 to \$8 at juvenile stores. For a brochure and retail information, call (800) 553-9302.

**WRAP-UPS:** From the R. Duck Company, these are waterproof nylon and feature a leak-preventing mesh liner that's designed to hug the diaper to your baby's bottom. About \$6.50 in solid white or brights. Jungle Wraps are the same style, but with a tropical or floral-print cotton outer fabric, and retail for \$7.95. Call (800) 422-DUCK (3825) for a catalog or nearest retailer.

**NIKKYS:** Super soft, stretchable and well constructed, Nikkys come in three different styles: 100 percent lambswool felt for maximum breathability (\$13.95), all-cotton with patented waterproofing that still allows for evaporation (\$11.95), and cotton with a vinyl liner in white, star or duck prints (\$9.50). Order direct from Baby Bunz & Co. at (800) 67-NIKKY (64559).

