



Toilet Learning



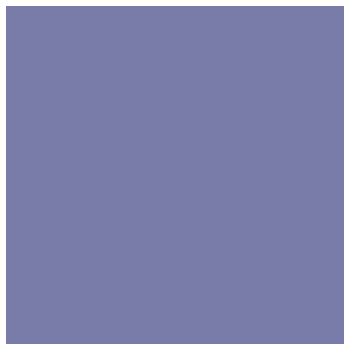
The Montessori Approach

A booklet for parents searching for a child-centered approach supporting the development of independent toilet learning for children aged birth to three.

Information contained in this booklet is adapted from the parent education program at the CHILD'SPACE Project, a 0-3 Montessori program in Western Australia. Please visit www.thechildspace.blogspot.com for a glimpse into the program.

Photos are from the blog www.howwemontessori.com and authentic Montessori materials for self-care and toilet learning can be purchased from www.howwemontessorishop.com

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Toileting from Birth

Supporting babies aged 0-12 months

If you are expecting...

Considering how you will support your newborn's toileting needs before they actually arrive gives you time to create a space that not only encourages toilet learning from birth, but is also functional. Newborns have relatively simple toileting needs: nappies*, clothing that allows for easy access for changing, a safe space for nappy changes, and most importantly, TIME.

We recommend the use of cloth nappies for two reasons. The newborn enters the world with incredibly sensitive skin. Using cloth nappies made from natural fibres allows your baby's skin to breathe, and they are more comfortable against your baby's body. Also, they allow for immediate detection of urination which is difficult when using disposables.

There are many different types of cloth nappies available, from all in ones, to inserts, to the traditional terry cotton squares our grandmothers used. Talking to other parents about their preferences will help you to choose the nappy that works for you. It is a good idea to borrow newborn nappies, particularly if you are not sure which kind you will need. There are often nappy libraries available, or if you contact retailers they sometimes have sample packs which are sold at a reduced price so that you can try a few before committing. Whilst the outlay may seem significant, it is a worthwhile investment, particularly if you plan on having more than one child.

*in Australia, nappies are the common term used for diapers. In the context of this booklet, the term nappy refers to cloth nappies, unless otherwise stated.



0 – 12
months
continued...

Toileting routines present a unique opportunity

The role of the adult in the toileting routines of a young baby is that of facilitator. After all, babies are not physically capable of changing themselves. However that does not mean that your baby is not able to be a willing participant and cooperative partner in the process. Quite the contrary, even the youngest baby is able to respond to sensitive physical care routines, and is able to contribute to their care through cooperation and expression of enjoyment in the process.

The goal of a nappy change, therefore, is not a clean baby, with a fresh nappy, but rather a baby who has an understanding that their physical care is an important part of their daily life, that it is important to their significant carer, and that they have a level of control and independence that is appropriate to their stage of development. The baby's first introduction to the world is through touch. Our hands and our handling of them communicates our love and respect in a profound way.

If we touch slowly, gently, and ask for cooperation rather than having an expectation that our babies are passive recipients of care routines focused on efficiency, then we will find that our babies grow into willing partners in the process of their care and this makes for less conflict as our child grows, which incidentally makes for more efficient care routines in the long run. Parenting is rarely about the short term experience, but more often about reaping the rewards of a crop that was lovingly planted and tended for a long time...

So what does a respectful nappy change look like with a non-mobile baby?

Before you initiate a nappy change, **OBSERVE** your baby to see if they are ready to be changed. If you swoop in and carry them off to be changed you may be interrupting their concentration and activity, which has significant ramifications for their developing cognition. If you get in the habit of

changing your baby's nappy as soon as it is soiled, then they will internalize the sensation of being clean and dry as "normal" and they will communicate their need for a nappy change from a very young age.

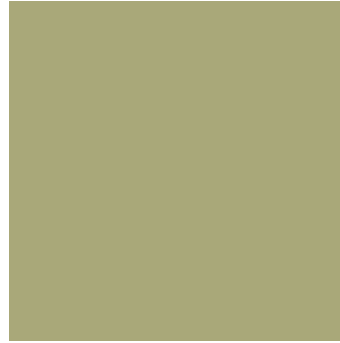
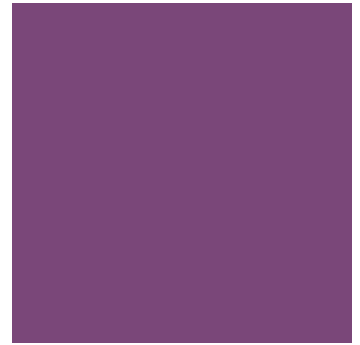
The key is to talk to your baby. Tell them what you are planning to do **BEFORE** you do it. Then **WAIT** for a response before continuing. **EXPLAIN** your actions as you perform them. **SLOW** everything **DOWN** so that your baby can experience every step and learn to trust you.

And for a mobile baby?

