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baby's skin is extremely thin and delicate, and much more prone to irritation than adult skin. Dry, itchy skin conditions are increasingly common and can leave mother and baby both anxious and stressed. By carefully selecting the right skincare products for your child and following a few basic tips, you will be well on your way to ensuring your children have smooth, healthy, glowing skin.

Childhood eczema

The term eczema is applied to a broad range of skin conditions which cause an inflammation of the outer layer of skin, the epidermis. According to the British Skin Foundation, eczema affects between 15-20% of children in the UK, so it is a serious issue. Symptoms range from mild and manageable, with dry, itchy patches, to extremely severe with cracked, burning, painful skin which can keep the child awake at night. Long-term sleep disturbance can have a serious effect on the child's performance at school, and eczema often has a negative impact on the child's self-esteem.

Eczema is believed to have a hereditary component, and often runs in families who also suffer from hay fever and/or asthma. Although most children with eczema do improve as they get older, there is no cure as such. The symptoms are usually managed with creams and ointments such as diprobase or oilatum, or in more severe cases, with topical steroid creams. Too much dust in the home can aggravate the condition, so it is important to keep your home dust-free and well-ventilated. Eczema is also thought to be linked to food intolerances, particularly dairy products. You can ask your GP to refer you to a specialist for allergy testing if you suspect this may be the case.

Chemical irritation

The skin is the largest organ in the body and the ability of many chemicals to be absorbed through the skin is now widely accepted. The skin is even used as a route for medication, for example, nicotine and HRT skin patches.

Many of the chemicals found in skincare products today have been found to irritate children's delicate skin causing discomfort, itching and irritation. Always use products designed

for babies or for sensitive skin where possible as these should contain fewer harmful chemicals and fragrances, although this is not always the case.

Check if your baby's skin products include sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), parabens or artificial fragrances, as these are thought to be some of the biggest culprits of skin rashes and irritation.

SLS is commonly used in personal care products, such as bubble bath and shampoo. It is an effective, but very harsh, detergent and is also used as a foaming agent. However, it is a known skin irritant and tests have shown it to cause skin rashes, eye irritations and other allergic reactions - definitely one to avoid if your child has sensitive skin.

Artificial fragrance is another no-no, as it is a concoction of chemicals. However, babies are born with an acute sense of smell and certain aromas can be very soothing and relaxing. So don't always head for the fragrance free option, instead try and use products containing natural scents obtained from essential oils, such as rose, lavender, camomile and neroli.

There is also a question mark over the use of parabens in personal care products. Parabens are a class of chemicals which are used as synthetic preservatives in many shampoos, moisturisers, etc, but there have been concerns that when these chemicals are absorbed into the body they can alter hormone levels, even possibly increasing the risk of cancer. They have also been linked with allergic skin reactions, so check the label before you buy.

Natural is best

Mother of two, Sarah, from Surrey, told us that she started to notice dry, scaly patches on her daughter's skin around the age of 2.

"Before that I had simply been using regular baby skincare products, but I did a little research into common skin irritants, and I was shocked to find these present in many of the products I had been using on Abigail, even though they were clearly labelled as baby products."

She shopped around for products which contained no artificial fragrance, no SLS and no parabens and started to use organic brands, such as Green People and Weleda, which are made using only natural ingredients.

Sarah says, "Once I switched to using only natural products, my daughter's skin improved immediately. The products are more expensive, but I know I am making an informed choice



and caring for Abigail's skin in the best way."

Buy Weleda online at www.weleda.co.uk, at selected Waitrose and Sainsbury's stores, or your local health food shop. Green People is stocked in many health food shops or buy online at www.greenpeople.co.uk.

Try 'organic lifestyle store', So Organic, which stocks a wide range of natural skincare products for mother and baby, at www.soorganic.com.

Mother's Love – premium skincare for babies

Celebrity make-up artist, Kim Jacobs, says her passion for holistic and alternative treatments for herself and her family, together with a natural instinct to look after her own and her children's skin, led her to develop her own range of skincare for babies, 'Mother's Love'.

