

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



Dear Reader,

Many thanks to the people who responded to last January's request to share insights about toilet learning and thoughts about pull-ups. Feel free to share more ideas and I'll include them in future issues.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Miller".

Karen Miller is the author of *Ages and Stages, Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos, More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos, The Outside Play and Learning Book*, and her newest book, *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House, 1996).

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas, as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to: Karen Miller, PO Box 97, Cowdrey, CO 80434-0097.

— Toilet Learning —

I once met a wonderful woman who had been teaching toddlers and two year olds in a child care center in the Dayton, Ohio, region for 23 years. She proudly announced that she had personally toilet trained about half the adult population of Dayton! Granted, this may be an exaggeration; but certainly, if you work with children in that age range, *toilet learning* is one of the things that dominates your time with children. You do become an *expert* at this — an auspicious distinction! And, yes, it can be hard to resist the temptation when you see that handsome teenager in the supermarket or at a community event to announce loudly, "Why, I potty-trained you!"

This is one area where parents will often turn to you for your expertise. It does tend to be easier for children to learn to use the toilet when they are in child care and can watch other children use it successfully. Indeed, the toilet is a fascinating thing to toddlers! They love the cause and effect of pushing the lever and seeing the water and contents go flushing down the hole.

All respondents who shared insights about this issue emphasize that the keys to success are (1) waiting until the child is ready and (2) having very close communication with parents.

I especially like the quiz format that **Joanna Mackenzie**, who teaches at the **Bright Horizons Children's Center** in Groton, Connecticut, used in an article she wrote for her center's newsletter (see box below).

If you are considering potty training your child at this time, take this quiz — TRUE or FALSE:

1. My child is dry at least two hours at a time, or is dry after nap each day.
2. My child's bowel movements are regular and predictable.
3. My child becomes uncomfortable with soiled or wet diapers and asks for them to be changed.
4. My child asks to use the toilet or the potty chair.
5. My child asks to wear "grown-up underwear."
6. My child can take off his/her pants and can walk to and from the bathroom.
7. My child can indicate when he/she is about to urinate or have a bowel movement.
8. My child knows when he/she needs to use the bathroom.

Another indication is good language development. The child needs to be able to *tell* you he needs to go, and understand your directions.

Karina Dovin, lead infant/toddler teacher, and **Lisa Dodd** and **Kasey Rairigh**, infant/toddler teachers at **The Learning Village** in Kalamazoo, Michigan, express to parents that their toilet training process begins with diapering. Children are given help in identifying and labeling what they are experiencing through caregiver support. Comments such as “You are wet” or “You have a poopy diaper” help children put language to a very real sensory experience. Additionally, upon seeing a child urinating or having a bowel movement in a diaper, a caregiver may question, “Matthew, are you pooping in your diaper?”

Tina Fisher, director of the child care center at the **Jewish Home for the Elderly** in Fairfield, Connecticut, expresses, “Typically the difficulty that child care staff encounters is when parents do not follow through at home or are not consistent in daily routines. What has worked is the open dialogue staff has with parents, encouraging and supporting their role as parents and providing insight into a child’s readiness.”

Kathleen Smith, the infant/toddler program coordinator at the **Port Hueneme Naval Base Child Development Center** in Port Hueneme, California, generously shares the “Toilet Learning Orientation” she and her staff developed (adapted slightly — see page 87). Feel free to copy and adapt this form and use it in your program.

At Kathleen’s center, before initiating toilet learning with a child, the parents and all of the staff who work with the child have a special meeting to talk it over, going over the orientation form that follows. I feel this is a very important feature. It ensures that the toilet learning process is not undertaken casually or half-heartedly and that all adults are *on the same page*. The child is less likely to get mixed messages. She reports that this

system works so well that they have rarely had to put a child back in diapers. The process usually only takes about two weeks. Kathleen is also happy to talk to you on the phone, should you have any questions about the process. Her number is (805) 982-4849.

Cultural Issues

There is hardly a more *cultural* issue than toilet learning. Every family has their own traditions and language around this issue. Emotions run high. Parents often feel pressure from grandparents, other family members, neighbors, and friends. Janet Gonzalez-Mena devotes a whole chapter to this topic in her excellent book, *Multicultural Issues in Child Care* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company). In some cultures, for instance, children are *trained* very early. The parent, feeling a child’s need to urinate, holds the child and places her on the potty. Some things are not possible in group care. Gonzalez-Mena’s book gives strategies for approaching cultural issues with parents respectfully, minimizing conflict and developing trusting relationships.

What About Pull Ups?

This really is a cultural issue, too! Our culture! TV advertising. Rushed parents with a desperate need for child care. The thought of their child not being admitted to a program because she is not toilet trained can cause panic.

The people who responded were unanimous in their feelings about pull-ups. They don’t help the potty training process. In fact, they often prolong it! **Renee Piper**, director of the **Tippecanoe Child Care South** in Lafayette, Indiana, writes:

“It seems as though I hear this statement in my sleep: ‘My child is not ready to be potty trained so she is wearing pull-ups.’ We have a *no pull-ups* policy, but convincing parents that it’s a good policy is sometimes difficult. I use several

arguments with parents:

“I first use a topic that is near and dear to almost everyone’s heart — money. Pull-ups are even more expensive than disposable diapers! Most parents will agree that they could save a lot by doing a little more laundry and buying fewer pull-ups.

