



# An Introduction to Cloth Diapering

By Andrea Kirsten

[www.mapetitemama.com](http://www.mapetitemama.com)

Revision: 29 May 2011

## Why cloth diapers?

When my husband first suggested we use cloth diapers on our first child almost six years ago, my reaction was not a positive one. All I could think about were the ones my parents had used on me and I really did not want the hassle of pins and plastic pants. My husband was persistent so eventually I decided to look in to cloth diapers. I was amazed by the modern styles available and also overwhelmed by all of the options. I spent several weeks researching them, before I made my choice. Researching my options definitely helped me get started on my cloth diaper journey. When I ordered my first fluffy mail it was for economical, environmental and simply practical factors that went in to my choice for simple fitted diapers with covers. I had no intentions of ordering any other diapers until it was time for the next size. Then my fluffy mail arrived and I was instantly hooked. I began wanting to try different kinds and styles and when it started to tap in to our already low bank account my husband urged me to start making my own. It wasn't long before making a few turned in to making a lot, and now making them for others helps me to stay home with my children.

When I started considering cloth diapers I did not expect them to become such a big part of my life. Perhaps your cloth diapering journey will start at the birth of your child and end with potty training, or perhaps you will also become hooked on cloth diapers. Whichever journey you are on, we all need a starting point. The majority of failures in using cloth diapers have to do with getting a kind that aren't good for your family's lifestyle choices. There are so many different styles and brands to choose from especially with custom made products readily available, that finding what will work for your family is completely feasible. The hard part is choosing, because with all those choices, it can seem complicated and overwhelming until you know your way around cloth.

It is my hope that this introduction to cloth diapering will help you choose the cloth diapering system that will work best for your family.

## Getting started: Identify your needs

I help new moms learn to cloth diaper frequently, and I have found that each and every family has similar but different needs. To know what will work best for your family start out by identifying why you want to use cloth diapers. Is it for the cost, the environment, the cuteness?

Next, figure out your budget for cloth diapers; is it as cheap as possible or can you spend as much as you want as long as they are cute and work well?

Next, look at how your family functions: are you fast paced, laid back or a bit of a mix?

What are your space constraints? Do you have lots of space or do you have very minimal space to work with?

Do you need your diapers easy on and easy off or is it ok to spend a bit more time putting them on or off or cleaning them?

Is your child going to be in daycare where you need your diapers to be as simple as possible or are you doing home care where you don't have to rely on others to diaper your child?

After you have identified your reasons for wanting to use cloth diapers, and you know your cloth diaper budget, it is time to figure out what is out there and make a few more choices to narrow down the possibilities.

## Types of Cloth Diapers Available

Here is a break down of the types of cloth diapers available for you to choose from. Due to the number of new styles created and different terms that could be used this list is not exhaustive, but it will give you a definition for most of the popular styles available.

**Flats:** Square or rectangle of fabric, usually cotton, that is folded into a diaper and secured with snappi, pins or a cover. This style requires a cover. Flats can be made out of many household items such as receiving blankets, towels and T-shirts making them the most economical choice.

**Prefolds::** are rectangular and come with more fabric options and have extra layers sewn in to the middle of them. They can be closed with pins, snappis or some folds allow for the cover to secure them. These need a cover and are another economical choice. There are many different sizes to choose from, and when they are outgrown they can be used as inserts, doublers or cleaning rags.

**Contours::** Shaped diapers that can be closed with a snappi, pins or some brands are simply laid into the diaper cover. You need a cover with these and while they cost more than prefolds they are still a fairly cheap option. Since they are shaped you do not need to learn any special folding techniques. They are often sold in several sizes, though there are a few one size options available. Contours usually cost more than prefolds and less than fitteds. They are a great option for those who want to keep diapering costs low but struggle to fold a prefold or flat.

**Fitteds::** This diaper is shaped and has elastic to allow for a good fit. They most often have snaps or velcro closures on them. Some brands do require you to use a snappi or pins. Fitteds should be used with a cover, however, some very absorbent fitteds can be used without a cover at your own discretion. Sold in one size or multiple sizes depending on brand.

