



# This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



## REVISITING THE DIAPER DEBATE February 2007

Disposables or cloth? That was the burning question of the day, 17 years ago, for eco-minded parents like myself. The subject, of course, was diapers, and our family chose the cloth route because we didn't want to clutter landfills with poopy plastic that could take 500 years to decompose. We felt good about doing the right thing in our small way, and weren't particularly inconvenienced, as a diaper service took care of the wash.



Then came the news that our tiny sacrifice might be for naught. A much-ballyhooed study that same year (1990) found no significant difference in environmental impact between disposables and cloth when the water and energy used to launder the latter was factored in. But wait, that study was conducted by Procter & Gamble, the maker of Pampers. Might there have been a bias?

Sure enough, another study conducted shortly after found that cloth was better after all. However, that one was sponsored by The National Association of Diaper Services, which also had a vested interest in the results.

The argument has raged ever since, with different parties weighing in on either side. Somewhere along the line, environmentalists from various organizations declared a draw, suggesting we all move on to issues where the costs and benefits were more clear-cut. Parents were advised to do whatever seemed best for them, which should have made the decision easy, but left -- and leaves -- many feeling at a loss. They want to do what is best for the earth and aren't comforted to hear that all choices are equally bad.

If you are one of those, you may be interested in a third alternative that is unquestionably better for the environment because it doesn't entail diaper use at all. Rather, it involves peeing and pooping into the toilet -- or something than can be emptied into one -- right from the start. I mean from birth. This is not a new-fangled idea. It is a traditional approach, used in many non-Western societies, including India and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, that has recently been discovered by adventurous parents in the United States.

The method goes by a variety of names: elimination communication, natural infant hygiene and infant potty training, though the last is spurned by many who say there is no training involved. Whatever it's called, it boils down to this: the parent looks for the signals (hand-clenching, grunting, squirming, a look of inner concentration, etc.) that the baby regularly shows in advance of having to go, then takes the



**Sheryl Eisenberg**, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.



**Non-biodegradable plastic's not the only problem.** Most people don't bother to empty the contents of used disposables into the toilet before tossing, so the untreated poop, which contains many pathogens, ends up in the landfill. If the waste were to leach out, those pathogens could contaminate groundwater supplies.

infant to the pot, sink or potty, and makes a special "cuing" noise -- for instance, "sss" -- to signal back that it's ok to proceed. Soon the baby makes the association. The family now has a communication system that can be used to avoid messes most of the time.

If all goes well, the baby will be toilet-trained in a year and a half, give or take a few months. Meanwhile, the baby and parents will have much less contact with poop than either would if the baby did her stuff regularly in a diaper.

There are websites and books that explain the method in detail, with lots of good tips on how to make it work, but as far as I can see, the main requirement is that you are able to devote a certain amount of close attention to your child and get the other primary care-givers to do the same. Unfortunately, day-care centers are unlikely to go along, so if you use one full-time, you're probably stuck with diapers, regardless.

Another option to consider is a new flushable product called gDiapers, which consists of a colorful cloth pant and snap-in liner with inserts made primarily of fluffed wood pulp. The pants and liners are washed and reused and the inserts are flushed down the toilet. The ingredients are almost all natural, but do include super-absorbent polymers, or SAP -- which most disposable diapers use as well -- to increase the amount of liquid that the diaper can hold. SAP has been linked to toxic-shock syndrome from tampons, and some parents are concerned about its use in diapers, but studies have revealed no adverse health effects from exposure outside the body.

In any event, gDiapers seem to have the environmental edge over more conventional choices because they send no material to the landfill, use no elemental chlorine or plastics, and require much less washing (therefore, less water and energy usage) than regular cloth diapers.

If you prefer disposables anyway, you can still make a difference by buying a brand made without chlorine, such as Seventh Generation. You could also try a biodegradable brand, though there is some question as to whether decomposition is possible in the oxygen-less conditions of a landfill. Cloth diaper users can lessen their impact as well by air-drying, washing bigger loads at lower temperatures and not pre-soaking.

Ultimately, only you know which choice you can comfortably live with. My advice is not to sweat it. Just make the best decision you can, then go enjoy your beautiful baby.

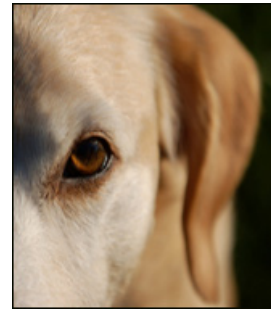
—Sheryl Eisenberg

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**Sheryl Eisenberg** is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.  
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#### ONLINE RESOURCES

- MOTHERING MAGAZINE: The Politics of Diapers - [http://mothering.com/articles/new\\_baby/diapers/politics.html](http://mothering.com/articles/new_baby/diapers/politics.html)
- CO-OP AMERICA: Solving the Diaper Dilemma - <http://www.coopamerica.org/pubs/realmoney/articles/diapers.cfm>
- LIFECYCLE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: Cloth vs. Disposable Diapers - <http://www.ilea.org/lcas/franklin1992.html>
- PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE: It's My Potty and I'll Try If I Want To - <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05297/593849.stm>
- NATURAL INFANT HYGIENE: FAQ - <http://www.natural-wisdom.com/faq.htm>
- INFANT POTTY TRAINING: Homepage - <http://www.diaperfreebaby.org>
- GDIAPERS: Homepage - <http://www.gdiapers.com/home>
- GRIST: Flush Forward - <http://www.grist.org/comments/interactivist/2006/05/08/graham-nye/index1.html>

**Diapers add up.** Parents typically use between 5,000 and 8,000 diapers per baby, depending on when toilet training occurs. That's either an awful lot of garbage -- or an awful lot of wash.



**Works with dogs.** Using elimination communication to raise a baby without diapers seemed impossible to me initially; then I realized it was the same basic approach we took with our puppy. We would look for the telltale signs that he had to go, then rush him out of our apartment, onto the street and over to a signpost or other good spot for him to do his thing. It was touch-and-go at first, but we got better, with time, at recognizing the signs, and he eventually learned the routine.

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