

TOILETING PART 2: THE ADULT'S ROLE IN SUCCESSFUL TOILETING

Written by TEA BEZOS

Babies have always had bladder and bowel movements - however, how we handle this event as parents has changed over time, and is even dependent on what part of the world we live in.

THE FACTS ABOUT TOILETING INDEPENDENCE

1. The average age for children learning how to use the toilet independently has increased over time in the western world, whereas "more than 50% of children around the world are toilet trained at about 1 year of age" (Schmitt, B.D. 2004).
2. "Waiting for readiness" is a misunderstood message. In 1962, Brazelton's study concluded that parents should stop nagging and pushing their children to use the toilet and instead work collaboratively and wait for readiness. Over time, this message has turned into "do nothing until your child shows readiness". These so called "readiness signals" often do not occur until 24 months at which point you are trying to:
 - a. get a child to unlearn a behaviour that they have been doing for 2 or so years and often for reasons that are not really obvious to them: why would they want to stop what they are doing, go to another room, take off their clothes (which in winter will make them cold) and sit still?
 - b. get a child to do something new at a time when their favourite word is, "NO!"
3. Once a child is walking, they are ready and able to control all of the muscles needed for bladder and bowel movements. It is just with experience and practice that they learn to use these sphincter muscles.



SCENARIO 1

Imagine for a moment that you have become incapable of going to the toilet independently - perhaps you have injured your wrists.

- Who would you ask to help you with this task - a stranger or someone familiar?
- How would you want them to do this? Do you want to be given space to do certain things you can still do, like get yourself to the bathroom, then just have a little bit of help with the undressing? Or do you want the other person to take over completely?
- How do you need them to behave and react? Imagine if they made any reaction, like "Ugh", or "Far out, this stinks!"
- Could any of these things potentially withhold you from bladder or bowel movements so that you didn't have to go as often?

SCENARIO 2

Imagine now that you have to be the one helping the other adult.

- How would you ask that adult if they wanted to go to the bathroom? Would you ask discreetly? Would you nag?
- Would you give them space to do as much as they can on their own or would you take over?
- How would it be different from how you change your own child?



UNDERSTANDING FROM YOUR CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

We gain a deeper understanding of self from how others respond to us.

When we change our child's nappy or help them use the toilet, it is very important that we are aware of any messages we might be sending. Check your language and your facial expressions and notice if you are giving off anything overly negative.

From birth, nappy changes are something that we do with a child - not too them. It is a collaborative process. Even before they can understand, we talk them through and do things slowly. Then gradually, as your child's understanding and skills grow, we step back.

Any protest is a signal that things need to change - not a signal that they are being defiant. In scenario one, as soon as your wrist healed, you would be telling that person, "I can do this," and it would be strange if they insisted on helping you. As soon as your child is able to pull up to stand, try stand-up nappy changes. As soon as your child is able to pull up their pants or take off their nappy or sit on a potty, give them the space and time to try to do these things on their own.

Remember that development does not happen in a straight line. Just because they were able to pull up their pants today, it doesn't mean that they will not ask for help tomorrow. When they first learned to walk for example, they would still often go back to crawling. Development is gradual and more like a spiral, with things moving up and down the coil.

LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT - WHAT WE SAY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Toilet learning vs toilet training

We refer to this stage in child development as toilet learning, toileting or toilet independence. Toilet training involves this idea that the child is doing something because we want them to do it. Toilet learning implies that it is a skill that needs to be learned; that it is a process that cannot be taught overnight.

Training also implies the use of rewards and praise. Be really careful if you choose to use rewards or praise with toileting. Emptying the bladder and the bowel is a natural bodily function and we want to keep it that way. We do not want to confuse this with being 'good' or 'bad'. This is especially important with toddlers who are looking to push boundaries and test reactions.

When you learn something, the skill in itself is the reward. When you learn to knit, the reward is the scarf in the end. When you learn piano the reward is being able to play a song. It is not the stickers that you got on some random chart every time you made a stitch or played a note along the way.

Big reactions—positive or negative—can also put a child off. Instead we want to be quite matter-of-fact. "That was the first time you did a wee on the toilet." "I can see wee on the floor." "I am going to get a cloth to clean it up, would you like to help?" If there is a poo on the couch and we have this big reaction, some children will want to avoid that, and so will only want the nappy on to poo again.

There are no "accidents"

There are no "accidents" during toilet learning, only lessons. We do not say: "You have done an accident", "Oh no", or "Uh oh" - instead we say what we see. "You have done a wee and your pants are wet." It is not a good or a bad thing, it just is what it is. Our job is to help them learn that in our culture, we go to the bathroom to complete this activity. Pointing out that they are doing it wrong doesn't build confidence.



Shame

Saying something like, "You are too big to be wearing a nappy now", is using shame to try to have the child use the toilet. Remember, this is just a natural bodily function and we want to keep it that way.

Dignity

Tell your child before you check their nappy rather than pulling back on their pants as they walk past without warning.

Use discretion if you are talking about their bowel movements in front of them. When our child is three or four years old, we will be annoyed about their every second word being "poo" and "wee", however, for the first few years of their lives, this will be a favourite topic of conversation.

Correctly name body parts

There is no good reason for a child to not know the names of their body parts. As adults we relate the genitalia to sex and sexuality - young children do not. They are just interested in the names. We cannot talk about something that we cannot name, therefore, it is important for both sexual health and personal safety that children know the correct names for the body parts. (Kenny, M.C. & Wurtele, S.K. 2008)



WELCOMING MILESTONES

Being able to have full control over the bladder and the bowel is a milestone. Toileting is a milestone. However, unlike some other milestones, sometimes we are not quite ready for it. We would never consider preventing other milestones like smiling or walking and yet, we often say things like, "Now is not a good time because grandma is coming to stay", or "We are going on holiday", or "There is a baby coming." And while yes, it may be important not to introduce too much change, we should also notice if we are putting any arbitrary obstacles in the way.

- This week your task is to learn the anatomical names, perform the nappy changes or trips to the bathroom like you would want someone to do it for you, watch your reactions, watch your language and most importantly—be patient.

RESOURCES

Brazelton, T.B. A "Child-Oriented Approach to Toilet Training". *Pediatrics*, January 1962, 29 (1) 121-128.

Kenny, M.C. & Wurtele, S.K (2008) Preschoolers' Knowledge of Genital Terminology: A Comparison of English and Spanish Speakers, *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 3:4, 345-354. DOI: 10.1080/15546120802372008

Olson, A. *The Tiny Potty Training Book: A Simple Guide for Non-Coercive Potty Training* (2013)

Schmitt, B.D. "Toilet training: getting it right the first time: successful toilet training benefits both parent and child. In this first of two articles, a leading expert explains how to help parents through the training process and avoid pitfalls. Includes a Guide for Parents." *Contemporary Pediatrics*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2004, p. 105+. Gale Academic OneFile, . Accessed 12 Mar. 2021.