

Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families

Summary

Diaper need – the lack of a sufficient supply of diapers to keep a baby or toddler clean, dry, and healthy – remains a serious and pervasive issue that impacts the physical, mental, and economic well-being of U.S. children and families. But a growing national movement led by the National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN), and supported by its founding sponsor Huggies®, is helping struggling families secure this basic need of clean, dry diapers for babies and toddlers.

A new nationwide study conducted by the NDBN and Huggies reveals that more than one-in-three surveyed families – including parents and other household members – reported struggling with diaper need in 2017, with the average household in need falling 19 diapers short each month.¹ The 36 percent experiencing diaper need² is slightly higher than the 34 percent recorded in a 2010 Huggies survey of mothers alone.³

Following the initial 2010 survey, the diaper bank community has grown substantially to more than 300 NDBN member programs serving local families, from 40 in 2011,⁴ and so has the number of diapers and dollars donated to help keep babies clean, dry, and healthy. The new study provides an updated and comprehensive portrait of the impact of diaper need on families and the pervasiveness of the issue nationwide. And it makes clear the need to expand overall awareness of diaper need as well as community support for diaper bank programs and services.

Two-in-three families (65%) surveyed said they weren't aware of diaper banks,⁵ even though the NDBN and its community-based diaper bank programs distributed more than 52 million diapers in 2016.⁶ Huggies, the largest supplier of donated diapers to NDBN, has contributed over 200 million diapers and wipes since its founding sponsorship of the Network in 2011.⁷

The new study also underscored that families reporting diaper need encompass a wide array of ages, racial groups and income levels. Of those identifying as in diaper need, 96 percent are under 45 years of age,⁸ with the majority (55%) between 25 to 34.⁹ Most

¹ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q37: If you currently struggle with providing or affording diapers for your child(ren), approximately how many diapers are you short of at the end of each month?

² Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; 36% of respondents selected at least one of the following three statements: 1. I currently do not have enough diapers to keep the child(ren) in my household clean, dry, and healthy 2. I find it difficult to afford buying diapers for the child(ren) in my household 3. I frequently find myself running out of diapers for the child(ren) in my household

³ Diaper Need and Its Impact on Child Health," American Academy of Pediatrics (2013)

⁴ National Diaper Bank Network

⁵ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q28. To your knowledge, which of the following organizations in your community provide free diapers to those in need? Survey respondents could select multiple answer options.

⁶ National Diaper Bank Network

⁷ Kimberly-Clark Corporation

⁸ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; 96% of respondents in need identified as between the ages of 18-44

⁹ Ibid.

respondents are married (65%).¹⁰ Two-thirds are employed,¹¹ with 14 percent working multiple jobs to make ends meet.¹²

Forty-five percent hold a bachelor's degree or higher.¹³ While the largest percentage of families in diaper need (25%) earn less than \$25,000 per year,¹⁴ 18 percent report annual incomes between \$50,000-\$74,999.¹⁵ Surprisingly, when combining income groups to those earning less than \$50,000 and those earning more than \$50,000, families in diaper need are nearly identical (50% vs. 49%).¹⁶

In addition, diaper need:

- Is characterized by economic hardship and high levels of stress in families striving to provide enough diapers and other necessities, including food, clothing and housing. This impacts their physical and mental health.
- Increases health risks, such as more frequent cases of diaper rash and urinary tract infections (UTI) for babies and toddlers left in dirty or reused diapers for prolonged periods of time.
- Affects respondents' ability to go to work and school. Almost three-in-five parents in diaper need (57%) missed work or school in the past month because they didn't have enough diapers when dropping their children off at childcare, day care or early education programs.¹⁷ On average, parents in diaper need missed work or school four days in the past month.¹⁸

To be defined as experiencing diaper need in the latest study, respondents had to agree with at least one of three statements: The household doesn't have enough diapers to keep children clean, dry and healthy; it finds it difficult to afford diapers; and it frequently finds itself running out of diapers.¹⁹

Huggies and the NDBN expanded the pool of those surveyed from just mothers to reflect the evolving modern U.S. family and those who play a major role in child rearing. The three-part study conducted by Edelman Intelligence included 3,240 U.S. households – 1,000 nationally and 2,240 across the eight major target cities, as well as

¹⁰ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Of those in need: D1. Which of the following best describes your marital status?

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; For respondents in need, D8. If employed full or part-time, how many jobs do you currently hold? 13% work 2 and 1% work 3

¹³ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; D6. Which of the following best describes the highest level of education you've received?

