'I Love Cloth Diapers'
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PARENTING

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Why children deserve to be wrapped insoft, environmentally friendly cotton

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When I had our daughter a few months ago and people found out I was using cloth diapers, many reacted by wrinkling their noses and asking, "Why?" Disposable diapers are so common these days that using them is now standard practice even for low-income families who cannot really afford them. Before I heard of a friend using cloth diapers I didn't even know you could buy them anymore! In just 30 years, plastic, disposable diapers have totally dominated the diapering industry. We would think a family who used disposable plates and bowls for every meal was wasteful, but we don't think twice about diapering our babies in the same fashion.

My mother-in-law says that in India most babies traditionally are diapered in old veshtis, or wrap around clothes for men, cut into pieces. No waterproof covers are used because they have tile floors and it's not a problem to clean up.

As a Hindu, it is my responsibility to tread softy on the earth for my own generation and those that follow. It is my aim to be as natural and gentle a parent as possible from the very beginning. Each year billions of tons of disposable diapers are dumped into landfills. They are wrapped in plastic bags and buried with no chance to biodegrade. These diapers will be around long after my daughter is a great-grandmother. On the other hand, a set of cotton cloth diapers can be used over and over again for each child in the family, and finally be recycled as cleaning rags. There is no waste. Even the water that is used to wash them is a renewable and natural resource.

When new parents buy disposable diapers one or two packs at a time, they do not add up the total costs. It is estimated that it costs close to us$1,000 to diaper a baby in disposables for the first year alone. For about two-thirds of that cost, you can hire a cloth diaper service. For about one-fourth of that cost, you can buy enough diapers for all of your child's diapering days (plus future siblings) and wash the diapers yourself. Even when you add in water, electricity, and

If that is not convincing enough, factor in how good cotton is on a baby's skin compared to paper, plastic, and water-absorbing

chemicals. On a recent week-long trip we used disposables and I was alarmed to find crystals forming on my daughter's skin as well as a mild case of diaper rash. I found out later it was the liquid-absorbing gels in the diapers that caused the rashes. These chemicals allow the child to sit in a wet diaper for a long period of time. Diaper rash, now accepted as an inevitable part of infancy, can be almost entirely prevented by using cloth diapers. Cotton allows the skin to breathe. The baby must be changed more frequently with cloth so she stays cleaner and drier. There is also a question as to the safety of the gels and chemicals used in plastic diapers which were banned for use in feminine products several years ago because they were known irritants!

Finally, cloth diapering is easy! Most people have an unpleasant image of toilet-dunking, smelly pails of diapers soaking in bleach water, and trying to fasten sharp pins while

holding down a wiggling baby. Thanks to modern washing machines and new diapering products such as velcro covers for easy-on/easy-off action without pins, cloth diapering is easy enough to do at home even for the busiest family.

I keep a dry pail. I use flushable biodegradable diaper liners inside the diapers. On wash day, which is about every other day for a young infant less frequently as the baby gets older I simply empty the pail into the washing machine, add a phosphate-free detergent and some vinegar during the rinse cycle for extra cleanliness and to neutralize any remaining odors, then put it through the normal wash cycle. I take advantage of the sun to bleach and further disinfect the diapers when possible.

So what about travel? On short outings I pack several cloth diapers, two covers, and several

reusable sandwich bags. After my experience with gel crystals on our recent trip, I am planning on using cloth for all future trips. If a washer is not available where we are staying, I can always make use of a public laundry. The only time I would consider using disposables is on a long international flight, but as soon as we reach our destination, out come the fluffy cloth diapers.

So what do you need to get started? You will need four dozen each infant- and standard-sized cotton prefolded diapers. The diapers sold by diapering companies are generally of better quality than ones sold in stores. You can even buy second-hand diapers from a diaper service, or sew your own from terrycloth and flannel. Velcro covers come in all shapes and sizes and brand names. You will need about six covers in each size as your baby grows. Add in a roll of flushable diaper liners (or make your own from reusable fleece), some terry washcloths

to use as wipes, and that is really all you need! If you want to get fancy you can buy fitted diapers that do not require folding, wool covers for better ventilation or all-in-one diapers that include the diaper and the cover as one unit.

For more information: www.borntolove.com; www.weebees.com; www.homestead.com/jojokat/clothdiapering.html; www.kjsl.com/~thisbe/diaper.html