Well basically the same rules apply, except that you will need to give more notice before initiating a nappy change, to ensure that you have their cooperation. Without your baby's partnership you will have a struggling, wriggly baby to contend with which makes for a pretty miserable nappy change anyway. So it is worth investing time in securing their willing participation in the process, before you start. You may also need to move your changing mat to the floor for safety. The beauty of making a point of changing your very young baby's nappy as soon as it is soiled, is that your child will not like the feeling of a soiled nappy against their skin and will want to remove it as soon as possible. So setting up this pattern early on, does you lots of favours when your child becomes mobile.

The first year of toilet learning is complete...the goal of this stage is to

- create an awareness within the child of the difference between "wet" and "dry"
- establish a positive association with nappy changes so that your child is a cooperative partner in the work
- prepare for the next stage which is awareness of elimination (can begin between 12 and 18 months)



Creating a space

What you need...

It is easy to get caught up in the typical buying frenzy that besieges households expecting a new baby, but in reality you need very little to create a space that will serve your baby from their first days, right through their toddler years.

To create a toileting space that supports independence and awareness you will need:

- a designated area for toilet care. Locating this area within your bathroom is the most logical place, but if you have a very small bathroom you may need to set up the space elsewhere.
- a changing pad, to provide a comfortable surface for your baby to lie on whilst you are changing their nappy.
- a bucket with a lid for soiled nappies
- clean nappies and a place to store them
- wipes – disposable or cloth will do, but if you are already washing cloth nappies it is no hassle to add cloth wipes to the laundry.
- a potty, which can be placed in the bathroom from birth and introduced in the first 12 months as part of the changing process
- a toilet seat adaptor and a step stool
- cotton training pants – no waterproof lining
- a bench for your toddler to sit on whilst removing clothing
- a space for hand washing
- a clean up kit (see section on dealing with messes for a list of items needed in this kit)



Standing Changes 12 months +

Once your baby is able to pull themselves up into a standing position, you will most likely have a hard time getting them to lie down for a nappy change. With practice, you can adapt your technique to allow your baby to stand whilst holding on to something as you change their nappy.



The Ikea Rast Nightstand is a very useful piece of furniture for the child-centred home.

Steps in the standing change are sitting down to remove pants, removing nappy, getting a wipe, wiping (try lifting one leg, then the other), disposing of the wipe, placing the dirty nappy in the bucket, getting a clean nappy, putting it on (try pre-fastening the lowest snap, flipping it inside out, legs through holes, then flip it up, and fasten the rest), sitting down to put pants on.





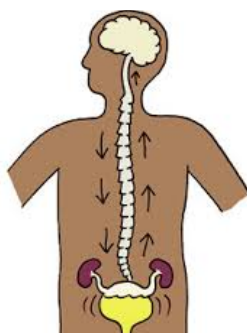
The Brain and the Bladder

Supporting the natural feedback loop



During the Day

By switching to training pants during your child's sensitive period for toileting (between 12 and 18 months) you will give them plenty of opportunities to make connections between the sensation of a full bladder, and the end result of that process – wet pants or a puddle on the floor. Understand that training pants are not used to contain a pee or a poo, they are used to direct your child's attention to their body during elimination and facilitate awareness. This is the first step towards independent toileting. Once your toddler shows awareness you can begin to cue them. This is as simple as asking them if they need or want to go to the toilet. Your child should not be required to act when you cue – this work must be freely chosen by them.



The Feedback Loop

The sensory-nervous feedback loop between the brain and the bladder starts out as an involuntary action. When the bladder fills, it sends a signal to the brain, which sends a signal back to the sphincter muscle, which opens and releases the pee (the same process applies for the bowel and poo). Once your child is around 12 months the nerves between the bladder and the brain are fully myelinated allowing the impulses to begin to move under voluntary control. With lots of natural pee and poo experiences, your child will gradually gain conscious control over the nerve messages from the brain and will be able to delay the release of the sphincter muscle. Importantly, the process of elimination is intimately tied to the psychological state of the child. It is vital that you remain calm and matter-of-fact when your toddler pees or poos, and that you follow a consistent routine for cleaning up any mess, so that your child understands and accepts the process as being natural and predictable.



Naps and Nights

In the interests of consistency you may choose to stop using nappies altogether during the toddler stage of toilet learning. To support the brain-bladder connection, ensure that your child has plenty of water to drink during the day, has a small drink before bed, sits on the toilet or potty before bed, and eats plenty of fibre to avoid constipation (which can confuse the brain-bladder signals with extra pressure on the bladder from the colon). You may like to prepare a night time wetting routine, in case your child does not wake up before they pee. A night light, a puddle pad, spare pyjamas and underwear and a holder for the soiled clothing and pad will help you to be prepared in the middle of the night. Again, repetition and consistency are key

The Sensitive Period

The sensitive period for toilet learning is between 12 and 18 months. This means that the child is psychologically primed for this work during this time. It does not mean that some toilet learning does not take place outside of this period. It is the window of opportunity in which the child's physical maturity, emotional state, psychological openness, and attention all converge so that the most important part of the work can be completed by working in sync with the natural state of the child, rather than working against the child by coercing them.

If you begin the toilet learning process outside of this window of opportunity then you will most likely meet with either some resistance, or a lack of interest from your child. They will not be primed for this work.



