



MONTESSORI
IN REDLANDS

Toileting

By Sarah Moudry

This article gives an overview of the Montessori approach to toilet training. At MIR our toileting practices are on a slightly different timeline than what the article indicates. Our staff waits for the children to settle in their classrooms and show signs of readiness before transitioning out of diapers.

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Functional independence in toilet training involves muscle control, the awareness and desire to stay dry, and the child's ability to dress themselves. This a gradual process beginning at home, and Sarah Moudry gives clear and encouraging ideas for supporting this process at school once the child is walking.

"Only through freedom and environment experience is it practically possible for human development to occur."—Maria Montessori

The concept of toilet awareness seems to be a new one in our culture. This is not to say that *potty training* is new; this concept has been around for some time and has become the typical phrase used for helping young children learn to use the toilet. However, within the concept of *toilet awareness*, using the toilet is actually just part of the final stages.

In order to be successful in anything, one must be surrounded by information and opportunity. Children must be introduced to the idea of using the toilet as early as possible (even from birth) in order to make it normal and typical expectation. Preparing to use the toilet is much like hanging pictures of the alphabet in a baby's room or reading books based on the alphabet. Parents don't decorate this way because they expect that the child is ready to read. They do this so their child is surrounded by letters, words and living in a language-rich environment. Parents know that living in this atmosphere sets the stage for later literacy.

Why is it that so many in our culture hide the bathroom? Babies are put into disposable diapers that wick away moisture and can hold urine for hours, then the diaper is changed, without even a suggestion that things can be different. If children are allowed to learn to respond to their own bodily functions from early on, this results in autonomy and functional independence.

If it is our goal as educators to connect children to the environment and feed their natural passion to learn, then it is our responsibility to prepare the environment in such a way that their independence is maximized and they become masters of their own body functions. We must not allow children to walk around the prepared environment in diapers as this sends the message that they may relieve a full bladder whenever, without control, as we ignore it. We present hand washing or table scrubbing while ignoring toileting, as if it is OK for a child to not understand his body.

Once children enter our environment, they must learn to be functionally independent. This includes being able to control their sphincter, stay dry, and dress themselves. This takes time and is a process and we must insist that this is the first step in truly acting independently in our environments. We cannot

pretend that a child who can prepare snack but urinates on himself constantly is truly independent. We cannot fool ourselves.

We should never force a child to sit on the toilet; the toilet is offered, and it is suggested that they sit. Children younger than two years old accept a request to sit on the toilet much like they accept a request to take your hand on a walk. They just do; it's a part of their life. When expectations around using the toilet are set before the age of two, a child is much more likely to willingly participate and be using the toilet independently by the age of two and a half.

There are no signs of readiness that determine when to start introducing the toilet. Once the physical and psychological environments are prepared to support the practice of using the toilet, it is time to begin. If parents begin this process at home before a child starts school, this will make the child's transition into school a bit easier. However, parents rarely begin before their child enters the school community.

The first day of school is often the first time a child is asked to sit on the toilet. There are many new things happening that day, and a child may be quite overwhelmed. It is important to go through the routine with a child from day one. Never force a child to sit on the toilet; just invite and make it the child's choice. Every day the child should be asked to sit on the toilet and change into "school underwear" before choosing work. The child is then offered the toilet at one-hour intervals during the morning until the routine becomes familiar. Whenever a child is wet, escort them to the bathroom and allow the underwear to be removed. The child then sits on the toilet (just to check if any urine is left to push into the toilet), and then dry underwear is put on and the child returns to work. We set this routine from the start, and most children are comfortable sitting on the toilet by the end of the first week and successfully urinating in the toilet by the end of week three. The consistency of the environment and routine combined with the adults' accepting attitudes create an atmosphere conducive to toilet awareness.

At home, children may experience different expectations. Many children are put back into diapers or maybe left in wet clothing for long periods of time. Others may have experiences similar to those at school. A consistent routine is followed at school. When a parent is ready to start at home, a child will transition to toilet independence at home and other environments. Inconsistency between home and school may prolong the process.

Although a child's body may not be physically capable of controlling the sphincter muscles until after s/he is walking, the environment in which s/he lives can support the natural acceptance of body functions. This preparation sets the stage for an easy transition once a child is walking. Like so many opportunities we offer the child in a Montessori environment, the opportunity to be independent in the bathroom supports the child's development and allows him to move on to greater and more complex tasks.ⁱ

ⁱ References: Montessori, Maria. *The Absorbent Mind*. 1949. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1995.

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