She says, "The products are all naturally derived using the finest ingredients and 100% aromatic essential oils. I developed the range with mother and baby in mind - all ingredients are mild and gentle so both mum and baby can use them. The scent was very important as babies have an acute sense of smell, and all our products have calming properties due to the essential oils."

Kim comments that most women already have fantastic skincare routines, but that they are also beginning to realise the importance of doing the same for their children. She adds, "We are surrounded by pollutants and harmful chemicals in the atmosphere and our skin suffers; parents realise that their children are also affected. We are being educated about what we feed our children; but what we put on their skin also has an effect."

Premium natural skincare is certainly more expensive. "But", says Kim, "Using fantastic natural ingredients comes at a price. It is rather like free range and organic food - you get what you pay for, and more and more people are gradually realising this." Kim has a growing client base and her natural mother and baby beauty range has also attracted the attention of celebrity mums such as Louise Redknapp and Nigella Lawson.

Kim's luxurious and sweet-smelling products would make great Christmas presents for mums of young babies and children. Her Mother's Love moisturising cream is a blend of natural oils including rosehip, starflower and almond oils, enriched with aloe vera, chamomile and vitamin E, and is perfect for use all over the

face and body. While it is suitable for all skin types, Kim says it is excellent for those with sensitive or very dry skin and eczema. Price £18.00.

Buy Mother's Love products online at www.angelique.co.uk.

Baby massage

Massage is a fun and relaxing way to look after your baby's skin and ensure all-over moisture and comfort. A good time to massage is just before a nap, or after a bath. Lay baby down on a towel somewhere warm and cosy and start by just letting your hands glide down the baby's chest all the way to the toes. Then focus on the legs and feet, before moving on to the arms and hands. Make sure you remember to warm up your own hands first.

Try Mother's Love's massage balm, a wonderful mix of olive oil jelly and shea butter, fragranced with 100% natural essential oils (£20, from www.angelique.co.uk), or Weleda's Calendula Baby Oil which has a base of sweet almond oil (£7.95, stockists as above).

Winter skin care

Babies and young children can be particularly prone to dry skin in winter. Central heating makes the atmosphere inside the home very dry, which can increase skin dryness. Whilst outside, the cold wintry weather can cause the skin to become dry, red, chapped and sore. Kim Jacobs recommends using a moisturising cream on your child's face at night, to boost moisture levels and prevent chapping and cracking. Angelique's Mother's Love massage balm (as above) is a rich and versatile blend of natural ingredients, particularly suitable for use all over the body, including the face, at this time of year.

Chapped lips can be very sore in the wintry weather, so try Badgers Balm's lip balms, which are made with all natural ingredients such as olive oil and rosehip oil, and come in a range of fun and natural flavours such as tangerine, mint and ginger. Badgers Balm lip balm sticks are available from www.soorganic.com, price £2.44, and are also available in health food stores and Boots stores. ■



Top tips for smooth, healthy skin

- Keep your child well hydrated. Dehydration can aggravate dry skin conditions.
- Don't bathe your child every day; it can be very drying on the skin. But make sure you keep up the daily 'top and tail' routine for young babies, as it is important to keep your baby's skin clean.
- Use only those products designed for babies or sensitive skin. Where you can afford it, choose natural, organic products, free from harsh chemicals and artificial fragrances.
- Choose loose-fitting, comfortable clothes, preferably made from natural fibres such as cotton, which allow the skin to breathe.
- Change your child's bedding regularly, and always use mild detergent. Choose cotton sheets if possible.
- Keep your child's bedroom cool, as overheating can make itching worse.
- If your child's skin gets a little drier over winter, then use a natural moisturiser daily, rubbing gently into affected areas.
- During the winter months, switch to a creamy, moisturising bubble bath such as Weleda's Calendula Cream Bath (£6.95, stockists as above).
- Send your child to school or nursery with a chapstick, to avoid sore, cracked lips in the cold weather. Try the Badger's Balm range, which is all natural and comes in a selection of fun flavours (see above for stockists).