The Older Toddler

If you are starting the process of toilet learning with an older toddler (older than 24 months) then you must prepare a toileting environment that encourages independence and autonomy. This will call to the child's desire to "do it myself" and will allow you to take the role of supporter, rather than enforcer. A battle of wills over toileting will only result in a toddler asserting their ability to defy, and a bad tempered parent.

- Set up a toilet seat and step that will allow your toddler to access the toilet on their own.
- use the toilet in front of your child, modeling is a powerful parenting tool.
- provide clothing that is easy to take off and put on, and help your child to dress themselves independently. Allow plenty of extra time so that you don't rush them.
- never use rewards or punishments related to toilet use
- focus on your behaviour rather than theirs, when dealing with wet events.



The Adult's Work and the Child's Work

How to tell the difference between the two, and how to provide assistance without taking over



Removing Obstacles

When your toddler is engaged in the self care process it makes sense to choose clothing that supports independent use. Snaps, buttons, zips get in the way of the child's work at the start and can be mastered later, when the urgency of the toilet visit has been reduced. Make sure your toddler can reach the toilet, sit comfortably on the seat and reach the basin to wash hands. Choose a chair with a backrest to support your toddler's body when dressing, so they don't topple backwards.



Preparing the Environment

Every minute of time you invest in the preparation of a toileting space that meets your child's exact needs, will help them to move a step closer to independent toileting. Consider everything, from the size of the equipment and furniture, to the steps you follow and the sequence of the process. Is everything within reach, is it placed in a logical order, is it easy to restore order to the space when finished, does it allow your child to be as independent as they can be right now?



Create Routines

Children of this age are in the sensitive period for order. They are all about routine and predictability. They need to know "what comes next" in order to feel secure. Secure emotions allow them the space they need to master this new skill. Keep a casual record of your child's toileting schedule (the times when they naturally urinate or have a bowel movement) as this will help you to cue them or build a visit to the potty into your daily rhythm. Follow the same routine with each visit to the toilet.



Involve your Child

By helping your child to be involved in every step of the process you help them to establish attention, concentration, sequencing, motor, memory and planning skills – all essential brain behaviours for later learning like reading, mathematics and science. Even the youngest toddler can contribute, and even the smallest baby can watch. Involving your child requires more effort and commitment than simply doing the job yourself.



+ Frequently Asked Questions

If my child has been dry during the day for some and starts to wet again, should I put them back into nappies?

The second stage of toilet learning (when your child wears training pants) is to develop their awareness of elimination as well as the ability to self-cue (anticipate an elimination before it actually happens). If your child has spent some time in training pants and has reached the stage where they are able to self-cue in time to get to the toilet then they will have completed that stage. Returning to nappies after this stage has been completed sends a message to your child that it is okay to ignore the messages their body is sending them, that they can rely on you to get them to the toilet in time, and that you believe they are not able to use the toilet independently.

My baby gets terrible nappy rash when we use cloth nappies, can we switch to disposables?

Disposables are designed to draw moisture away from the skin, so work counterproductively when trying to establish a baseline normal of “dry”, as your child remains dry even after they have eliminated. They find it difficult to connect the sensation of eliminating with the feeling of being “wet”. If you choose to use disposables but still want to follow this child-led approach, then you must be even more sensitive to and aware of your child’s elimination patterns, and must be vigilant in changing a soiled disposable as soon as you can. Even a small pee needs to be changed quickly, so that your child is able to connect the process of elimination with the process of a nappy change.

I can’t keep up with the laundry! Can we use pull ups instead of training pants during the second stage?

Pull ups are designed to absorb pee and prevent it from leaking onto clothing. Even pull ups advertised as having a strip that allows the child to feel the wet, does not draw the child’s attention to their elimination in the same way that a trickle down their leg, wet pants, or a small puddle will. Let’s be honest, pull ups are designed for the convenience of the adult, not for the development of the child. This approach is for parents who choose to support the natural development of toileting behaviours in their child. It is for parents who see the value in allowing the development to unfold at the time that is right for the child and recognizing that their role is to support the child’s work, not usurp it.



Clean Up



Preparing a Clean Up Kit beforehand will not only make accidents easier to deal with over the long period of time that it takes your child to become reliably dry, but will also make it far more likely that you will include your child in the clean up process. Start by allowing them to do just one step, and gradually add more pieces as you see that they have mastered the previous one. Always move towards functional independence.

For tiled or wooden floors you will need:

- an adult mop and a child sized mop. When choosing a mop for your child try to find one with a handle that is the right height or cut it down to size.
- a bucket with a wringer, demonstrate how to wring out the excess water. If you can't find a wringer just use a small amount of water in a tub and allow your child to mop first, then you mop up the excess water with your mop.
- a disinfectant spray, water soluble melaleuca oil makes a great natural disinfectant when mixed with water in a small spray bottle. Try to find a bottle with a small trigger that your child can manage. A stack of paper towels to wipe the disinfected floor.
- a place to wash hands afterwards.

For carpeted floors:

- a super absorbent cloth like a chamois
- a bucket which is filled with a small amount of warm water when needed
- a disinfectant/deodorizing spray (melaleuca and peppermint essential oils do a good job)