“Second, I stress that a pull-up is like a disposable diaper in the fact that a child can’t feel when he is wet. One of the first signs that we use to tell us that a child is ready to be potty trained is when he really doesn’t like the *mushy* feeling of a wet diaper. When the child doesn’t feel that he is wet, he has no *reason* to use the toilet. This point of the argument is usually pretty effective. Most parents haven’t thought of it like this before.

“Last, I point out our success rate by *not* using pull-ups. I usually share this short example with them. Mom thought Sam was ready to *hit potty training*. She insisted on using pull-ups because she thought it would make for an easier transition. She used pull-ups for three weeks with no luck. It seemed like Sam would walk around all day with a wet pull-up, if it weren’t for the staff checking him. He showed no sign that he was uncomfortable or bothered. Mom, needless to say, was frustrated, saying, ‘I was *sure* he could do it.’

“We convinced her to pitch the pull-ups and bring underwear and *lots* of spare clothes. The first time he wet his pants, he told the teacher, ‘Yuck! Me wet.’ We were so excited because he had made a HUGE step to being a ‘big kid now.’ Within two to three weeks, he was on our Potty Wall of Fame.

“My hope is that we can educate parents on the reality of the situation, and not the TV’s *reality*. The key for us all to remember is that the *child’s* job will be easier. Potty training is difficult enough without making it harder than it needs to be.”

It was
Carolyn Maloney, director

of the
Tiny Tots Preschool Program in
Petaluma,
California, who asked for our feedback
on this question back in the January
issue. There is a city recreation center
program that does not have the proper
facilities necessary to meet local health
codes regarding the sanitary changing of
diapers and their disposal. There-
fore, they have a *must be*
potty trained require-
ment.

They decided
to institute a
no pull-ups
policy and
gave par-
ents sev-
eral
months
to make
the transi-
tion and
discuss it
with her if
they needed
to. (Before they
instituted the pol-
icy, 10 of their 40
preschoolers who were
supposedly potty trained were
in pull-ups and, in reality, not trained at
all.) They make exceptions for children
admitted under the Americans for Dis-
abilities Act. And, of course, they recog-
nize that children will have occasional
toileting accidents. Carolyn reports that
they only lost one enrollment directly
because of this policy and that many of
the parents thanked her for making them
“finish the process.”

Resources on Toilet Learning

Books for Adults

Toilet Learning, by Alison Mack, Little
Brown, 1978.

This is the book Kathleen Smith
and her staff recommend and use.
They have found it very helpful in
developing strategies for helping

parents understand the process,
and helping children through it.

*Toilet Training, A Practical Guide to
Daytime and Nighttime Training*, by
Vicki Lansky, Bantam Books.

This book, which has been out for
a while now, has a new revised
edition which includes proceeding
with toilet training in child
care.

Books for Children

*Going to the
Potty*, by
Mister
Rogers’
Neighbor-
hood,
G. P.
Putnam’s
Sons,
1986.

Like all mate-
rials produced
by Fred Rogers,
you can count on
this one to be “right
on.”

Koko Bear’s New Potty, by Vicki Lansky,
Practical Printing.

A children’s book, this is really a
book for the child *and* the parent.
Every page has tips for parents, as
they see a lovable little bear grow up
and enjoy his new independence
learning to use the potty.

Once Upon a Potty, by Alona Frankel,
Barron’s Press.

This book even includes a video
and has a lively song that heads the
“Hit Parade” in Kathleen Smith’s
toddler program!

*Above photograph provided by
Kathleen Smith, Port Hueneme Naval
Base Child Development Center,
Port Hueneme, California.*

Toilet Learning Orientation

Toilet learning should be a positive experience for a child. It should take only a short period of time, if the child is ready. Toilet learning is as individual as learning to walk. There is no right age by which all children should be using the toilet. Problems in toilet learning usually arise because adults do not pay attention to the child's lack of readiness.

We will try toilet learning with your child for 10 days. If the child shows no interest, is fearful, or has too many accidents, your child will go back into diapers until we decide together that your child is ready to try again.

We're listing here a few helpful hints of ways we can work together to minimize frustration and maximize success. Of course, *encourage your child, and continue the process at home.*

- Have your child wear loose-fitting clothing he or she can manage independently, such as elastic waist pants that are easy to pull up and down. Do not dress your child in overalls or t-shirts with snaps between the legs. Dresses are also not a good idea because the child cannot see to pull down pants.
- We prefer that you supply regular, thin, cotton underpants, rather than thick training pants or pull-up diapers. That way, the child is more aware when she or he has had an accident. For the same reason, we don't put children back into diapers at naptime.
- Please bring a bag with at least three pairs of extra clothes, including socks, *every day*. Label all clothing with the child's name. Bring an extra pair of shoes as well.
- Decide at the beginning if little boys will sit or stand.
- Have your child start wearing underwear at home the weekend before we initiate it here. *By all means, continue the program at home, having the child wear underwear rather than diapers.* If you feel you need to, the child can wear a diaper at night, but first you might try getting the child up once during the night to go to the bathroom.
- Here, we leave the door to the bathroom open, both for easy access and to encourage the child's interest, seeing other children use the toilet. The child goes to the potty with a buddy for positive reinforcement.
- The child will be told, "You need to go potty now" (or whatever term you prefer) every 30 to 45 minutes the first and second week, as necessary.
- Unfortunately, because of health regulations, teachers cannot wash out soiled clothes. We will put them in a plastic bag for you to take home and wash.

Parent Signature _____ Date _____

Caregiver Signature _____ Date _____

*Developed by Kathleen Smith, infant/toddler program coordinator,
Port Hueneme Naval Base Child Development Center, Port Hueneme, California.*