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Squabble Over Potty Training

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By Carol Mell

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THE TAOS HUM: Some of us squabble with the garbage man, and some of us take on the military-industrial complex. In a quiet valley near Taos, author and psychologist Linda Sonna is challenging the great baby guru, physician Barry Brazelton, and his corporate sponsors on the subject of potty training.

The question is not if but when. In her new book, "Early-Start Potty Training," Sonna, who has written a dozen books for parents with children of every age, maintains that everything the establishment told us about when to potty train is a load of (fill in your favorite expletive) served up to get us to buy disposable diapers for an ever-longer time.

"The notion that later (training) is better has been pushed by pediatric spokesmen for the industry since the 1960s," Sonna wrote. "Delaying has been a boon for the corporate bottom line. The truth about the ability of young toddlers and babies to learn to use the potty may be one of the best-kept secrets in America."

Sonna studied the work of Dr. Benjamin Spock who wrote the baby bibles of the 1940s and 1950s and those of Pampers-promoting Brazelton, "a Harvard professor turned infomercial star."

"Spock used to say younger was better, 14 months was considered late for training," said Sonna. "In 1961 everything changed and Spock began quoting Brazelton. That was the year Brazelton signed up with Procter & Gamble. He came out saying it was cruel to train babies too early."

She says with the production and marketing of ever-larger diapers, experts claim even 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds can remain untrained if they have not demonstrated that "mysterious state of readiness."

"The knowledge that it is possible to train early has been completely wiped out," Sonna said. "Babies are born signaling, the way they do when they are hungry. Think about it. Giving a signal that it's time to eliminate is a baby's survival tool. They need to be in a warm dry place with others. If they were always wet that wouldn't happen. It is up to us to learn to read the signals."

Sonna lays out a plan for training babies from birth. Parents who recognize their baby's cues simply hold them over the pot, making a little noise like "pss, pss" as a signal.

Diaperless babies are a fad, Sonna said, but she takes a gentler approach. For most babies, 6 to 12 months is perfect. If it sounds crazy, even Sonna had to switch paradigms.

"When I was writing my first book on potty training I thought it sounded cruel to start a baby so early. I was mystified by diaperless training, but I read it, and it all fell into

place. In Mexico, there were women with naked babies in their rebozos that were never wet. I had seen it in China, too."

In Taos she heard Hispanic parents talking. To them, "right on schedule" meant fully trained at 12 months.

She wrote an early training chapter for her first book in 2002, but the editors cut it out. No one could get an article in a baby magazine because they were published by the disposables industry, Sonna said. Now, totally diaperless training, though treated in the media as a freak show idea, got the word out that early training is possible. Sonna's complaint was that other books didn't talk about hygiene, the real reason for potty training.

"If your elderly parent sat in a dirty diaper you'd be horrified," she said, "but Brazelton views parents' willingness to allow youngsters to wet and soil themselves for a couple of extra years as a sign of respect for their bodies." If your children are too old for diapers and you are still too young, why should you care? Because diapers are the third leading component of the nation's landfills, said Sonna. If you add to the tons of untreated sewage the fact that diapers are made of trees and toxic chemicals, the environmental picture is not pretty.

Sonna has friends in China who tell her that the disposable push is on there with the attendant advice to wait. This is bad news in a country where infant and toddler clothing was simply made with a big opening in the crotch to make things easy.

"The world will be drowning in untreated waste," said Sonna.

With eight books in five years, Sonna feels "Early-Start Potty Training" and "Parent's Guide to Raising Siblings," due out in April, are her gifts to the world.

"For little me to take on a multimillion dollar corporation, the biggest in the world, was scary but I'm getting an amazing response. The book is selling well. "

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