

# The pros and cons of cloth and disposable diapers

4 MONTHS AGO by JO THOMAS



In the first few years of parenting, you'll be hanging out with diapers A LOT. Even when your kid is potty trained, they could still be in diapers during the night until they're around 4 years old. That's one heck of a lot of diapers. So, how do you choose between cloth diapers and disposables? And do you even have to choose? Every decision you make as a parent is about weighing up how you want to raise your child, what you can afford, what you're able to use your limited energy on and, ultimately, what's best for you and your family.

## Here are some thoughts on the great diaper debate – cloth or disposables?

### Cost

Let's cut to the chase, kids put a pretty big dent in your bank balance. Anything we can do to save a bit of money is gonna get a big thumbs up from most parents.

The UK's [Money Advice Service](#) says average use of supermarket own brand disposables over 2.5 years will set you back £1,875 and an average set of reusables for use from birth to potty training plus washing costs would be £400.

[The Bump](#) quotes US figures of \$2,000 to \$3,000 on disposables over two years and \$800 to \$1,000 on reusables if you wash them yourself.

Whatever way you slice it, reusables come out cheaper. You can save further on reusables if you buy second hand and sell them on when you're done. This isn't as crazy as it sounds because a lot of reusables actually improve absorbency with use. Although some aren't guaranteed beyond one child, so make sure to read the small print before you invest.

### Environmental impact



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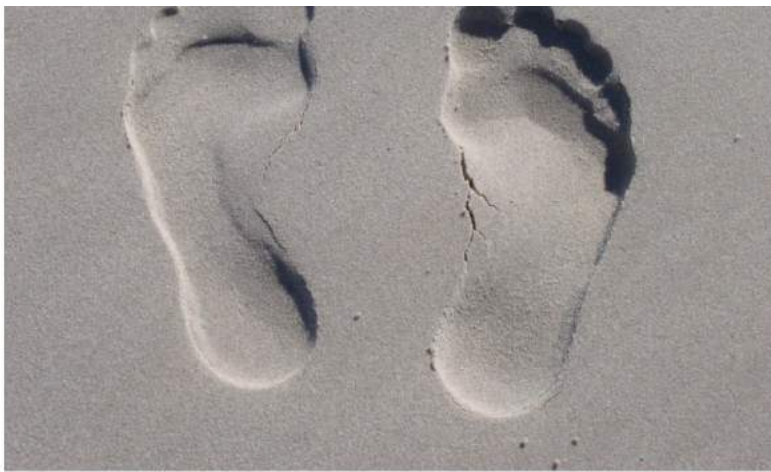


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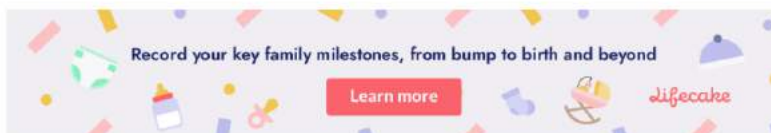
When I first started researching this topic before my baby arrived, I thought it would have been a no-brainer. Disposables are far worse for the environment, right? Well, yes... and no. [A widely-quoted 2008 report](#) by the Environment Agency (a government agency responsible for protecting and improving the environment in England and Wales) compared the environmental impact of using both types of diapers for 2.5 years.

It showed that using average disposable diapers would have a global warming impact of approximately 550kg of carbon dioxide equivalents. For reusable diapers and average washer and drier use (washing at 60°C, drying 3 out of 4 loads on a washing line and tumble drying the rest), there would be a global warming impact of approximately 570kg of carbon dioxide equivalents. So, on the face of it, not much difference.

However – and this is the deal-breaker – the report also showed that how you use, wash and dry reusable diapers can reduce the environmental impact by around 40%, which is a huge reduction. To make this difference you need to:

- Line dry diapers whenever possible
- Tumble dry as little as possible
- Use energy-efficient appliances whenever possible (A+ rated are best)
- Wash lower than 60 degrees C
- Wash fuller loads
- Reuse diapers on other children or buy second-hand

So, with disposables, the environmental impact is what it is, there's nothing you can do to change that. But with reusables, you can reduce the effect on the environment by your own behavior. Pretty empowering stuff.



## Convenience



There's no denying that pulling a disposable diaper out of a packet, fastening the tabs and then rolling it up and chucking it out when it's used is quick and easy. But you do need to get to the store and buy the things regularly, and haul them all up to put out with the trash



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Poppers and Velcro fastenings and all-in-one designs mean that many reusables these days are just as easy as disposables to put on. And if you get into a routine of washing and drying them with your usual washing loads, you can make sure you've always got some in the house ready to go.