¹⁴ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; 25% of respondents in need identified as earning less than a \$25,000 annual household income before taxes

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q17. Have you ever had to miss work or school because you did not have enough diapers to drop your child(ren) off at childcare, daycare, or early education programs? Q18. You told us you may have had to miss work or school due to a lack of diapers. How many days have you had to miss work or school in the past month because you did not have enough diapers?

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families

a separate survey of 400 families determined to be in diaper need – with diaper-aged children 0-3 years of age.²⁰ The 2010 study surveyed 1,513 U.S. mothers.²¹

Implications of diaper need

The NDBN and Huggies study sought to identify the effect on families who can't afford the average cost of \$18 a week for the six-to-ten diapers a baby needs daily²² – equal to an estimated 3,000 in the first year.²³ A gap in the federal social safety net contributes to the difficulties of paying for an adequate diaper supply as federal subsidies do not cover diapers and baby wipes. Eighty-eight percent of families in need agreed that their household diaper need would decrease if such assistance was provided for diapers. Of those, 71 percent said that if provided just 50 diapers per child each month “would reduce my diaper need a lot.”²⁴

When they're short of diapers, two-in-five families (39%) said they stretch the diapers used by keeping a child in the same diaper longer. Research has found that this practice increases a child's risk for skin rashes and urinary tract infections, among other serious side effects.²⁵ Accordingly, the survey found that 54 percent of respondents in need took a child to the doctor to treat diaper rash, with one-in-four taking a child three or more times in the past year.²⁶

The survey reveals the strains that diaper need takes on parents' financially, personally and emotionally:

- On average, families in diaper need work 38 hours per week, with 58 percent holding full-time jobs, and nine percent working part-time.²⁷ Of those who work, less than half of their employers offer medical insurance (48%) or paid time off (46%).²⁸

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Huggies® *Every Little Bottom* Study, June 2010, <http://nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/huggies-2010-every-little-bottom-study.pdf>

²² Yale University Study, cited in *Pediatrics* online, July 29, 2013. <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/diaper-weighs-heavy-low-income-moms-study-article-1.1411741>

²³ American Academy of Pediatrics

²⁴ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q48. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? If federal assistance programs such as Women Infants and Children (WIC), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or another direct assistance program included financial assistance for the purchase of diapers, it would significantly decrease my household's diaper need. If you agree, how much would 50 diapers per child each month impact your household's diaper need? Note: "% T2B" represents a netted value of the top two responses: "Agree" and "Completely Agree"

²⁵ Research citations included in "Diaper Need and Its Impact on Child Health," *Pediatrics*, August 2013. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2013/07/23/peds.2013-0597.full.pdf>

²⁶ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q26. Thinking about your child(ren) who are in diapers, have you ever taken your child(ren) to a doctor or other healthcare provider to receive treatment for a diaper rash? Q26a. How many times in the past year did you take your child(ren) to a doctor or healthcare provider to receive treatment for a diaper rash? Among those that went to the doctor, 42% went once, a third (32%) twice, and over a quarter (26%) went 3 or more times.

²⁷ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; D7. Which of the following best describes your employment status?

²⁸ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q42. If you are employed, does your employer provide paid time off? Q43. If you are employed, does your employer provide medical insurance?

- Roughly three-in-four (74%) families in diaper need feel embarrassed that they cannot afford enough diapers. Eighty percent agree that those in need are hesitant to talk about their need with others.²⁹
- Three-in-four (76%) families experiencing diaper need face economic hardship, compared to 24 percent of families not in need.³⁰ In addition to finding it hard to regularly attend to their children’s diaper needs (66%), families in need also struggle to provide food for their children (60%) and a permanent home (46%). Among those that do not have a permanent home, 30% moved once, 42% moved two-or-more times in the past year.³¹
- When faced with diaper need, nearly half of households borrow money (48%) or diapers (39%) from family and friends.³²

Awareness of diaper availability and donations

The NDBN and Huggies study spotlights the limited awareness among in-need parents of community-based programs offering diaper assistance. Most in-need families (59%) haven’t visited a diaper bank or other nonprofits and organizations that provide diapers.³³ Of those with diaper need, nearly two-thirds (64%) were unaware that community-based diaper banks provide diaper assistance to struggling families.³⁴

But equal percentages (65%) of families, both in diaper need and not, say they are very or somewhat likely to donate diapers to a local diaper bank. A much higher percentage of families who receive diaper supplies say they are likely to volunteer at a local diaper bank than families without a need (56% and 32%, respectively).³⁵

Families make trade-offs to provide diapers

To provide diapers for their children, three-fourths of families with diaper need (74%) said they reduce other spending:³⁶

- Entertainment – 54 percent

²⁹ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q38a. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Note: “% T2B” represents a netted value of the top two responses: “Agree” and “Completely Agree”. Parents struggling with diaper need are hesitant to discuss with others

³⁰ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q2. Economic hardship is defined as the inability to pay reasonable and necessary living expenses. Generally, basic expenses include your rent or mortgage, utilities, food, transportation, healthcare, and basic needs products such as soap, shampoo, diapers, and feminine hygiene. Based on this definition, is your household currently experiencing economic hardship?

