

# ON THE TOPIC OF Toileting

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learned as **easily and painlessly**  
as any other in the Montessori environment

By Catherine McTamane



Throw away the M&M's! Or, at least hide them in the cabinet to enjoy. Helping your child to master the toilet doesn't require candy, stickers and rewards. Children have a natural desire to care for their bodies. Toileting can be a tool for independence learned as easily and painlessly as any other in the Montessori environment.

Remember how the Montessori classroom teaches new skills: the child demonstrates a developmental readiness. The teacher prepares all the tools the child will need in a manner that is appropriate for that individual child. The child is given time, and space, to err and to self-correct before mastering the skill.

Toileting is no different. Like all Montessori parenting, supporting your toiling child is based first and foremost on observing your child's development and responding to his or her individual needs. Consider these guidelines as a net within which your child's growth will probably fall: then observe your child to see which specific tools best fit into your family structure.

## The Touch, the Feel...

Many Montessorians recommend cloth cotton diapers from birth on, and not merely for environmental benefits of avoiding disposable diapers. While conventional diapers – constructed to keep wetness away from children's skin – are convenient for parents, they prevent children from developing an understanding of the cause and effect of their wetness and give them one more thing to learn when their bodies are ready to use the toilet.

Infants who have an immediate physical reaction to urination are able later to connect their discomfort with their bodily functions. In addition to your choice of diapers, remember to consider your child's independence in selecting clothing. While those overalls may be very cute to look at, they're ill-suited to children who want to practice taking clothing off and on. Look for loose, elastic-waisted pants that your child can easily push down or pull up instead of complicated, adult-reliant clothing.

## **Get Up, Stand Up!**

Parents are often curious about the standing diaper change they observe in Montessori classrooms. Allowing children to stand during a diaper change engages them as active participants in caring for their bodies and sends the message that taking care of our bodies is not a passive act. As soon as children can support their own weight on their legs, they can begin to participate in standing diaper changes.

Bring your child down from the changing table to stand on the floor, or pull up along a small bannister installed on the wall of the bedroom. Show your child how to pull off the tape from his or her diapers and allow your child to practice wiping his or her own body. This is a good time to teach your child to wash his or her hands after toileting, although at first, you'll be doing it for them.

## **Water, Water Everywhere**

Most skill development in Montessori classrooms is preceded by a child's interest. Typically, children become extremely interested in the bathroom at about a year old. Drawn to the water in the sink and toilet and curious about their parents' behavior, children may follow their parents into the bathroom or want to put their hands in the toilet water. While you will want to discourage this, be sure to make other water available to your child.

A small basin of water at his or her table, or some time with you at the sink, will allow your child to explore the properties of water (and the effect playing in water often has on children's own bodies). Avoid locking the bathroom door or latching the toilet seat. Although these precautions decrease the potential for drowning, proper adult supervision and accessible water play elsewhere should satisfy your child's curiosity without sending him or her the message that the bathroom is off-limits.

## **Avoid Potty Language**

You can answer your child's curiosity by talking to your child about your body, even before your child may be capable of expressing the correct words independently. Remember this, too, is an opportunity to build your child's vocabulary using real words and appropriate language. Teaching your child appropriate vocabulary for parts of his or her body and functions of the body is no different from teaching them the correct language for tools in the kitchen.

Encouraging your child's early interests in toileting makes beginning toileting with your child a natural transition. Often children as young as thirteen months want to sit on the toilet, handle toilet paper, or pull their pants up and down. Although most children lack the ability to control evacuation at this point, you can prepare your child for when his or her body is ready by following this interest.

Prepare the environment first by securing a toilet adjuster to the toilet seat that will make the size of the opening appropriate for smaller bodies. Place a low stool in front of adult-sized toilet seats so that young children can climb to the toilet without having to be placed upon it. When your child approaches the bathroom, say aloud, "You would like to use the toilet." Introduce the full process of toileting, from pulling down their pants, sitting on the toilet seat, wiping up, pulling their pants back up and washing their hands.

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### What to Do With the Diapers

Many children are ready and interested in transitioning to underpants as early as fourteen or fifteen months. Observe your child's signals for when you do away with diapers, whether they are cotton or disposable. Typically, children should be able to remain dry for around two hours and should be expressing some discomfort in soiled diapers, pulling at them or otherwise drawing your attention to their evacuation. Children will often find a place that they prefer to retreat to for bowel movements. This, too, is a signal that they are ready to begin toileting, as it is a signal that they are ready to begin toileting, as it indicates an awareness of their bodily functions and an emerging ability to control them.

Keeping a child in diapers when he or she is expressing an interest in toileting sends a mixed message—that toileting is only for when it is convenient, and that it's ok to use a diaper if it's more expedient. Understand though, that once you make the move to cloth underpants, returning to diapers will be confusing and stressful for your child. If there are specific times during which your child's toileting needs cannot be met immediately, structure those into your toileting.