The choice about which diapers you end up using often has a lot to do with what fits in best with your family routine.

*"I found the hardest thing with cloth nappies was starting. I worried it was going to be a lot of effort, but once you get into a routine, you're laughing. I'd also say it's important to get your partner on board. I gave my husband a run down of all the benefits and he really got into it!"* Emily, mum to a two year old

*"I always thought I'd use reusables and bought or borrowed quite a few before my baby was born. But in the end, it proved one extra thing too many for us to cope with in the first months/year and we just never got round to swapping to cloth nappies."* Jo, mum to a two year old

*"We used them a lot with our first, hardly at all with our second and never with our third. You need to have some soaking, some drying and some in use and it gets harder to keep on top of that when you add another baby into the mix (complete with poo or baby sick-soaked romper suits!)."* Rhiannon, mum to a 7, 9 and 12 year old

*"We've used reusables for a year now and I love them. However, they are hard work and definitely easier in the summer when they dry outside in a few hours. Us both working from home makes it easier too. Once you get a routine going it's ok though."* Phil, mum to a one-year-old

## Performance and comfort



A common myth is that reusable diapers leak and disposables would soak up a bucket full of pee if you left them on long enough. The truth is, it's all about trial and error to find the right ones to suit you and your baby. I've had bad leaking with one of the biggest disposable UK brands on my daughter. There are no guarantees. The problem can be that with reusables it can cost a lot to try out all the different types. But with disposables you're only ever going to have to pay out for a small pack of diapers to find out if they work. [Cloth diaper rental services](#) are becoming more widespread. Or you could ask friends who already have reusables to borrow a few to try out.

*"We have a couple of different types of reusables and I've found that different ones fit her better at different growth stages."* Phil, mum to a one-year-old

*"Cloth nappying definitely involves some trial and error, what with the various additions of boosters and liners, and what wash cycles get them looking and smelling fresh. I found the two-part system quite bulky and tricky to use, but we got on really well with the all-in-ones."* Emily, mum to a two year old

Some parents choose reusables to help protect their baby's skin as they are available in softer, more natural materials. When it comes to diaper rash, some people claim disposables are better as they are so absorbent that they keep any wetness locked up. But the chemicals, dyes

and gels used in disposables can irritate some babies' skin. Whichever type you use, you'll need to change them regularly. Reusables generally need to be changed a little more often than disposables, but again it depends on your baby and you can get booster pads to add absorbency if needed.

Another aspect of diaper comfort to consider is how they fit. Some reusables aren't available in tiny baby size. Or if your baby is on the skinny side as they get older, you may find it trickier to find a brand that works for you. Some people love how cloth diapers look on their baby, although it can sometimes affect how clothes fit.

*"I love the look of reusable nappies – all big and squishy! The patterns are so nice that often I just put a t-shirt or dress on her with them, so don't need to worry about getting tights or trousers to fit."* Sarah, mum to a six month old

*"A big cloth baby bum is just adorable! It can make buying clothes harder though. Vests often need extenders and some sleep suits aren't long enough. I found some shops like H&M that are 'cut for cloth' and some more high-end brands like Frugi."* Emily, mum to a two year old

## Is doesn't have to be all or nothing



One of the main points that's comes across when you ask parents about cloth vs. disposable diapers is that you don't have to choose one or the other. You can do a bit of both and that's just fine. Reusable cloth wipes are also a great alternative to disposable wet wipes if you're looking to make another small change.

*"We use reusables as much as possible, mainly for environmental reasons. However, if I run out before I get the next wash on, I don't beat myself up about it and have a stash of disposables ready to go! I also use the reusable cheeky wipes, which I love, and the two things go really well together."* Sarah, mum to a six month old

*"My little boy has just turned two and we got a couple of new wraps and we're back using the reusables his big sister had – so it's never too late! Night-time nappies can go on until age 4 or so, so I'll get some good use out of them."* Anna, mum to a 2 and 5 year old

*"We tried reusables, but it was another thing on top of so many other things, so we stopped. We have switched to reusable swim nappies though and this was amazing. Cost us so little, looks better and good for the environment."* Kylie, mum to a 2 year old

*"I'd say that the biggest change any parent can make, using reusable nappies or not, is switch to cloth wipes – one set for bums, one for hands and face. They clean far better than wet wipes, cost much less and don't cause blocking or landfill problems. You have to be organized, but keep things as easy and simple as possible and it's not too bad to keep on top of it."* Anna, mum to a 2 and 5 year old

**What are your thoughts on using disposable or cloth diapers? What's your experience been like? We'd love to hear.**


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