

There's one truth I've learned as a parent to young kids—they always need new clothes. Just when you think you've assembled a good collection, the seasons change and their little bodies outgrow their current size at a rate that makes your head spin. Kids are hard on clothes, too—the falls, the spills, and the spit up—it's likely they go through multiple outfits a day.

For all these reasons and more (hello, affordable prices), many parents (including me) have turned to fast fashion labels to clothe our little ones. Yet if you give the fast fashion industry a closer look, you'll see that it's a big contributor to climate change, microplastic pollution, and unethical labor practices. Thankfully, there are more sustainable ways to outfit our families and better brands to choose. Together with a shift in mindset to slow fashion, we can bestow a healthier planet to our children.

What is Fast Fashion?

While fast fashion began to make its way into the ethos decades before due to manufacturing improvements, *The New York Times* was the first to coin the term in the 1990s. They used it to describe Zara's business model of affordable prices and lighting fast production cycles.

In general, fast fashion describes brands that value quantity over quality, mass producing clothes cheaply, often at the sacrifice of worker's rights, livable wages, waste, and environmental and health concerns. These companies consistently churn out new styles, setting trends at a rapid pace. For example, while there used to be two seasons in fashion (Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter), it has now evolved into 52 microseasons, with new styles hitting store shelves every few days.

Consumers are programmed to attempt to keep pace, and with affordable prices, buying habits have shifted to buying more and often. More recently, "Hauls" have taken over social media in which influencers document the large quantities of purchases they've made of fast fashion brands like SHEIN and H&M. There's even a #babyhaul hashtag filled with stuffed nursery closets and more clothes than one child could ever wear. With fast fashion, it's easy to feel your closet of clothes is outdated and even easier to update it with many items priced under \$20.



How Does it Harm the **Environment?**

This cultural shift to overconsumption has proved very detrimental to the environment in many ways.

BREAKING DOWN THE CLOTHING AND TEXTILE INDUSTRY'S IMPACT



Responsible for \$2.4 trillion in global manufacturing



Employs 300 million people across the globe (including many women)



Contributes 2-8% of global greenhouse gas emissions



Uses roughly 215 trillion liters of water per year



Annual material loss of \$100 billion from underutilisation



Accounts for roughly 9% of annual microplastic ocean pollution

Adapted from the UN Alliance of Sustainable Fashion

Unsustainable Carbon **Footprint**

According to the **UN Alliance for Sustainable** Fashion, the clothing and textile industry is responsible for 2-8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. A 2020 McKinsey report <u>"Fashion</u> on Climate: How the Fashion Industry Can Urgently Act to Reduce Its Greenhouse Gas Emissions" likens the contribution from 2018 alone, in which it estimated a 4% contribution, to the yearly emissions of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom combined. It warns that without

"Under its current trajectory, the fashion industry will miss the 1.5-degree pathway by 50%."

– "FASHION ON CLIMATE: HOW THE FASHION INDUSTRY CAN URGENTLY ACT TO REDUCE ITS **GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS"**

an accelerated abatement of emissions even with current decarbonisation initiatives, the output would be double the limit needed to remain on the best-case scenario 1.5-degree pathway. The recommendations call for a 60% reduction in emissions and emphasize a switch to renewable



SUSTAINABILITY **REQUIRES A SWITCH TO CIRCULAR FASHION**

The main principle of circularity is to consider the product's end of life from inception to avoid waste and emphasize recyclability and biodegradability.

These principles are built into the circular fashion production process so that materials can stay in rotation for as long as they provide value before they are then returned to the earth. In this model, fabrics can be recycled and reused to create new items and then biodegraded.

energy. They also call upon consumers to alter their consumption habits and embrace fashion circularity.

it says. Instead of valuing our wardrobes, societal expectations have been set to always want more. Cheap prices make it possible.

Excessive Clothing Waste

The waste issue is two-fold and includes clothes that have never been purchased and clothes that are no longer wanted on an individual level. Where does it all go? Well, according to data from the EPA, 85% of textiles discarded in the United States in 2018 from both consumers and the fashion industry are incinerated or landfilled.

