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PERSONAL HEALTH

Plan of Action Can Keep Toddlers Clean and Dry

By JANE E. BRODY

Many parents these days must have more disposable income than my husband and I had when our twin sons were toddlers three decades ago.

Certainly today's parents use far more disposable products, especially disposable diapers, for far longer than we did. And diaper companies, ever ready to expand their market, now produce diapers (about 25 cents each) and pull-ups (40 cents each) big enough for 4-year-olds, maybe even 5-year-olds.

The purpose of pull-ups is to make it easy for children to use the potty or toilet by themselves, if necessary, and to provide protection in case they don't.

But how is this different from training wheels on a bicycle? Children don't learn how to balance a bike until the training wheels are removed. Likewise, many children being toilet trained will avoid the potty as long as they have the security of a pull-up or diaper to keep from wetting or soiling themselves.

Dr. Barton D. Schmitt, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and an expert in bowel and bladder problems, points out in the March issue of *Contemporary Pediatrics* that "more than 50 percent of children around the world are toilet trained at about 1 year of age."

While such early training may involve more parental than child training, many parents in the United States postpone toilet training well past age 2 or even 3. "The predominant reason," Dr. Schmitt says, "seems to be the availability of disposable diapers. Delayed toilet training has been legitimized, and that's good for business. Other factors are busy, dual-career families and normal procrastination."

Delayed toilet training may be good for business, but is it good for children and their parents? In addition to saving money and trips to the store, when a child is toilet trained, parental options expand: for travel, excursions, baby-sitting, day care, preschool, you name it. For the child, it can mean enhanced self-esteem, feelings of mastery and freedom from diaper rash.

For the family, use of a toilet instead of a diaper can reduce exposure to pathogens from stool.

Dr. Schmitt lists several other drawbacks to delaying toilet training past 2 1/2: "The child accepts or likes diapers; the child likes passing urine without waiting to get to the potty; the child dislikes change and has no reason to change; and the child becomes smarter and more capable of testing adults."

Once a child reaches 3 and is still untrained, efforts to achieve this can become a contest of wills, and in it, the child, not the parent, assumes control.

Parents are therefore urged to learn how to prepare their child for toilet training, to recognize when the child is ready for training and go about it in a logical and supportive manner that fosters the child's sense of accomplishment.

Fostering Readiness

Dr. Schmitt suggests starting to prepare a child for toilet training at 18 months by teaching about "pee and poop," never referring to it as dirty or yucky, praising the child for using the diaper and teaching the child to request a diaper change when it is wet or soiled so that the child learns to prefer to be dry and clean.

If you can detect that the child is about to eliminate, or is already in the process, say, "Your body wants to make some pee or poop," teaching the child to recognize body signals.

At 21 months, you can begin teaching the child about the potty and toilet — what they are for and that use of them is a privilege. At this point, children should be given their own potty chairs and encouraged to sit on them clothed while doing activities that are fun.

The next stage, at 2, involves reading toilet learning books and watching videos, having the child put a doll or stuffed animal on the potty, and buying the child special underwear and introducing it as a privilege.

"The most common error parents in this country make is doing nothing to prepare the child until the week they start toilet training," Dr. Schmitt said. "Readiness training prepares the child for earlier and easier success."

Next come practice runs — actual sitting on the potty without a diaper and trying to urinate or defecate. Potty sits should be done only a few times a day and should last no longer than five minutes, with or without success.

Fostering Success

Successful deposits into the potty should be greeted with praise and perhaps rewards, and unsuccessful efforts with encouragement. Parents can increase the chances of success by recognizing signals and saying: "The poop (or pee) wants to come out. Let's find the potty."

If the child wets or soils the diaper soon after getting off the potty, Dr. Schmitt advises parents to say: "You wanted to go, but it came out in your diaper. That's O.K. You can do it. Keep trying."

There is no question that some children are easier to train than others. My own sons learned at age 2 in a matter of weeks; I simply removed their diapers and pants and taught them to urinate first into a can and then into the potty. Bowel control came a few weeks later. At first they wore diapers only at night, but these too were removed when they awoke dry three days in a row.

My grandsons, also twins, did not get the opportunity to go bare-bottom, but at about 27 months they were treated with rewards — stickers at first, then M&M's and eventually bits of an ice cream sandwich. When after about two months they had mastered both, elaborate praise replaced the treats. When one boy told me matter of factly, "We don't get treats anymore because we learned how to use the potty," it was clear that mastery had become its own reward.

Dr. Schmitt is a great fan of the bare-bottom technique. It helps children recognize the link between urge and elimination, plus most hate the feeling of evacuating on themselves. He suggests devoting a weekend to keeping the child bare below the waist: no diapers, pull-ups, underwear or any clothing or shoes.

The child and parent stay in the vicinity of the potty chair, placed where there is no carpeting (in warm weather, this can be done outside). The parent should refrain from practice runs and most reminders, "allowing the child to learn by trial and error with parental support," Dr. Schmitt suggests.

Other helpful measures include having more than one potty chair — one in the room where the child spends most of the day and one in the bathroom, and dressing the child in convenient clothing: no belts, suspenders, zippers, snaps or buttons that must be removed.

Pants with easily stretched elastic waists are best. Better yet, at home keep the child only in underwear; if it has a design of a favorite cartoon or action figure or animal, all the better to keep the child from soiling it.

Disposable pull-ups or washable training pants, if they are used at all, are best reserved for trips outside the home when toilet facilities may be a problem, and at bedtime until the child stops wetting at night.

Dr. Schmitt cautions against overdoing reminders, since they can antagonize the child, prompting a self-determined toddler to exercise independence and refuse to cooperate.

Most important: never punish, threaten or spank a child or express anger or disappointment over toilet accidents. Neither should children be forced to sit on the potty when they don't want to. Such heavy-handed tactics only lead to resentment and power struggles that the parent usually loses.