Many parents introduce a heavier cotton pull-on or disposable training pants for naptime or nighttime. These should be different from a diaper (for example, they pull on, rather than being secured by a tape) and should only be used during that specific time. It may help to have a special name to distinguish underpants from "night pants" or "sleep pants".

### A Sensitive Period

Montessorians identify "sensitive periods" as those times during which a child is uniquely able to absorb a new type of information or skill. Many Montessorians identify a sensitive period to toiling, typically at between sixteen and nineteen months, when the child's physical development has progressed enough to provide regular control of their own bodies.

### Toileting Checklist

#### Some do's and dont's to keep in mind

- Look for physical cues that your child is ready: staying dry for two hours or so at a time, seeking retreat or quiet space for a bowel movement, or signalling parents to change diapers.
- Use real underpants whenever your child is awake, and reserve pull-on training pants or pull-on disposables for sleeping only.
- Avoid a potty chair at home, opting instead to make your real toilet accessible to your child. Beginning on the real toilet provides your child with one less transition to make as he or she masters this skill.
- If your child is in full-time care, talk with his or her teachers. Make sure they see the same signs of readiness at school and that they are able to reinforce your child's toileting in the school setting.
- If your child's school setting is unable to accommodate toddler toileting, consider scheduling a family vacation to help your child master the basic skill, then sending him or her back to school well on the way to toileting successfully.
- Help your child to turn out soiled underpants into the toilet, and reserve a hamper for soiled underpants to keep them separate from laundry that might not need as immediate attention
- Expect accidents. Have vinegar and water on hand to disinfect and clean up spots to carpets and floors. Some experts call this the "Two Week/\$20 plan"-two weeks to toilet and twenty bucks to clean the carpets!
- Slow down the rest of your schedule to support emerging toileting skills. For the first few days, you'll need to be near a toilet most of the time.
- Don't backslide! If you've committed to helping your child toilet, follow through.

## Most skill development in Montessori classrooms is preceded by the child's interest. Typically, children become extremely interested in the bathroom at about a year old.

Children at this age are generally able to transition to underpants quite easily, to be able to sense their bodies' signals for toiling and to control their bladders and bowels long enough to get to the toilet on time.

Make sure you have allowed for your child's success by preparing the environment as much as possible. Have your home bathroom prepared for your child to access the toilet quickly and on-demand. Carry a small, portable "potty chair" in your car, so that if your child expresses the need to toilet, you'll be prepared. Include in your travel preparations a supply of Ziplock bags for carrying soiled clothing, a number of changes of clothing, and disinfecting wipes to clean the potty chair after use.

Being prepared for travel toileting will reinforce the message to your child that toiling is something that happens all the time, and will allow your child to develop control through practice. It's particularly important at this point to avoid using diapers "just in case." Putting your child in a diaper for a car ride, for example, teaches him or her that it's ok to use a diaper in the car and will challenge your child's ability to develop self-control he or she will need to master toiling fully.

### Accidents Will Happen

Toileting is a significant step in any child's development and one that will not be without its challenges. Be patient with your child. Begin the toiling process when you have been able to observe a readiness in your child and be calm when accidents occur. Consider toiling like any other practical life skill. The child needs to spill a few beans in order to learn to pour them successfully. These accidents are part of learning how our bodies function and how to respond to the signals they give. Parents can talk a child through the process of cleaning up, offering necessary assistance but allowing the child to care for his or her own body as much as possible. A small basket of towels or wipe cloths can be available in the bathroom to clean up accidents.

Your language is always important. Talking your child through all the functions involved in toiling will help him or her to understand that this is a natural process. "You are using the toilet," or "I see your pants are wet. Let's go and change them," can help draw your child's attention to his or her body in a way which is matter-of-fact and free of judgment.

### What Happens Now?

For many parents, the idea of beginning toiling with their infant or young toddler is unfamiliar. Older children will still eventually learn to toilet successfully, although many Montessori teachers believe the sensitive period to toiling close before the child's second birthday. Our societal norm, however, is to wait until much later to introduce toiling (one reason, perhaps, that toiling is such a frustrating process for many parents and children).

If your child is already out of the sensitive period to toiling, understand that you may be introducing a skill that he or she is not as compelled internal to master. This doesn't mean that toiling shouldn't be introduced, but parents of older children should expect the process to unfold more slowly, and to be more influenced by other children than the child's inherent interest. Children at 2 1/2 years or older are more interested in other children and, as a result, may toilet most easily when they are surrounded by peers who are already toileting, in a classroom setting or with older siblings.

As with all new skills, watch carefully to observe the messages your child is sending you. Toileting may be one of the most challenging skills for you to support, pushing your tolerance for smells and substances which most prefer to avoid. Offering your child gentle language and calm, thoughtful reactions when the situation is the most challenging is a wonderful opportunity for you to build your patience as a parent and to teach your child that his or her body is a wonderful thing. Mastery is its own reward. There is no need for star charts or special candies. Mastery is its own reward.