The fashion industry routinely overproduces by about 30-40% each season, according to Forbes. A 2018 report from ShareCloth on apparel overproduction estimates that 150 billion garments are produced each year equalling roughly 20 garments per person. Inherit in this issue is that the production volume is not actually based on need and dramatic surplus is discarded without an industry-wide restructuring of the production process. The report also highlights how consumers buy more when the prices are lower. "The average American buys 70 apparel items per year. That is a new piece of clothing every four or five days,"

Microplastic Ocean **Pollution**

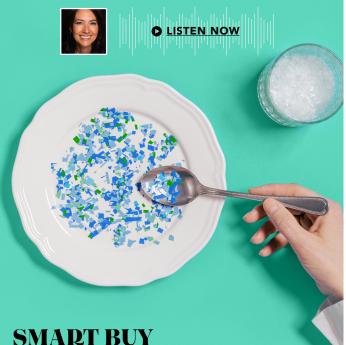
Synthetic fabrics like polyester, acrylic, nylon, and spandex are plastic-based and derived from petroleum sources. According to Ocean Clean Wash, 60% of clothes today are made with synthetic fibers because of their durability and affordability, amongst other reasons. When clothing made with synthetic materials are worn and washed, they shed tiny fibers too small to be filtered by conventional washing machines and end up in our waterways.

Microplastic pollution not only harms the environment but has pervaded the marine ecosystem and subsequent food chain so much so that it has been found in human bodies. More research is needed on the effects of microplastics in the body but a recent review in the Journal of Hazardous Materials found that it can damage cells in a multitude of ways.

LISTEN AND LEARN

Want to learn more about microplastic pollution in our oceans? Listen to our podcast interview with Julie Andersen, CEO of Plastic Oceans International on Raising Healthy Families with Moms Meet and KIWI.

"Diving Deeper into the Plastic Pollution Crisis with Expert and Plastic Oceans CEO, Julie Andersen"



Roughly 9 million microfibres make their way into wastewater treatment facilities from just one load of wash, according to Ocean Clean Wash. There's a few simple consumer solutions to cut down on your microfibre contributions that can be used in or with your washing machine.

Harmful Chemicals in **Textile Manufacturing**

Over 8,000 different chemicals and 10,000 different dyes are utilized in the making of textiles according to Green America. Some of the worst offenders are hormone disruptors like polyfluorinated chemicals (also known as persistent or forever chemicals) and flame retardants. Others like azo dyes, heavy metals, and formaldehyde are known carcinogens whose exposure can elicit a multitude of health concerns.

Garment workers who come into contact with these and other chemicals in the textile production process are at most risk. Likewise, much of these chemicals run off into the local water system, polluting rivers and affecting the local population around the factories.

Chemical contamination also constitutes much of the water pollution created by the textile industry.

According to Green America, "The impacts of chemicals banned in the final product but allowed in the manufacturing process, like dyes, polyfluorinated chemicals, and flame retardants, are striking. In China, 70 percent of the rivers and lakes are polluted, and in Bangladesh, the Buriganga River is so polluted with toxic



Using the filtering principles of real ocean coral, the Cora Ball is able to catch roughly a third of microplastic fibers in your laundry. STARTING AT \$38.99, **CORABALL.COM**



Or you can toss your synthetic clothing in the Guppyfriend Washing Bag which prevents 86% of synthetic fibers from breaking when washed in the bag. **STARTING AT** \$34.95, GUPPYFRIEND.US



chemicals and heavy metals prevalent in the leather tanning industry that it can no longer sustain aquatic life."

Unethical Labor Practices

Inequity and unethical labor practices are rampant in the fashion industry. Many of the poorest people around the globe are making the clothes we buy for unlivable wages under abysmal working conditions. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, garment workers in South Asia are paid 2–5 times lower than what they need to live in dignity. While minimum wages may exist, they are not always reflective of living wages, forcing workers to endure unsafe conditions and unbearably long working hours.

