

## Cloth Diapers or Disposables—Which is Really Better?

By Shannon Hartigan

Like many first-time parents, I had high expectations for myself as a mother. One of these was to exclusively use cloth diapers. I've long believed that it's better to use—and re-use, of course—re-usable objects rather than disposable ones. It reduces the amount of garbage going to our landfills and, over time, uses less energy and materials to produce goods. But when some of my friends found out about my intention, they told me that disposables were better because the cleaning of cloth diapers requires a lot of water, detergent, and energy with each use. Use and re-use may be a no-brainer when it comes to coffee cups, but the math isn't so obvious when it comes to diapers. So I decided to do a little research to find out more

I came across a study, "[An updated lifecycle assessment for disposable and reusable nappies](#)" conducted by the United Kingdom's Environment Agency which compiled a detailed life cycle inventory of the environmental burdens associated with the production, use and disposal of reusable diapers and disposable diapers. This analysis included all energy and materials from the extraction of resources through to emissions, waste management, and water treatment.

The authors developed a baseline scenario modelled on typical UK consumer behaviour and found that disposable diapers used over a two and a half year period resulted in the production of 550kg of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents. Manufacturing changes to reduce the amount of materials used in making diapers could help further reduce the global warming impact.

Unfortunately, the baseline scenario for cloth diapers was worse, producing 570kg of CO<sub>2</sub>. The study noted, however, that the impact depended on individual practices. Total CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents can be reduced by 40% (200kg) by washing full loads of diapers (the baseline scenario was based on a typical consumer wash of less than a full load), line-drying, and using the diapers on a second child. On the other hand, washing in hot water and always tumble drying the diapers increases the global warming impact by 75% over the baseline scenario (an additional 420kg of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent).

The study confirmed what many of us already know: there is no magic solution. Protecting the environment relies on our everyday choices.

After deciding to invest in cloth diapers, most of which I bought used, some environmentally-minded friends introduced me to the gDiaper ([www.gdiaper.com](http://www.gdiaper.com)), which is perhaps the best compromise, combining the virtues of re-useability with



the convenience of disposal. GDiapers are hybrids, comprised of biodegradable, compostable, flushable refills made of wood fluff pulp and sodium polyacrylate (SAP) for absorbency (just like disposable diapers), and cellulose rayon. The refills fit into a waterproof breathable nylon liner that snaps into a reusable cotton diaper cover.

**Cloth diaper users can reduce their environmental impacts by:**

- Line drying outside whenever possible. The sun also bleaches out stains naturally!
- Tumble drying as little as possible.
- When replacing appliances, choosing more energy efficient appliances
- Not washing above 60°C; it uses less energy. Also wash water that's too hot will weaken the fibers and, over time, wear out a cloth diaper prematurely.
- Washing full loads.
- Reusing diapers on other children or obtain used ones. If you buy new and don't plan to have another child, give yours to a friend or sell them.

The diaper covers are small and can be used a few times before needing to be washed. And if you flush or compost the liners, then no

waste goes to a landfill. Although gDiapers were not part of the UK study, I suspect they would be found to have a very low impact. Unfortunately, gDiapers don't seem to be available on PEI.

As for my baby and me, we use reusable cloth diapers most of the time. But at night, we use a disposable diaper, which is so absorbent it allows little SJ to rest easy all night without the discomfort of a saturated diaper. When we travel, we use the gDiapers; I can flush or compost the paper lining and not worry about carrying around dirty diapers. I generally wash full loads of diapers and try to time the laundry with sunny days so that I can get the benefit of my solar hot water heater as well as the sun and wind for line-drying. Even on cold and cloudy days, hanging the diapers outside helps bleach out any stains and reduces the amount of dryer time that may be needed. One cloth diaper manufacturer, Bummi, sells a flushable liner made of 100% viscose rayon. The liner biodegrades very quickly and makes clean-up of "number two" much easier on both baby and diaper.

Like me, any parent can opt to make different choices to protect the environment. To begin to use gDiapers would be a relatively straightforward transition from disposables. Now, if only we could get them on the Island!