**AIOs (All in One)::** The waterproof cover, absorbent material and often a wicking layer are all included. Some are lined with non-wicking materials also. Some styles simply snap on the baby while other styles have snap in layers. AIOs without a snap in or flap sewn in layer tend to take a longer time to dry. Whether they have snap in layers or not, I consider an AIO a diaper that is a

one use diaper (no reusing the outer shell) where all pieces to the diaper are sold together. Additional pieces to the diaper can be bought but are not necessary when layers snap in.

**AI2s: (All in Two):** The cloth diaper community does not agree on the exact definition of an AI2, so here is my personal definition. An AI2 has two pieces that when put together the diaper is complete with the shell being reusable. Another popular definition of an AI2 is any 2 piece diaper that consists of a waterproof layer and an absorbent layer. The confusion comes in with some styles of AIOs that have snap in layers which are sometimes referred to as AIOs and other times referred to as AI2s. AI2's have faster drying time than AIOs with the layers sewn in to the diaper. Since the shell can be reused they are also often more economical than AIOs. They do not need to be stuffed like pockets, and many brands have additional snap in soakers to allow for a change in absorbency.

**Pockets:** There is a waterproof shell and an inside layer that is soft on baby's bottom. The diaper has a pocket that opens to allow absorbent fabric to be stuffed into the diaper to customize absorbency. Most often the inner layer is micro fleece to wick moisture off baby's bottom but other fabrics may also be used. Pockets must be stuffed prior to use. Whether or not removing the insert prior to washing is required is debated in the cloth diaper community, I personally found that I had to remove the insert and that it was hard to get the inside of the pocket adequately clean without more effort than other styles that I have used so I prefer not to use pockets. The stuffing and unstuffing is undesirable by many, but does not bother others.. Cloth diaper users usually tend to either love or hate pocket diapers. They are often chosen for the ability to customize absorbency and their faster drying time since the layers are separated.

**AIO pocket combos:** An all in one that has a pocket to allow for extra stuffing when needed.

**Hybrid:** Cloth outer shell that allows for either cloth or disposable inserts. There are also several WAHM (work at home mom) brands that use the term hybrid to represent the joining of two diaper styles into one.

# Closures

**Snaps:** Easy on, easy off. Snaps can be overwhelming if there are many snap settings to choose from. I prefer using snaps for the following reasons: their durability, they don't cause a diaper chain like velcro and babies have a harder time getting them off when they learn to undress which can help keep diaper messes contained in the diaper.

**Velcro/ Aplix :** While Velcro is the term most commonly used and understood term, aplix is more commonly applied to diapers than true Velcro since aplix is softer (less likely to scratch baby than Velcro). More adjustable than snaps, but it is not as durable as snaps. Another common problem is that even with laundry tabs velcro often sticks together or to other diapers and causes a "diaper chain". Velcro may cause damage to other diapers that they are washed with and pilling on diapers with velcro is common. Many brands with velcro closure require the velcro to be replaced or repaired for use on multiple children.

**Pins:** Not commonly used anymore, diaper pins have a larger than usual safety pin like head with a safety closure. Some injuries are associated with using pins since they are sharp and babies move a lot while you are trying to get them on. Diaper pins are still available for those who choose to use them.

**Snappi:** A modern closure that has 3 ends that attach to the diaper to hold it closed. Has a bit of a learning curve, but once figured out is a nice option. Snappis are a popular closure for many diapers that do not come with snaps or aplix on them.

# Sizing systems

**One Size (OS):** As stated, only one size in the system usually meant to fit from birth to potty training. Generally OS is offered for pockets and A12s. I find they don't truly fit all from birth to potty training for most babies, so calling them a "one size" can be misleading in my opinion. They will fit for the majority of the time the child is in diapers but usually not in the beginning or at the end. If your baby is not average, then its even longer they won't be able to fit in the diaper. Many parents are able to start with newborn diapers and change to a OS for the rest of their diapering, however if the baby is very small at birth or outgrows the OS before potty training it could lead to a surprise unwanted expense. Another consideration is that OS diapers can be bulky when the baby is smaller, and then more trim once the baby is bigger. So if you are looking for a super trim diaper, they may or may not work for you. There have been many improvements made in OS styles in the past few years, and if those improvements continue we may at some point find a true "OS" diaper system that will work without a lot of bulk in the beginning or ill fitting in the end of diapering. OS are a good option for someone who has a large baby at birth that thins out as they become a toddler. They can also be a good option for when you are cloth diapering multiple children at the same time.