Some of the safety issues they experience are working in factories with structural dangers. This was on horrific display during the tragic 2013 **Rana Plaza factory collapse** in Bangladesh that killed 1,100+ people and left another 2,500 injured.

Additionally, garment workers are exposed to synthetic chemicals and dyes on a daily occurrence in often poorly ventilated factories with improper protection and a lack of

transparency on the risks exposures have on them. Polyester is a good example of the issue.

According to Green America, "Polyester textiles, used in 55 percent of all clothing production, rely on the use of heavy metals, like antimony, a possible carcinogen, as well as known carcinogens, like cadmium and lead. Research from the National Institutes of Health shows that occupational exposure to antimony can cause respiratory, skin, and gastrointestinal symptoms, and may even cause cancer. Too often, factory workers who may encounter such toxic materials are not notified about safety procedures or given proper equipment to reduce exposure."

Greenwashing

As in all industries, consumers need to be aware of greenwashing from brands who highlight one ethical attribute of their organization while continuing to employ harmful environmental or human rights practices. A brand may also market themselves as eco-conscious but on further inspection, they don't hold any Fairtrade or organic certifications.

Green America's "Scorecard of Environmental & Social Practices of Major US Apparel Companies" from its

2019 report on toxic textiles

is a great resource for digging into your favorite brands' practices. Target and The North Face top the list for their transparency and practices while J. Crew, Carter's, and Forever 21 bottom out the list. To learn more about whether your favorite brands' green claims are true or hyped, check out **Green America's** investigation.



What Parents Can Do to **Shop Smarter**

As consumers, we have the power to move the dial towards a more ethical and sustainable fashion industry with our purchases.

Do Your Brand Homework

Dig in a little deeper to the business and production practices of the brands you buy. Look for concrete sustainability goals on their website, transparency in the supply chain, and certifications that prove their commitment to the environment and human rights.

Certifications that Matter

What to look for in a sustainable brand:



Fair Trade Certified is the certification from Fair Trade USA® quaranteeing that a brand provides "safe working conditions, environmental protections, sustainable livelihoods, and community development funds." Learn more.



Fairtrade International, operating out of Bonn, Germany focuses on traceability and has distinct labels for Fairtrade Cotton and Fairtrade Textile Production amongst others. Learn more.



B Corp certification focuses on an equitable, inclusive, and regenerative economy. Learn more.



GOTS Certified, which stands for the Global Organic Textile Standard, looks at the entire textile supply chain and has set criteria for not just certifying organic cotton but also chemical use and ethical worker treatment. Learn more.



OEKO-TEX® offers an umbrella of certifying labels that consider harmful substances and environmental and social practices in the leather and textile industries. Learn more.

Switch to a Slow Fashion Mindset

The fast fashion industry lulls us into thinking we must constantly buy to keep up with the trends. Slow fashion values sustainability in the supply chain, ethical workplaces and labor rights, and clothing quality that endures beyond one season and one sibling.

SHOP SECONDHAND

This is an affordable and practical way to practice sustainability. Check out our list of the 8 Best Places to Resell Kids Items. Check your local area for the best resale options around you. Here's my favorite: @fievelandlouise. They sell in the shop and on Instagram and even ship to you if you aren't local.

MEND YOUR FAMILY'S CLOTHES

Stitching at the seam is simple enough, but if your kids' clothes have holes in t=hem, you can patch them up with boats or bikes or anything else your child likes.

WASH WITH CARE

How you wash your clothes matters. To extend wear, wash less, wash full loads, use cold water, and hang dry when possible.

BORROW AND LEND

Sharing is caring, especially when it comes to clothing amongst families and friends with similar-aged kids. Some of my favorite pieces of kids' clothing have been passed around between my circle of friends and returned or passed on depending on who's kid is next in the size lineup.

WANT TO CALCULATE YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT?

You can calculate your impact with a simple 12 question quiz from **Ethical Clothing**.