

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

# Breaking the Habit of Disposable Diapers

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TERESON DUPUY thinks reusable diapers are having their back-to-the-future moment.



Tereson Dupuy

Sure, she knows that lots of parents (indeed, most of them) would rather toss dirty nappies than wash them. But she says that the convergence of four disparate elements — Internet chat rooms for new mothers, easy ways to sell on the Web, the green movement and the development of better polyesters — is spurring many parents to rethink their attachment to disposables.

There are signs she may be right. In 1999, Ms. Dupuy, 37, started Mother of Eden, a company that sells reusable polyester diapers called Fuzzi Bunz. She does not advertise and does not have a sales staff. Yet her company topped \$3 million in sales in 2007, and she expects to sell double that amount this year.

“The Internet and environmental concerns have been a bonus,” Ms. Dupuy said. “But even without them, reusable diapers would be meeting a real need.”

In a recent conversation, Ms. Dupuy elaborated on why cloth diapers may be a product whose time has come — again. Excerpts from the interview follow:

**Q.** *Have cloth diapers really evolved much from the bulky, leaky things with pins that many of us remember as so unpleasant?*

**A.** There’ve been lots of small changes, but the key difference is the textiles. Cotton is very absorbent, but it’s hard to wash, it stains and it can take forever to dry. Many of today’s reusable diapers use polyester fleece, which lasts longer, absorbs better and dries in 10 minutes. And they are thin enough to fit under normal baby clothes. That’s no small thing — clothes today are made to fit over a disposable diaper, not a bulky, multilayered cotton one.

**Q.** *Disposables still seem more convenient. Why would anyone go back to cloth?*

**A.** Lots of reasons. I used disposables with my first child, and we were only getting garbage pickups once a week. They literally stank. And my second child had severe eczema, and no matter what cream I tried, or how often I changed the diaper, his bottom was raw and bleeding.

**Q.** *I’ve never heard of a reusable diaper curing eczema. Did that really help?*

**A.** I switched to cotton diapers, and it got better, but he still got rashes from the wetness near his skin. That’s when I had my light bulb moment: I bought a square of fleece, the kind that Patagonia uses in jackets and underwear. I stuck that in my son’s diaper, and his skin stayed dry. So I decided to sell fleece diapers with pockets for inserts. I named the company Mother of Eden because my son’s name is Eden, and I am, after all, his mother.

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**Q.** Patagonia uses fleece made from recycled plastics, which are, of course, petrochemicals. Should people feel comfortable putting chemicals so close to a baby?

**A.** Not everyone does, I know. Some people will only use diapers made of organic cotton. But those diapers are awfully expensive, and they have the same problems as conventional cotton. I trust Patagonia — they wouldn't use it in underwear if it weren't safe.

**Q.** It takes a lot of energy to make polyester, and it uses a lot of water to wash diapers. And if people use diaper services, you have to factor in the fuel used by their trucks. Aren't you running counter to the "green" trend?

**A.** Quite the contrary. If you ask people what "cloth diaper" brings to mind, they mention bleach, soaking, washing, lots of hard work. But use the term "reusable diaper," and the first thing they say is "good for the environment."

Now, it is definitely better for the environment to produce organic cotton than polyester, I can't argue with that. But polyester diapers last five times longer, so you don't have to replace them as often. If you check the chat rooms on the Internet, most of the cloth-using moms are washing them at home. If you have a baby in the house, you're doing a lot of laundry anyway. And a lot of trees probably get cut down to make disposables.

**Q.** Still, polyester isn't biodegradable. Doesn't that pose an environmental disposal problem after the baby is toilet-trained?

**A.** We're trying to find a supplier who can recycle our fibers. We'll take diapers back from people, and donate them to orphanages, primarily overseas. We are also using our manufacturing scraps to make cloth baby wipes, breast pads for nursing moms and menstrual pads. They represent only 2 or 3 percent of our sales — but they use up all our waste.

**Q.** How can reusable diapers compete with marketing titans like [Procter & Gamble](#) or [Kimberly-Clark](#), which lead the disposable diaper market?

**A.** Products like ours wouldn't exist without the Internet. People do [Google](#) searches to find cloth diapers. We distribute mainly through a network of 300 or so stay-at-home moms who found us on the Web, and who sell on the Web. We have 150 more on the waiting list; we just don't have enough product to supply them yet. Hopefully, this year we will.

And the Internet has enabled lots of working moms — people like me — to work from home. That means they are there to change the baby's diaper. A mom — or even a dad — is more willing to wash out dirty diapers than your typical day care worker.

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