

Don't be fooled by disposable nappy industry's environmental impact claims: WEN takes manufacturers to ASA

The Women's Environmental Network has lodged a complaint with the Advertising Standards Authority against disposable nappy manufacturers for claiming that there is nothing to choose between the environmental impact of disposable and washable nappies.

WEN's complaint says Procter & Gamble, one of the biggest manufacturers, is also flouting a 1992 ASA ruling by backing The Absorbent Hygiene Products Manufacturers Association (AHPMA), which has made the claim in a leaflet aimed at new parents. WEN wants the leaflet withdrawn and calls on the ASA to ban the AHPMA or its members from making such claims in future.

The leaflet, published under the guise of the 'Nappy Information Service' has been widely circulated to health professionals, hospitals and doctors' surgeries and to local authority waste or environment managers.

Maeve Murphy, WEN's Real Nappy Project officer, said: "The Nappy Information Service leaflet published by the UK disposables industry is a blatant example of greenwash⁽¹⁾ masquerading as public information. Parents should not be fooled by it - disposable nappies use more resources and create far more waste than cloth nappies, even when washing is taken into account.

"Doctors, midwives and health visitors have a duty to offer parents balanced and accurate information on the range of nappy systems available, and should not be duped into thinking this leaflet satisfies that need, when it is nothing more than a marketing ploy."

The 1992 ASA ruling, which followed a WEN-commissioned independent critique of two 1991 Procter and Gamble-funded lifecycle analyses of nappies⁽²⁾, prevents Procter & Gamble from claiming that the environmental impact of disposable nappies is not materially worse than that of cloth nappies. It adds that P&G must include a warning that their claims of similar environmental impact were simply one side of an ongoing argument and should not imply that the results of their 1991 study were generally accepted.

Yet the leaflet and an associated website ignore the latest evidence that disposables have a far greater impact on resources, even when washing is taken into account. Instead they refer to manufacturers' own environmental comparisons between disposable and cloth nappies as fact; they do not present them as one side of an argument as they have been advised to do.

A 1998 study by Best Foot Forward, an independent organisation recognised as experts in 'ecological footprinting'⁽³⁾ compared disposable, home laundered and service laundered nappies. Footprinting is a recognised method of calculating the amount of land required to provide the resources and to absorb the wastes of all sorts of activities. It looks at the whole lifecycle of a product from its manufacture, through its use, to disposal. All materials, energy, water etc. used and residues created at any stage in the process are taken into consideration.

Best Foot Forward carried out comparative footprinting analysis of disposable and washable nappies with the following results.

Comparative footprints for nappies required, laundered and disposed of for one baby over one year	
Nappy system	Environmental Footprint
Laundry service	1,600 sqm
Home laundered nappies	2,300 sqm
Disposable nappies	4,300 sqm

This study concludes that disposable nappies have almost twice (1.8 times) the environmental impact of home laundered nappies and over two and a half times (2.6 times) that of service laundered nappies.

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Notes to editors

1. 'Greenwash': questionable statements put out by major companies or governments to make them sound more environmentally friendly than they are or to hide unpalatable facts.

2. In 1991, two major lifecycle analysis studies of nappies, by separate consultants, Lentz and Little, had been published; both funded by Procter and Gamble. They concluded that there was very little difference in the overall environmental impact between disposable and reusable nappies. The Women's Environmental Network commissioned a critique of the two studies from the Landbank Consultancy. Landbank examined the impacts of both nappying systems from the growing or extraction of raw materials, to the nappies' use and disposal. Landbank found that both Lentz and Little had concentrated on the use stage, where reusable nappies have the greatest impacts, to the exclusion of other stages such as manufacture and disposal. Landbank used the raw data from the two studies and additional public information on process impacts, to recalculate the impacts of the two different systems. The results are shown below:

Disposable nappies use

3.5 times more energy, 8 times more non-renewable raw materials, 90 times more renewable material

than washable nappies.

Disposable nappies produce

2.3 times more wastewater, 60 times more solid waste

than washable nappies.

Disposable nappies require

between 4 and 30 times more land for growing natural materials as reusable nappies.

The study also showed that the manufacture of both nappy systems use similar amounts of fossil fuel energy.

3. Footprinting. Details of the study are published in Sharing Nature's Interest: ecological footprints as an indicator of sustainability by Chambers, Simmons and Wackernagel, published by Earthscan, November 2000. For more information please visit www.bestfootforward.com

4. WEN is a national membership organisation which campaigns on environmental and health issues from a women's perspective. Founded in 1988, it aims to educate, inform and empower women and men who care about the environment.

5. WEN's Real Nappy Project is funded by a £55,000 grant from **Biffaward**, a multi-million pound scheme set up by **Biffa Waste Services**, using donations of more than £4 million annually from qualifying contributions under the landfill tax regulations. WEN believes parents should have a fair choice and has no commercial interest in any particular type of nappy.