**Multiple Sizes:** Two or more sizes in a system. My preferences is for 2 to 3, occasionally 4 sizes in the diaper system. Ideally 2 sizes should last from birth to potty training, 3 if the child is in diapers for a long time or has an unusual growth pattern. The more sizes in the system the better fit and often more trim that diaper is in each size range, however, the more sizes you need the more it will effect the total cost of your diapering system.

# Fabrics

**Cotton:** Traditional and common. There are few allergies associated with cotton. Cotton is commonly found in regular or organic versions of knit terry, flannel, sherpa, velour, French terry, and burly knit terry.

**Hemp:** Common but its use and availability fluctuates depending on manufacturing conditions which effect the market price. This fabric is more absorbent than cotton, which allows a trimmer fitting diaper to be made from it, however it has a few drawbacks. It will begin to stink and get very stiff if not washed appropriately. It also deteriorates faster than some other fibers. It is considered more environmentally friendly than cotton and less environmentally friendly than bamboo. Few allergies are associated with hemp. Most often found as hemp French terry or hemp fleece, sometimes hemp jersey is also used with diapers.

**Bamboo:** Very thin and absorbent fabric. Bamboo is environmentally friendly. Few allergies are associated with bamboo. When used in diapers it is most often in the form of French terry, knit terry, velour, sherpa, and jersey.

**Zorb:** Ultra absorbent fabric made of man made fibers. It absorbs 10x its weight in liquid and is fast drying. Hypoallergenic. This fabric looks like felt and should not be exposed in the diaper. It should be paired with another fabric such as bamboo or cotton to meet its fullest potential. There is also now Zorb II available. Zorb II is very new on the market, but so far the reviews for it are positive. Zorb II is zorb sandwiched between layers of bamboo. Current reviews state that it is thinner than regular Zorb and more absorbent.

**Microfleece:** Thin, micro yarns are used to make the fleece thinner than traditional fleece. It is soft and used in diapers for its wicking properties. It also works well to help feces roll off the diaper once solids are introduced. Microchamois is a style of microfleece that usually has a thinner and softer finish to it. There are some styles of microfleece that have a regular microfleece side and a microchamois style so identifying the differences between microfleece and microchamois can be difficult.

**Powerdry:** Also a polyester based fabric like fleece, however, it can have a wide variety of finishes to it. It is a very good wicking fabric, often wicking faster than microfleece. It is mostly used in performance sports garments and military outfits to control perspiration but it has shown to hold up very well in diapers. There are at least 4 different textures to this fabric.

**Suede cloth:** Also a synthetic fabric used to wick moisture off baby's bottom. It is nice and thin but does not have much stretch to it.

**Fleece:** Thicker fleece, especially Polar fleece is used in making the outer layer of AIOs, AI2's and also for diaper covers and Longies. It is lower maintenance than wool and still considered breathable, however it should not be confused with wool. Wool is a natural fiber, fleece is made from polyester. In my opinion, Malden Mills/ Polartec Windpro and Windbloc are the best made fleece on the market and they make high quality covers and longies.

**Microfiber:** A man made synthetic fiber that is ultra absorbent. When used in diapers it cannot be touching baby's skin. Microfiber is so absorbent it dries up the natural oils in baby's skin and cause irritations. Microfiber also is known for having odor problems. It is often chosen for creating trim diapers.

**PUL:** Most often Poly fabric that is laminated with either 1mil or 2 mil lamination. Other fabrics are also commonly laminated. Sandwich PUL is when there are 2 layers of fabric with 1 layer of lamination in between them. Poly PUL, comes in both print or solid fabric and is great for the outer layer of diapers or for covers. Sandwich PUL is great for covers and wetbags. Cotton woven or knit fabric that is sent for "DIY" (do it yourself) PUL is controversial. Some say it works

great for covers and AIOs while others state that there are issues with wicking. I personally found wicking to be a problem when using it to make AIOs. Other types of popular fabrics such as Minkee have been laminated and used in AIOs with success. As long as the laminated fabric is not an absorbent fabric there should not be any wicking problems.

