

## Families turning green

### Eco-awareness is taking over households - but that doesn't necessarily mean giving up meat or driving a hybrid.

By Lini S. Kadaba  
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For Amanda Ashbee, it began with milk. It often does.

As she considered sustenance for her first-born, Ashbee was glued to Web sites about milk production.

Hormones. Grazing practices. Antibiotics.

What she found worried her enough that Ashbee made a choice for 1-year-old Ava and her family that she had never considered before baby made three:

Organic milk.

"It kind of snowballed from there," the 31-year-old Downingtown mother said recently from her three-bedroom, cul-de-sac house, where the thermostat is set at a tolerable 78 degrees on this July day.

Organic milk begat organic fruits and organic vegetables, which begat natural California Baby shampoo and soap, which begat a native-species garden in the front yard, which begat. . . .

Two years later, Ashbee is committed to a style of raising Ava and Ryan, 2, that puts her at the front of a growing national movement adding adherents, including many in the Philadelphia area, one mommy or daddy at a time.

Green parenting.

The eco-friendly philosophy has moved way beyond choosing cloth over disposable diapers. For many, it embraces every facet of bringing up children. What furniture should the nursery have? (Many favor cribs made with renewable wood.) What clothes should baby wear? (Organic cotton.) What programs should she watch? (*Animal Planet* is a big hit.)

"When you have children, you start thinking about the future, and you want to make sure it's a healthy future," Ashbee said.

For Gen Xers, who grew up with Earth Day and the mantra *always recycle*, a green way of life is a natural choice.

Take Holistic Moms Network. In four years, it has grown to 115-plus chapters. On Saturday, it will expand to Lower Bucks County with a launch at the Silver Lake Nature Center in Bristol.

"Sustainability or green has really hit the mainstream," said Rob Fleming of Philadelphia University, where he directs a new program in sustainable design. "It's not surprising that people are trying to integrate those principles into daily life."

Al Gore's global warming call to arms, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and \$3-a-gallon gas have only served to reinforce the urgency, he said.

Green is not just trendy, but vital for a generation of parents. "As much as it is about green, it's about their children's health," said Robyn Griggs Lawrence, editor of Natural Home Magazine.

Of course, it helps that Wal-Mart sells organic. "There isn't any compromise with convenience," said futurist Denise Chiavetta, with the Washington, D.C., consulting firm Social Technologies.

Nor, increasingly, price. "Green is here to stay and expand," she said.

In part, that's due to an image makeover. Saving the planet no longer requires ugly shoes (think Birkenstocks) or vegan diets.

"You can still indulge rather than sacrifice something to do well for the planet," said Alex Kennaugh, who has fallen for eco-luxury brand Green & Black's, London-based organic ice cream makers.

Kennaugh is managing editor of SimpleSteps.org, a Web site that aims with its recently launched "BabySteps" page to help parents go green. The initiative is a new focus for New York-based advocacy group Natural Resources Defense Council, better known for efforts to combat global warming than for parenting tips.

Environmental groups cannot ignore the numbers, Kennaugh said. LOHAS, as marketers call consumers who value "lifestyles of health and sustainability," are one in five Americans, according to the Natural Marketing Institute of Harleysville.

These consumers with a conscience constitute a \$209 billion market, she said. Retail sales of organic foods alone grew in the United States to nearly \$17 billion in 2006, and while that's only a thin slice - 3 percent - of the overall food and beverages market, it's a whopping 22 percent increase from 2005, the Organic Trade Association found.

Parents-to-be and new parents are often the biggest converts, Kennaugh said. "It really is a period in a person's life when they're awakening to these issues, and they become vigilant," she said. "And it's a little bit infectious."

Ashbee has progressed from pure self-interest to a value system with ever wider circles. Now, she seeks to reduce even the community's carbon footprint.

Beyond the wooden toys over plastic or battery-operated ones, and the Timberlands (known for environmental support) over New Balance shoes, beyond the new floors made of Brazilian wood harvested under sustainable practices and the Peco wind-energy sign-up, Ashbee has turned her attention to schools.

At Moms for the Future, a Chester County play group of sorts started three years ago, the conversation turns not on the kids' nap times or feeding schedules but green schools and biodiesel buses.

Husband David Ashbee, 30, a commercial crane operator with long hours, goes along, mostly because none of the green choices have really rocked his world. Most of the changes, "he hasn't noticed," she confided.

Despite her lifestyle, Ashbee doesn't readily claim the green-parent mantle. "We don't drive a Prius," she said. "I'm not a vegetarian. [Her children] know what a Happy Meal is. . . . I'm not granola."

Beth Curtis, 37, of Germantown also is no purist. Still, she has moved to more philosophical arguments with her oldest of three children.

When Isaiah, 7, earned money by cleaning neighborhood yards and wanted to immediately spend it, a family discussion focused on "when enough stuff is enough."

Some days, his reaction is "pretty good," said the home-birth midwife. "Other days, he hates me."

Still, the Curtises persist in sending an unequivocal message about the planet: "It's not an option. It's imperative that we do it this way."

Not that it's a snap. "I'm always trying to check my own impulses," Beth Curtis said.

Most green parents are not tree-huggers. Some make their own household cleaners even as they use disposable diapers (albeit biodegradable ones). Others drive minivans but buy farm-fresh milk through co-ops and thrift-store furniture to avoid consumption.

"It's really a lifestyle choice," said Kennaugh of SimpleSteps.org. "You don't have to do it all. You don't have to live off the grid and compost and walk everywhere."

Lyla Kaplan, 37, a potter and founding member of Moms for the Future, does one bit for the planet every other week. That's when she and her 6-year-old son, Ruben Matell, visit Vollmecke Orchards in West Brandywine Township. There, the pair collect a wicker basket full of produce. The community-supported agriculture, or CSA, group has about 130 members, the vast majority families with children, who pay about \$600 a year for a share (there is a wait list).

Kaplan splits the cost with another family, and they alternate farm visits during the June-to-November season.

On a recent Friday afternoon, the skies cleared, and mother and son collected the week's offerings: two cucumbers, four peppers, six ears of sweet corn, a watermelon, and so on. They also got a pint of pick-yourself berries.

This is Ruben's favorite part, though he was more focused on *eating* the ripest, as his berry-stained face clearly showed.

"I wanted Ruben to feel connected to his food," Kaplan said. For her, that means he needs to know raspberries come from bushes on farms, not grocery store aisles. If he gets it at this age, she figures, "it becomes second nature."

Every now and then, Ruben will spout a gem, as he did recently. "Berries are like eating the earth," he said.

And Kaplan cannot help but look proud.

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