

TOILET TRAINING:

Background, approach &
practical advise

Background:

- Biologically all species bring their own internal characteristic structures which are in interplay with the conditions of the environment
- Every biological structure exists, develops and functions within an environment
- This critical knowledge also applies to toilet training
- In our culture toilet training is identified with the process of learning how to go to the bathroom

M. Montessori - The Absorbent Mind

“ To us the mental organism is a dynamic whole, which transforms its structure by active experience obtained from its surroundings.”

For development to occur there is an interplay between:

INTERNAL STRUCTURES

- The Brain
- The Sensorial System
- Voluntary Movement
- Coordination
- Language
- Social Interaction
- Emotions

THE ENVIRONMENT

- Internal structures are stimulated or not by conditions in the environment

- There are three basic physical actions critical to the well being of a person:
 - Eating
 - Sleeping
 - Process of elimination/toileting
- Toileting is regulated by three major considerations:
 - Physical aspect
 - Psychological aspect
 - Cultural aspect

Physical Aspect

- The child must have voluntary control of the sphincter muscles
- Sphincter muscles direct the movement of the bowels
 - It is the circular band of muscles surrounding the anus
 - It narrows and closes the opening by contracting
- During development, control of these muscles depends on the production of myelin
- Myelin allows the sending and receiving of information to and from the brain for voluntary control of the muscles

- The elimination process is biologically pre-programmed, BUT we are born without voluntary control of these muscles
- For the developing child these muscles must come under the control of the will
- There are a variety of theories and debate on how this process is activated based on general information, cultural aspects & most currently, scientific research
- Main concern for caregivers is: WHEN TO BEGIN?
- Current debate focuses on:
 - Early start
 - Later start

Early Start

- Promotes the utilization of techniques of early toileting awareness
- Has been used in many countries & cultures for centuries, including the US before 1960's
- Initially caregivers must develop an awareness of when the child needs to go through close observation
- Utilizes the technique of holding the baby [from around 3 months] to “sit” on the toilet or potty seat:
 - The back of the legs stimulates the desire
 - Caregiver makes a noise “psii” or short indicative word
 - Process is repeated with consistency
 - Once child does it once, connections begins to emerge
 - Repetition and consistency are important

Later Start

- Most traditionally used after the work of Dr. Harry Brazelton in the late 1950's & 1960's
- Proposes delaying the beginning of toileting strategies until the child “signals or verbalizes” his/her “readiness”
- This late strategy was supported by the development and use of disposable diapers
- It was also connected with the need to “facilitate” care with the boom of working mothers

General Statistics

- From 1900 to 1961 – 90% of children were trained by age 2.5
- In 1998 only 22% of children were trained by age 2.5
- In 2001 – a study by *Ambulatory Pediatrics* placed the average age for full training:
 - Girls at 35 months [around 3 years]
 - Boys at 39 months [3 years and 3 months]
- New studies show many children are still wearing diapers at 4, 5, and 6 years of age
- Environmental awareness: Disposable diapers are the 3rd leading component in the nation's landfills

Montessori: on Physical Aspect

- Window of opportunity around 9 to 10 months when child starts crawling
- Crawling is an indication that myelin has reached the lower part of the body with possibility of control of the sphincter muscles
- Around 10 months, the bladder also increases in size, enhancing capability for control
- We can begin though an earlier exposure and familiarization to enhance neuronal connectivity

Montessori: on Psychological Aspect

- Caregivers need to develop awareness, recognize & assess indicators:
 - Child's need to eliminate
 - Child's desire to stay dry
 - Cause & effect
- Changing child as soon as wet or soiled encourages psychological need to feel better when dry or clean
- Failing to do this could produce reverse results, connecting that he/she is expected to go with diapers on & feeling comfortable about it
- Appropriate diapering using natural fibers encourages need to stay dry allowing the observation of elimination patterns, creating awareness & not disguising elimination process

- Cause & effect: Caregivers need to encourage the child to make appropriate connections associating the consequences to elimination
- Patterns should be recognized by adults at certain critical times:
 - Waking up in the morning
 - After a nap
 - After eating or drinking
 - After experiencing a change of temperature

- Disposable diapers can be an obstacle – child cannot feel he/she is wet
 - Child cannot make the connections to develop control
 - Child cannot perceive the discomfort that being wet or soiled can produce
- Adults must provide opportunities for the child to create this awareness
- Feelings of discomfort which begin very early should be taken as a signal
- Child should realize how being wet or soiled is uncomfortable and that there are ways to prevent this

Montessori: on Cultural Aspects

- Child will adapt to whatever customs are practiced within their social group:
 - **WHERE TO GO:** Child needs to learn how & where to go depending on his/her culture.
 - In our culture we go in the bathroom
 - The potty or toileting activity should be encouraged in the bathroom and not all over the house
 - **MAKING CORRECT ASSOCIATIONS:** Child needs to connect the function with the right place one goes for elimination.
 - In our culture, as early as possible child should be brought to the toilet area while they are being changed

Practical Advise

- Kinds of potty
 - Offer choices to the child: potty that suits him best for the initial process
- Importance of clothing & types of diapers:
 - Clothing is an essential aspect in the process of development
 - Especially with toddlers having elastic waistbands and comfortable, manageable clothing will facilitate toileting – no jeans, no zippers, no belts
 - Diapers should be made of natural fibers allowing skin to breath & developing awareness of elimination
 - Cloth diapers are less expensive, reusable & ecologically friendly

- **Role of the Adult:**

- Be mindful of adult reactions & keep a positive attitude
- Guard against overreaction to success or failure
- Be evenhanded and natural about the process
- Make sure the child can feel good even if they have accidents
- Be sensitive towards the possibility of being afraid of flushing

- Give confidence and encouragement
- As soon as the child can sit, establish a good preparation & routine, placing the child on the toilet at regular times and then changing them
- Be consistent, fits and starts are confusing: Stick to your plan
- Be patient but confident to make it happen
- Boys: Show them how to hold penis down with a finger

- Use of toilet paper:
 - Select good quality paper
 - Have a simple system for use
 - Show , model child appropriate use
 - Show how to reach for toilet paper
 - Help them at the beginning, by showing how wipe dry when urinating or defecating
 - Especially for girls, be mindful to show how to wipe towards the anus to avoid infections in the uterus

- Working within a school environment:
 - Work together: Plan ahead with teacher or caregiver
 - Open communication: Talk to teacher to be in the “same page”
 - Avoid providing reading or distracting activities in toilet area
 - Exchange specific needs or concerns:
 - Encourage each other and rejoice in the process
 - Recognize toileting is a great maturation achievement

- Age considerations:

- Every age group is different

- Walkers must acquire independence

- Elimination of diapers, pacifiers and bottles should be encouraged

- Final advise:

- Some children could use toileting as a means of control

- Use right approach and do not use questions format, just say: “let’s go to the bathroom”

- With older children that still wet their beds there are three options to consider:

- Place an alarm clock for the child, explaining they can wake up on their own and go to the bathroom.

- Show the child to change the sheets by themselves

Reading Resources

- Silvana Montanaro, *Understanding the Human Being*
- Susan Tracy, *Toileting Starts at Birth*
- Dr. Linda Sonna, *Early Start Potty Training*
- Dr. Jill Lekovic, *Diaper free before 3*

HAVE FUN WITH THE PROCESS!

THANKS

Montessori of Alameda

Parent Education Series

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