**Vinyl:** A synthetic fabric that was once, and sometimes rarely still used for covers (ie: plastic pants). These are not recommended for use as they trap in the heat and moisture allowing an environment that promotes rashes and yeast to thrive.

**Wool:** Great natural fiber that can be used as a cover. It is also a popular fabric choice for Longies. Wool often needs to be hand washed and lanolized. It is a wonderful choice, however, I personally am allergic to it so I no longer use it. Some compression wicking can be associated with wool. When this happens usually there is not enough absorbency in the diaper, the diaper has been on too long OR the child is in a nonbreathable surface, such as a plastic chair. Compression wicking can also occur if baby is putting a lot of weight onto a wet diaper, such as when they are in a car seat or if the wool has not been lanolized.

## What to buy

Now that you have a general understanding of the types of diapers, closures, sizes and fabrics available you may have a good idea of what it is you want to try to fit your cloth diapering needs you need to decide what and how many of each item to purchase.

What to buy is specific to the type of diaper system you have chosen, how often you want to wash, whether you are doing cloth full time or part time, whether or not your child will be in daycare and the size/personality of your baby/babies.

You will find many different opinions on what you need, and the number of diapers truly is specific to your situation. I suggest starting with general guidelines and deciding if you need more or less for your specific situation. My suggestions are what I have found to work for most people who cloth diaper full time. Check with others who have a similar diaper system and have some similarities in needs to get opinions on if the general guidelines are good for you or if you need less or more. Also remember you do not need to buy them all at once. Start out with the lowest amount you think you need and add to it if you see you need more. There isn't just one way to CD, so remember to customize your system to your needs as you see fit. It will help you be successful.

General guidelines are 24 diaper changes per child to be able to wash every other day. Most of the time newborns use more diapers than older babies and toddlers, but older babies and toddlers will need more absorbency. Keep in mind that cloth diapers need to be changed more often than disposable diapers.

**Prefolds with covers:** 24 – 36 with 4 to 6 covers

**Fitteds with covers:** 24 with 4 to 6 covers

**AIOs:** 24 no covers needed if extra absorbency is available 6 snap in boosters would be great for outings.

**AI2's:** 24 changes

**Pockets:** 24 plus 24 to 48 inserts to stuff with. The number of inserts has to do with how absorbent they are and how much absorbency your child needs. Some systems require as many as 4 inserts per diaper, those inserts.

In addition to diapers, for full time diapering some other items you will likely want to make your life easier:

**Diaper pail:** My favorite is actually a garbage can by Sterilite. It can be found at Walmart in 2 different sizes, it is white with a spring top lid. The smaller one is great for 24-20 newborn diapers, and up to 20 larger diapers. The larger one is great for when you are diapering more than one child, or when you want more than 18 to 20 of the larger diaper sizes. The small size costs approximately \$10 and the large costs approximately \$15. Wetbags fit them nicely and they are easy to open while holding a baby & a dirty diaper. The Sterilite garbage cans are also made in the USA.

**Wetbags:** You will want 2 pail liner styles for your diaper pail (so you can have a clean one in the pail while the other is being washed). You will also want at least 1 wetbag for your diaper bag. You can get wetbags that will fit 1 diaper or wetbags that fit several diapers. Which one you choose depends on your needs and I will address this more when going over the diaper bags. While a wetbag is not a need, it has made cloth diapering a lot easier for me and since starting to use one I have not had stink issues with my diaper pail. Using the wetbag to line the diaper pail makes it so I do not need to scrub out the diaper pail, and I can empty the wetbag into the washer making it so I do not need to touch dirty diapers.

**Cloth Wipes:** You will want at least 24 cloth wipes. If you use more than one wipe per change you will want more, if you use less than one wipe per diaper change then you will want less. I will address how to use them with your diapers under the nursery & diaper bag sections.