³¹ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q7. How many times have you moved in the past 12 months? Among those that do not have a permanent home, 30% moved once, 42% moved 2 or more times

³² Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q9. Earlier you told us that at times you do not have enough diapers to meet your household’s needs. What do you do in situations when you do not have enough diapers for your child(ren)?

³³ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q29. Have you personally ever visited any of the following to acquire diapers?

³⁴ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q28. To your knowledge, which of the following organizations in your community provide free diapers to those in need? Survey respondents could select multiple answer options.

³⁵ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q31. How likely are you to do any of the following? Note: “% T2B” represents a netted value of the top two responses: “Somewhat Likely” and “Very Likely”

³⁶ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q21. Which of the following expenses have you had to cut back on to provide diapers for the child(ren) in your household?

- Clothing – 49 percent
- Personal savings and cable TV expense – 46 percent
- Food and grocery purchases – 39 percent
- Mobile phone expenses – 38 percent
- Personal hygiene items – 37 percent
- Utility expenses – 30 percent
- Transportation costs – 26 percent

Among personal trade-offs, 36 percent said they spend less time with friends, 34 percent did less laundry and 28 percent reduced time with family. Over a quarter of families said they skipped meals or took on additional jobs.³⁷

Additional diaper need findings

The study uncovered other interesting insights about diapering as well as the need for additional supplies. Among them:

- Forty-five percent of all respondents learned how to diaper from their mother, with mothers providing guidance to 53 percent of families with diaper need.³⁸ Healthcare providers trained 22 percent of all surveyed families and “my spouse” trained 21 percent.³⁹
- Families with diaper need spend 11 percent of their monthly income on diapers and other baby care products, the fourth-highest expenditure after mortgage/rent (29%), food (17%) and utilities (12%) and exceeding transportation (10%).⁴⁰
- Child care (27%) and diapers (26%) rank atop the most unexpected child care expenses for all surveyed families, with diapers far atop the list for families with diaper need, at 38 percent.⁴¹
- To cope with a lack of diapers, families in diaper need primarily turn to:⁴²
 - Borrowing money from family/friends – 48 percent
 - Keeping a child diaperless – 40 percent
 - Borrow diapers from family/friends – 39 percent
 - Stretch diaper use by keeping a child in a diaper longer – 39 percent
 - Get diapers from a diaper bank or charity – 30 percent

³⁷ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q30. Which of the following things, if any, have you personally had to do to purchase diapers for the child(ren) in your household? 27% skip meals; 28% took additional jobs

³⁸ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q13. Who taught you how to diaper the child(ren) in your household?

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q1. How much of your monthly income do you spend on the following?

⁴¹ Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q6. Thinking about when you first started caring for your child(ren), what was the most unexpected expense that you encountered?

⁴² Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families; Q9. Earlier you told us that at times you do not have enough diapers to meet your household’s needs. What do you do in situations when you do not have enough diapers for your child(ren)?

- Stretch diaper use by cleaning and reusing soiled diapers – 25 percent
- Use cloth diapers instead of disposables – 23 percent

Conclusion

The 2017 study *Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families* reaffirmed the findings of 2010, that one-in-three families experience diaper need. As the need for these essential supplies is evident, the study provides a meaningful picture of what contributes to diaper need and the impact it has on the well-being of children and families. And despite growing annual donations by the millions, the study reveals how many U.S. families remain underserved and continue to struggle with a basic need of all babies and toddlers.

The Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families study can serve as a catalyst to address the diaper need issue. It can spark a national dialogue on the physical, emotional and financial health of children and families who struggle with diaper need.

Individuals and organizations interested in helping families experiencing diaper need can visit a local diaper bank or even host a diaper drive with a neighborhood, school or local organization. The National Diaper Bank Network active membership includes more than 300 diaper banks, diaper pantries and food banks located in 47 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. To find a diaper bank near you, visit nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org.

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