

Parents Misled about Potty Training,

Psychologist Says

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While U.S. parents wonder if their 3-year old is ready to start learning to use the potty, most children around the globe are fully trained by age two, according to the author of ***Early-Start Potty Training***, a recently released parenting book by McGraw Hill.

In Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa, most children finish training soon after they learn to walk. The gentle methods still used to teach babies in other parts of the world were popular in the U.S. until the 1940s. When washing machines simplified laundry chores, the age for starting training was pushed forward. Still, 90 percent of U.S. children finished potty training by age 2.

That changed after disposable diapers hit the market in the early 1960s. The ensuing advertising blitz featured paid pediatric spokesmen, such as T. Berry Brazelton. The Harvard professor turned infomercial star claimed that disposable diapering products keep children "clean and dry" and said, "Don't rush your toddler into toilet training or let anyone else tell you it's time - it's got to be his choice." In actuality, the products keep children filthy. Depriving children of the sensation of wetness slows learning.

Brazelton's recommendations were incorporated into the American Academy of Pediatrics Toilet Training Guidelines. They state, "Children younger than 12 months have no control over bladder or bowel movements and little control for 6 months or so after that. Between 18 and 24 months, children often start to show signs of being ready, but some children may not be ready until 30 months or older." Yet toilet training research indicates that children meet the physical criteria for readiness during the first year of life.

Today, 1/3 of U.S. three-year olds are still in diapers, along with increasing numbers of 4- and 5-year olds. The multibillion-dollar disposable diaper industry now makes products in sizes large, jumbo, and mega sizes to accommodate children up to 125 pounds.

In just two generations, knowledge about how to teach babies and young toddlers to use the potty has been all but lost in the U.S. Popular wisdom says that early training is impossible or cruel, but in ***Early-Start Potty Training***, author Dr. Linda Sonna, a professor of multicultural psychology at Yorkville University, states that babies are much easier to work with than older children. Toddlers have a hard time sitting still long enough to learn, are attached to their diapers, and many resist putting aside their toys for potty trips.

"The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends waiting and letting children lead the way," Sonna says. "But the research reported in the Academy's own journals suggests otherwise." Sonna cites numerous scientific studies recommending early learning and a structured teaching approach. There are compelling reasons to begin sooner rather than later:

- Delaying training until after age 2 ½ has been associated with unstable bladder, a condition which involves chronic accidents and bedwetting.
- Hundreds of thousands of trees are used to manufacture the sixteen billion disposable diapers children use each year.
- Discarded disposable diapers are the third largest component of landfills by volume (behind newspapers and fast-food containers).
- Dumping raw sewage into landfills threatens ground waters.

- Greenpeace has demanded a worldwide ban of a chemical used in super-absorbent gel, which harms the immune system and causes toxic shock syndrome.
- A carcinogenic by-product of the manufacturing process, dioxin, causes cancer and nerve damage.
- The cost to keep children in disposable diapers for 2 ½ years ranges from \$2,000 for economy brands to \$6,000 for premium brands. Premium cloth diapers sell for under \$36 a dozen.
- Holding urine close to the body for prolonged periods in a material that doesn't breathe increases scrotal temperatures, which has been associated with undescended testicles and infertility.

In her book, Sonna presents natural methods for babies and young toddlers, as well as solutions for older children who are having difficulties. "Pediatricians are correct when they warn that harsh methods slow learning," Sonna adds. "Simply putting your child on the potty and issuing multiple suggestions to 'try' increases anxiety. To succeed, the timing must be right, and youngsters must be relaxed. And too much pushing can damage the muscles."

So how many prompts should parents give? "Just one," Sonna says.

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