**Detergent:** You will get MANY different opinions on which types of detergents to use and which ones you should not use. My favorite is Soapnuts but I have used Era and Tide without issue as long as I have used less than the recommended amount and I do a rinse with white vinegar. You may want to do a search to find what reviews are available for the detergents that you are interested in. When searching, keep your water type in mind since hard water, soft water and city water all tend to react differently to detergent.

White Vinegar: Cheap and easy to find by the gallon (or 4 liter bottles depending on where you live). It is great to use 1-2 cups in a rinse cycle with your diapers. It will soften them and help cut down on detergent residue issues.

**Cloth accessories:** There are "extra" items depending on the cloth diaper system you have chosen that will need to be considered. Inserts to add absorbency are the most common extra you will want to consider.

**Diaper sprayer:** Very nice to have, but you can get by without one. It attaches to your toilet so you can spray feces off of diaper and into toilet.

For prefolds and fitteds some find fleece liners very helpful. The fleece helps to wick the moisture off baby's bottom and reduces diaper rashes caused by the skin being wet for too long.

Some diaper systems have extra boosters that can be snapped in to add absorbency, these are great for when you need to do outings and want the diaper to last a little longer between changing.

Other accessories may or may not be useful to you. Check the manufacturers recommendations and then find people using your chosen system to find out what they think of those accessories to know whether or not you need/want them.

# Cloth Diaper Storage Systems

Once you have purchased all your cloth diaper goods you have to figure out a storage system. Just as there are many different opinions on which cloth diapers work best, there are also many different ways to implement using cloth. Figuring out what is going to work best for you, again comes down to answering questions that will guide you to what is going to work best for you.

Start by considering your space and figuring out how you want to store your clean cloth diapers, where the best place for your diaper pail will be, and what type of system you want to use with your wipes. What do you currently have in your home to work with? Is baby in their own room, sharing a room with a sibling or perhaps rooming in with you?

Will you be changing your baby wherever in the house you feel like changing baby, or do you have a changing table/specific diaper changing location?

Do you have a lot of space to work with, or a very compact space where everything has to be easily accessible?

Does your child have any special medical needs that requires the use of equipment to help them eat or breathe (or any number of other special medical needs)?

Do you have other children or possibly pets that you need to consider?

Will you wet your wipes with a spray bottle or use a wipes warmer? (If you are using a warmer you will want to try to arrange your changing area so you have access to an outlet where you need it).

Do you want your space decorative and out in the open or do you want them enclosed and more hidden?

What type of budget do you have for setting up your nursery?

If you are currently using disposables and are switching to cloth, then you will need to assess how you are currently set up, often very minimal changes can be made to work with cloth.

After going through the above questions, if your baby changing space is not yet defined the first thing you will want to do is consider how you want to do things with your baby.

Look at magazines, online photos, your friend's nursery set ups and ask around to get more ideas. Even take notes on how disposable diapers are set up, there aren't many differences between cloth and disposable set ups.

Keep in mind that if you have older children (toddlers) that you want a diaper pail they have a hard time opening since you don't want them playing in dirty diapers or tossing their toys inside (one of the worst surprises I had when washing cloth diapers was when my daughter tossed a puzzle into the diaper pail. I didn't notice until I went to take my diapers out and there was thin cardboard film on everything-- it was a terrible mess to clean up!).

If you choose to change your baby at a changing table most often, then look at what storage options are available with the table itself and what your options are nearby. Having everything you need within reach area will help to simplify diaper changes.

For a changing table with shelf space, baskets can be an easy storage solution for diapers and wipes. If your changing table does not have any storage space available, consider a wall hanging unit or what cabinets/dressers you have nearby.

If baby is rooming in with you, you may need to get a bit more creative if there is not room for a changing table. Baskets under a bassinet, dresser drawers, or even a portable changing station might be most useful to you.

If you put together a portable changing station you will likely want to put a changing pad, several cloth diapers, wipes, a spray bottle and a wetbag into a tote with handles that can easily be carried to where you need it.

If you choose to use a diaper sprayer consider whether you want the diaper pail/ wetbag in the bathroom or if you want it near your changing area.

Also keep in mind if you need to hang covers to dry between uses, if your diapers have extra accessories or if everything is all included in 1 place.

