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'Down to My Last Diaper': The Anxiety of Parenting in Poverty

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I started to ask mothers, "Can you tell me how many diapers you have on hand right now?" Almost every one told me with exact specificity how many they had — five or seven or 12. And they knew exactly how long that number of diapers would last, based on how often their children defecated and urinated, if their kid was sick, if they had a diaper rash at the time. So just all the emotional and cognitive labor that goes into keeping such careful track of diaper supplies.

They were worrying and figuring out, "OK, I'm down to almost my last diaper. What do I do now? Do I go find some cans [to sell]? Do I go sell some things in my house? Who in my social network might have some extra cash right now?" I talked to moms who sell blood plasma just to get their infants diapers.

Q: What coping strategies stood out to you?

Those of us who study diapers often call them diaper-stretching strategies. One was leaving on a diaper a little bit longer than someone might otherwise leave it on and letting it get completely full. Some mothers figured out if they bought a [more expensive] diaper that held more and leaked less, they could leave the diaper on longer.

They would also do things like letting the baby go diaperless, especially when they were at home and felt like they wouldn't be judged for letting their baby go without a diaper. And they used every household good you can imagine to make makeshift diapers. Mothers are using cloth, sheets and pillowcases. They're using things that are disposable like paper towels with duct tape. They're making diapers out their own period supplies or adult incontinence supplies when they can get a sample.

One of the questions I often get is, "Why don't they just use cloth?" A lot of the mothers that I spoke with had tried cloth diapers and they found that they were very cost- and labor-prohibitive. If you pay for a full startup set of cloth diapers, you're looking at anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000. And these moms never had that much money. Most of them didn't have in-home washers and dryers. Some of them didn't even have homes or consistent access to water, and it's illegal in a lot of laundromats and public laundry facilities to wash your old diapers. So the same conditions that would prevent moms from being able to readily afford disposable diapers are the same conditions that keep them from being able to use cloth.

Q: You found that many women's concept of being a good mother is wrapped up in diapering. Why is that?

Diapers and managing diapers was so fundamental to their identity as good moms. Most of the mothers in my sample went without their own food. They weren't paying a cellphone bill or buying their own medicine or their own menstrual supplies, as a way of saving diaper money.

I talked to a lot of moms who said, when your baby is hungry, that's horrible. Obviously, you do everything to prevent that. But there's something about a diaper that covers this vulnerable part of a very young baby's body, this very delicate skin. And being able to do something to meet this human need that we all have, and to maintain dignity and cleanliness.

A lot of the moms had been through the welfare system, and so they're living in this constant fear [of losing their children]. This is especially true among mothers of color, who are much more likely to get wrapped up in the child welfare system. People can't necessarily see when your baby's hungry. But people can see a saggy diaper. That's going to be one of the things that tags you as a bad mom.

Q: Was your work on diapers influenced by your experience as a parent?

When I was doing these interviews, my daughter was about 2 or 3. So still in diapers. When my daughter peed during a diaper change, I thought, "Oh, I can just toss that one. Here, let me get another clean one." That's a really easy choice. For me. That's a crisis for the mothers I interviewed. Many of them told me they have an anxiety attack with every diaper change.

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