

'Pampered' children filling landfills with disposables

By LYNETTE FERGASON
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The recent swing toward a more environmentally aware society has made the choice between disposable and cloth diapers a difficult one for parents who want both convenience and an environmentally safe world for their children.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans throw away more than 18 billion disposable diapers each year — enough to stretch back and forth to the moon at least seven times.

It's a journey of junk that Nick Keller, national project manager for the National Wildlife Federation, would rather not take.

"In terms of which diaper is cheaper for the consumer, cloth diapers are by far the cheapest, especially if the parents do their own laundering," Keller said.

Most environmentalists are opposed to disposable diapers because the material and fillers they are made of can resist decomposition in landfills for decades. *50 Simple Things You Can Do To Save The Earth*, a book on the environment, says it may take up to 500 years for disposable diapers to decompose in a landfill, while cotton diapers, which are reusable, decompose in about six months. According to the Solid Waste Composting Council, disposable diapers take up about 2 percent of our landfill space.

In response to pressure from environmental activists, makers of the disposables recently have campaigned for use of

accelerated composting to contain the flow of waste. At the basic level, composting is the breaking down of garbage through the process of sorting, shredding, manipulating heat and air controls, and stockpiling to achieve an environmentally safe material; accelerated composting works in the same way, but on a larger and faster scale.

A recent advertising campaign run by Proctor and Gamble, the makers of Luvs and Pampers, claims that by using the accelerated composting process, 80 percent of a disposable diaper can be turned into soil enhancer in 30 to 180 days.

An Environmental Protection Agency spokesperson said, "These types of programs are definitely a step in the right direction for the disposable diaper industry."

However, Keller has a different outlook on these programs.

"Proctor and Gamble has recently put out some very slick-looking literature on recycling, but it is like creating something so that you can recycle it," Keller said.

"In terms of the environmental issues of a product, we must look towards reducing the need for it before we look at

recycling it."

Keller said Proctor and Gamble seems to be overlooking the reduced-need aspect of disposable diapers.

"We do not need disposable diapers because we can use cloth," he said. "But they ignore this idea and move on to finding a way to recycle their product."

Indeed, recycling and composting programs are not without problems. They are expensive to operate and the availability of these services is limited because few areas have implemented such programs.

But concerns about the practicality of cloth diapers also abound. Some environmentalists and the makers of disposables argue that the process of breaking down the solid wastes from cloth diapers requires huge amounts of non-renewable energy and leads to water and air pollution.

When a soiled cloth diaper is cleaned, the waste can be disposed of either through a wastewater treatment plant or by an incinerator. EPA studies of wastewater treatment and incineration indicate that the by-products of the processes, sludge and ash, can be used as fertilizer.

However, according to the wastewater study, a significant amount of leftover dirty water cannot legally be used for anything. The costs of operating and maintaining such plants also are considerable. EPA research shows that a plant that serves less than 50,000 people can cost up to \$200,000 per year to run.

In addition, another EPA study reveals that some of the ash and many chemicals can escape and

cause air pollution.

The amount it costs to operate and maintain an incinerating plant also is comparable to the amount used to run a wastewater treatment plant.

Confused, yet? So are most parents.

Ironically, the determining factor in this environmental debate may turn out to be a financial one.

Research by the National Wildlife Federation indicates that using cloth diapers can reap substantial savings for families.

Keller said cloth diapers cost roughly 4 cents each for parents to wash themselves or about 17 cents per diaper if they use a laundry service, while disposables run about 22 cents per diaper.

According to *50 Things You Can Do To Save The Earth*, a recent poll indicates that 87 percent of Americans prefer using cloth diapers.

It suggests that if you are not ready to make a complete change from disposable to cloth, you can make a gradual change. Use cloth at home, disposable for daycare.

And environmentally, it makes a lot of sense.



LEIGH ASTLE, THE CRIMSON WHITE, U. OF ALABAMA

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Nick Keller

Common sense best approach to waste issues

By JAY FOUT

The Flame, U. of Illinois, Chicago

Recently, I drove through the Maxwell Street area in Illinois, gazing at the piles of rubbish.



Although in some eyes, this piled-up junk could be seen as no more harmful than "decentralized dumping," it bothered me.

So it got me thinking. What is one of our major sources of garbage — roughly three pounds a day that each of us is responsible for?

I was struck by the amount of packaging waste we produce just from eating.

How many of you have bought, say, a box of crackers that had an outer box, inner lining wrapper, and then individually wrapped "columns" of crackers?

Why so much waste? Is there a contest to see who can fill the landfills the fastest? This made me think about two things. First, that we ought to rethink the way we run our supermarkets.

Instead of having shelves and shelves of competing brands in lavish packaging, we should return to the supermarkets of yesterday.

In supermarkets of old, most everything was behind the counter, on a shelf or in a bin. Tomorrow's supermarket will be a lot like this: bulk items would be the rule. A package for an item will only be sold once.

For instance, if you needed a box of laundry soap, the first time you bought it, you could buy a large soap box with a brand name on it. The box would be durable

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enough that you could take it back with you on your next trip and refill it instead of buying another box.

If the box wore out, you could buy another one (although at a premium), and continue reusing that one. Such a change would bring about great benefits.

The manufacturer would spend less on packaging, we would spend less on the product and the shopkeeper could either keep more items on the shelves or have a smaller store. But perhaps the greatest advantage of this newer system would be the amount of waste that we would NOT contribute to the already overstuffed landfills.

The second realization I had was that we, as a society, are too hell-bent on convenience.

We exalt convenience not only as a virtue, but almost as a god. We are willing to buy cleverly packaged food, and dispose of the box, never to think of it again, as long as it is safe and sound in some far-off landfill.

We would rather drive our cars to work by ourselves than use public transportation, which may cause us the inconvenience of a short walk to the bus stop.

We would rather buy environmentally damaging disposable diapers than wash our reusable cloth diapers. We would rather eat a hamburger than think about destroying the oxygen-making capability of the Brazilian rainforests.

It kind of gives new meaning to the phrase "dying for a Big Mac."

Whether you like them or not, you have to give it to the band "The Dead Kennedys," for summing this up so concisely in their album title, "Give Me Convenience, or Give Me Death."

We must look at our lives and evaluate the things we do and use — not just for the sake of our environment, but also for the sake of reason.