Some commonly used items for storing clean diapers include hanging diaper holders (usually made with the same or a matching fabric to your nursery theme and can hang above changing area, often has pockets of creams, powders, wipes etc), wicker or plastic baskets, bins (IKEA trofast for example), and drawers.

The main differences between cloth and disposables: diaper pail or hanging wetbag instead of diaper Genie or trash can, cloth takes up a little extra space in the changing area, however they do not require storage space (such as when you buy boxes of disposables to stock up for a sale). Same thing with wipes as with the diapers, more immediate space no storage space. And for your wipes you can either spray them with a spray bottle or you can use a wipes warmer.

Take into consideration if you are using all of one type of diaper or several types of diapers. If you are using multiple styles of diapers a basket or drawer system may be easier for you to set up for your clean diaper storage (over a hanging diaper stacker).

When I change a soiled diaper I fold it on itself with feces on the inside and put it at the end of the changing table while I clean my daughter and put a fresh diaper on her. When she was younger I would put her in one of her safe baby stations (play pen, bouncy seat, exersaucer etc) now that she is older she runs free when I am done. I then pick up the soiled diaper, take it to the bathroom and empty feces off the diaper into the toilet and flush. Since I do not yet have a diaper sprayer if it is a very messy diaper, after I have emptied off as much of the feces as I can I toss it into a bucket and put some water into it, every hour I drain the water into the toilet and refill with fresh water until all solids are off of the diaper. I do not recommend leaving in the water for a long time. After a few rinses most of the feces should be off, and I let it dry a little in the now empty bucket, then I put it into the wetbag. When I have a very messy diaper like this I usually choose to wash it/them as I do not like them sitting around long. If they sit in the water for too long it is likely to cause a stain to set.

Once your nursery is set up and you have chosen how you want your diaper changes to go try it out. If it doesn't work, make adjustments as needed.

# Childcare

So you've chosen cloth and it is working for you but your child will soon be using out of the home childcare or someone is coming into your home to watch your child and you aren't sure how that will work. The good news is that with the many easy types of cloth diapers out there today you will likely find care givers that will be willing to work with you.

Here is what you need to consider:

Is your child going to be in a home setting (friend of family member baby sitting) or will they be in daycare?

Are you using this child care often or just on occasion?

Daycares must follow state guidelines. Check into what your state will and won't allow before asking your daycare. If you cannot find the information then approach the day care and ask if they have a copy available for you. Also ask the daycare what their specific policy is.

Some daycares ask you to bring enough cloth diapers for the day plus 1 wetbag, others ask you to have 1 wetbag per diaper and a large wetbag for all of the diapers to go into. You will want to consider using easy to use diapers such as pockets or AIOs with daycares. Keep it as simple as possible and include easy to follow written instructions that are kept with the clean diapers. Many day cares are not allowed to handle the feces so expect to need to empty it into the toilet yourself at home. This is when having 1 small wetbag for each diaper comes in handy. If you put a clean diaper into the wetbag and when they change your baby they take out the clean diaper and return the dirty diaper to that wetbag it makes things nice and easy for care givers and keeps your child's feces contained if they choose to fill their diaper.

When you are using friends and family members or small home run day cares for your childcare needs it will be up to the person watching your child what they are comfortable with. If you keep it simple, provide written instructions and do a demonstration to help them be more comfortable with the cloth diapers, it is likely they will say yes.

For using cloth in a church or community group nursery where your child is only there for a few hours per week, again, keep it simple and keep written instructions. Often these child care providers will call your name or your child's number if they need help, so if needed you can show them for future reference. Make sure it is well noted to NOT throw away the diaper. As odd as it sounds I have heard of moms losing diapers because the care giver did not realize that cloth was actually reusable.

I hope that this introduction to cloth diapers has helped you get started on your own cloth diaper journey.

© 2008-2011 Andrea Kirsten – Ma Petite Mama

Posting on the internet or otherwise sharing this document is permitted as long as it remains AS-IS, is offered FREE OF CHARGE and the source and author is clearly identified. Derivative works or copying portions of this document are prohibited unless explicitly authorized by the author.