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Mother knows best

Catherine Touzard tells **Fionnuala Carolan** how it is possible to raise a large family in an environmentally friendly way – even in Hong Kong

Having a first child is a significant turning point in a person's life. Suddenly, the environment and the world around them have new implications. When they throw their plastic in the bin rather than recycle, or run the tap while brushing their teeth, they have to consider how these mundane acts can affect their child's future.

Catherine Touzard, author of *Going Green in Hong Kong*, says that having her first child gave her a whole new perspective on life and with it a new conscience.

"With my first child I felt more connected to the world and began thinking about what the world would be like in 20 years' time and how things would be for my children as they grow into adulthood.

"If you are not already inclined to think in a 'green' way, this is the time to start."

With four children, ranging in age from two to 13, Ms Touzard has plenty to contend with and is proof that you can have a large family and adopt a green existence – even in a place such as Hong Kong.

One of the main forms of waste is diapers; each child can go through about 5,000 before they stop using them.

"Nappies are loaded with petrochemicals, meaning they will never degrade but just break into smaller plastic particles," she says.



Petrochemicals can also cause rashes and other skin problems and even more serious complaints. "I remember a study released in Britain that showed microleakages from dioxins in some nappies caused temperature increases that linked to infertility in males," says Ms Touzard (pictured).

Advertising campaigns for nappies touting high absorbency levels have proved very successful. But the disturbing reality of why modern nappies are so slim and absorbent is because they are stuffed with polymers – small synthetic particles that soak up water – and a polymer is essentially a petrochemical.

Ms Touzard suggests using disposable diapers made from vegetable starch. They may look less clean than the modern type because they are not bleached, but these nappies are equally efficient and degrade much faster. The main drawback is that they are about 50 per cent more expensive than regular diapers.

She uses a combination of disposable and washable diapers to reduce costs. "There are now ... washable nappies. Some have a plastic layer and a natural cotton pad that is flushable, or others can be washed after each use. If you are in the right mindset, you will want to reduce waste

Protect your children from air pollution

Hong Kong's air pollution is often cited as the most negative aspect of living here. Anthony Hedley from the University of Hong Kong has been studying the effects of air pollution for the past 21 years.

According to his research, there are 2,000 deaths related to air pollution in Hong Kong every year and the young and the old in society are the most sensitive to filthy air.

"When children develop bad health they often carry it with them to later life. Breathing dirty air has long-term effects and the longer the exposure, the more severe the problem," Professor Hedley says.

Other large cities, such as New York, Los Angeles and Berlin, have a much lower level of pollutants in the air than Hong Kong. Pollution levels here are more on a par with cities such as Bangkok and Jakarta, yet the level of social and economic development in Hong Kong is well ahead of these cities.

The most pressing need is to look at reducing the effect of the pollutants on young children.

"Nobody should be smoking in a home where a child lives, not even on a balcony. A neighbour's smoke can even affect a child. Even if you can't

smell the smoke you can breathe it. It's the tiny particles in the air that have the effect," he says.

To combat the effects of pollution, Professor Hedley suggests adopting a

healthy diet. "Eat leafy green vegetables and citrus fruits and avoid fatty foods that alter the metabolism."

Youngsters need to get exercise, but doing exercise in a polluted environment can mean that the bad effects outweigh the good. "Keep an eye on pollutant levels and don't do high levels of outdoor activity on high pollution days," he says.

There is hope in the air for the future, as government regulations in Hong Kong and across the border have led to a reduction in the level of airborne pollutants in the city.

Last year the average annual concentration of sulphur dioxide and respirable suspended particulates (the nasty stuff) in the region decreased by 19 per cent and 11 per cent respectively as compared to the levels in 2007.

A report by the Hong Kong government attributed these reductions to the implementation of enhanced emission reduction measures (for example the completion and installation of desulphurization systems at thermal power plants) and strengthening controls on vehicle source emissions. **Fionnuala Carolan**



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